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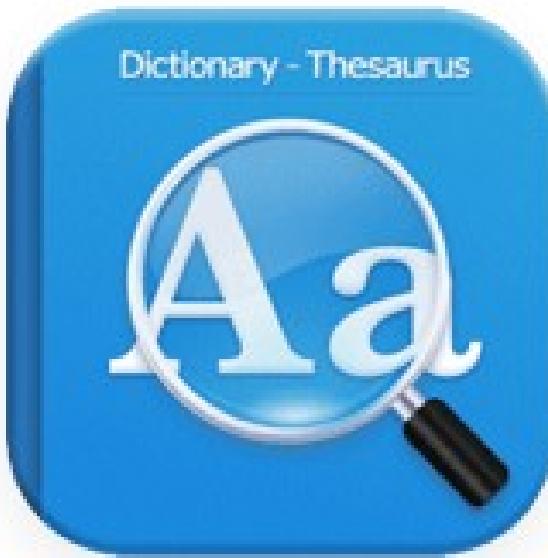
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Goings On

- [Meredith Monk Finds the Joy and the Necessity of the Collective](#)
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Going On

Meredith Monk Finds the Joy and the Necessity of the Collective

Also: First-person documentaries, Remi Wolf's funky soul pop, the Met Opera's new season, and more.

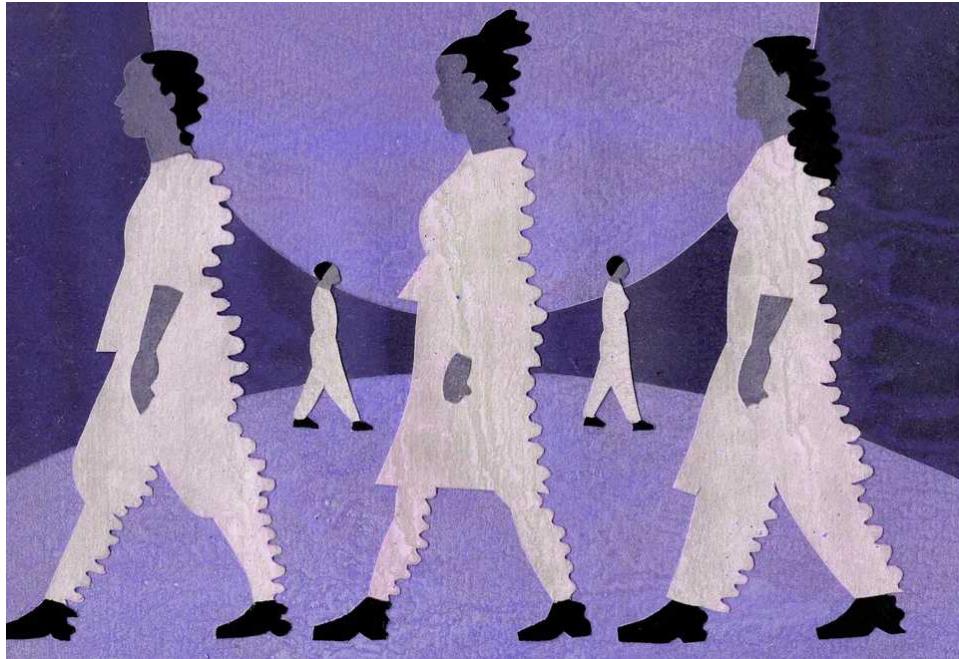
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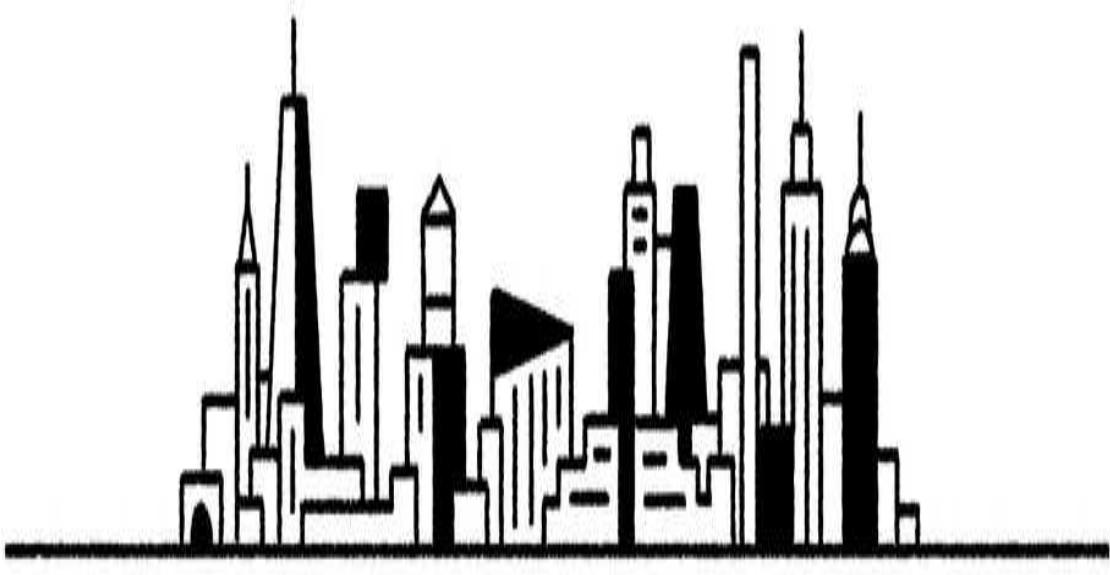
[Hilton Als](#)

Staff writer

The ever-astonishing eighty-one-year-old vocalist, composer, theatre-maker, and performer **Meredith Monk** comes from a family of voices—four generations of singers—or one voice. Her mother was a talented commercial singer on the radio, but Monk chose a different way to make sound. As a student at Sarah Lawrence, in the nineteen-sixties, Monk, who sang, too, began making work that was sound-based. Her focal point has always been the voice, and she has done brilliant work around breathing and repetition, while forging a path that stripped theatre of distracting artifice to get at its essence: what moves us as our bodies move in space.



Monk has created “**Indra’s Net**” (at the Park Avenue Armory, Sept. 23-Oct. 6), which takes its title from a Buddhist metaphor for infinite interconnectedness. The piece includes sixteen vocalists, a sixteen-piece chamber orchestra, and two video installations, all of which is meant to emphasize our interdependence. It’s an example of the kind of collaboration that Monk has continued to create over sixty-odd years, emphasizing the joy and the necessity of the collective, the sweet and enlivening feeling of your comrade’s breath grazing your neck and changing your interior landscape with its presence, and silence.



About Town

Off Broadway

Enjoy the lighthearted opening minutes of “**Our Class**,” featuring singing schoolchildren (played by adults) in interwar Poland, because what follows is a parade of horrors. Tadeusz Słobodzianek’s play, adapted from the Polish by Norman Allen, tracks ten classmates—five Jewish, five Christian—over eight decades, as they betray, kill, and, on occasion, protect one another. (It’s the females, notably, who do most of the protecting.) The frenetically inventive director, Igor Golyak, and his ensemble cast don’t shrink from the historical atrocities they dramatize, even staging multiple rapes. The audience is a different story; some members left during intermission when I attended. Yet many who stayed seemed to admire the production’s unflinching gaze, delivering an impassioned ovation. How fitting that a show about what turns people against one another should polarize its viewers.—*Dan Stahl* (*Classic Stage Company; through Nov. 3.*)

Dance

Lecture, film anthology, autobiography-by-proxy: the Crossing the Line Festival entry “**Jérôme Bel (2021)**” is all of these at once. Bel, a French choreographer who produces work that hovers at the crossroads of dance and memoir, no longer travels, for ecological reasons. So this autobiographical stroll through his past creations—he calls it an “auto-bio-choreography”—is narrated, in person, not by Bel himself but by the actress April Matthis. As Matthis reads Bel’s musings from a device, film clips and performances roll by: a monologue conceived for Véronique Doisneau, of the Paris Opera Ballet; a reënactment of Isadora Duncan. The whole thing is as cozy as a fireside chat, and as artificial as a hall of mirrors.—[Marina Harss](#) (*Florence Gould Theatre; Sept. 27-28.*)

Pop



Remi Wolf is pretty far off from the typical pop artist’s trajectory, and even further from a centrist sound. A junior Olympic skier and “American Idol” reject with a prickly voice and a snarky disposition, the Palo Alto native studied music at U.S.C. before committing to a style she dubbed “funky soul pop,” going viral on TikTok, in 2020, with the groovy and absurd single “Photo ID.” “Juno,” the major-label début that followed, seized the moment with haywire hits that seemed to bounce off the walls of a synth fun house.

In July, she returned even more self-assured with her second album, “Big Ideas,” which displays the indisputable chops of a sharp and amusing songwriter who is as quirky as she is crafty.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*Kings Theatre; Sept. 30-Oct. 2.*)

Opera

War and romance have long been central characters in opera, whether they stand stately at the forefront of the plot or churn not so silently in the background. Opening week of the **Met Opera’s** new season features both sides of the enduring dichotomy, with “Grounded” and “Les Contes d’Hoffmann.” The former follows a fighter pilot navigating an unplanned pregnancy, and the latter a fictionalized E. T. A. Hoffmann living out love-filled plots based on his own short stories. Both spotlight machinery, one boasting a drone, the other a female automaton. “Tosca”—in which both war and romance are dialled up to the max—is also playing.—*Jane Bua* (*Metropolitan Opera House; begins Sept. 23.*)

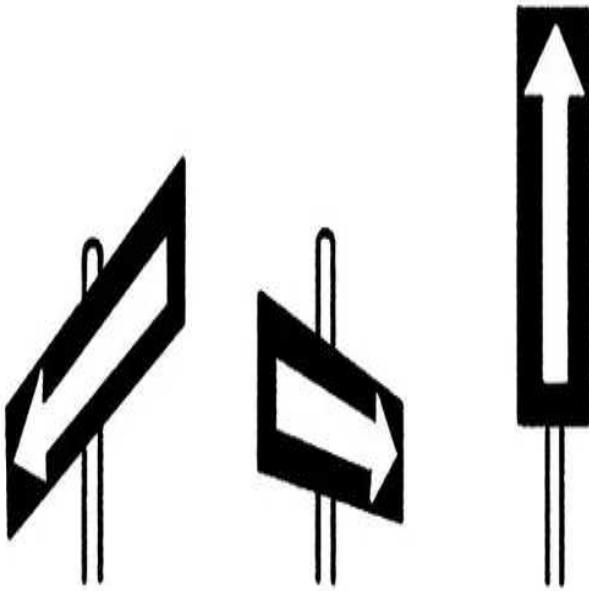
Art



Nancy Grossman and Romare Bearden, the co-stars of “**Collage in Dialogue**,” began to work in the medium in the early sixties and spent the next few decades pumping out hits, trading tips as they went along. Attention-grabbers came more naturally to Bearden: you can feel him thinking in color as he builds hot, jangly crowd scenes where stillness has never set foot. Grossman likes softer, more shimmering compositions that tend to feel like landscapes, whether or not they actually are. Put them together and you’ve got a comprehensively twentieth-century American kind of show, moving without strain from exuberant to anxious to alienated to trippy. It could have been twice the size and I wouldn’t have complained.—*[Jackson Arn](#)* (*Michael Rosenfeld; through Nov. 2.*)

Movies

The remarkable series “**Personal Belongings: First-Person Documentary in the 1990s**” takes its title from the opening-night feature, by Steven Bognar—about his relationship with his father, who participated in the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and perpetuated the revolutionary spirit three decades later. Also notable is Lourdes Portillo’s “The Devil Never Sleeps,” her ardent investigation into the death of a favorite uncle, in Mexico, that was first ruled a suicide and then a heart attack. In the family’s home town of Chihuahua, Portillo uncovers a pathos-filled story of a self-made businessman who was owed money, who was unhappily married, and who may have been blackmailed over rumors about his sex life. Blending journalistic research with trenchant reflections, Portillo unfolds a passionate family saga with a novelistic scope.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*Museum of the Moving Image; Sept. 20-29.*)



Pick Three

The staff writer [Michael Schulman](#) seeks out alternative glamour.

1. Since her Koch-era blowouts at the Copacabana, the party hostess Susanne Bartsch has been the Swiss Miss of New York night life. Drag queens, Harlem voguers, and scenesters would dress up in outrageous outfits for her bacchanals—but Bartsch, in rhinestoned bodysuits and sky-high wigs, would usually upstage them all (and still does). A new coffee-table book, “**Bartschland**,” captures her decades of fabulosity, with appearances by RuPaul, Michael Musto, Amanda Lepore, and the gym impresario David Barton, whom Bartsch married in 1995.
2. At the top of my watch list for this year’s New York Film Festival, at Lincoln Center Sept. 27-Oct. 14, is Luca Guadagnino’s latest, “**Queer**.” Drawn from the 1985 William S. Burroughs novel, it follows an American junkie (Daniel Craig) who becomes infatuated with a younger man (Drew Starkey) in postwar Mexico City. Have we even recovered from Guadagnino’s last erotic hand grenade, “Challengers”? This one promises less tennis and more heroin.



3. Ethan James Green has a dual career as an upscale fashion photographer (he just shot Lady Gaga for the cover of *Vogue*) and a chronicler of the queer demimonde. His new portrait collection, “Bombshell,” at the Tribeca gallery Kapp Kapp (through Oct. 26), is a seedy subversion of the glamour shot, featuring many of his favorite muses, among them the trans glamazons Hari Nef and Dara Allen, as they writhe in platform heels, swing from traffic lights, or chill on fire escapes. It’s a throwback to Andy Warhol’s downtown, and proof that the city’s presumed-dead counterculture is very much alive.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [From the creator of “S-Town”](#)
- [Theodore Roosevelt National Park ranger lewks](#)
- [An appreciation of vermouth](#)

The Food Scene

At Din Tai Fung, Soup Dumplings with a Side of Spectacle

The Taiwanese chain's first New York location offers consistently excellent meals choreographed with the friendly inflexibility of a mass-entertainment experience.

By Helen Rosner

September 15, 2024



Any conversation about Din Tai Fung, the Taiwanese restaurant that opened this summer in a sunken plaza near Times Square, quickly descends into a numerical rat-a-tat. The gargantuan restaurant is more than twenty-five thousand square feet in size. This new outpost is one of some hundred-and-sixty-five Din Tai Fungs, the overwhelming majority of which are in East and Southeast Asia; one, in Hong Kong, has earned a Michelin star. There are eight Din Tai Fungs in California and several others out West; the New York location, announced two years ago, is the first on the East Coast, and the largest in the world. It is open for lunch and dinner seven days a week; the dining room can accommodate four hundred and fifty souls. The kitchen

can produce more than ten thousand dumplings a day; the *xiao long bao*, or soup dumplings, are assembled by hand and must weigh precisely twenty-one grams, with each wrapper bearing no fewer than eighteen folds.



The scale and the spectacle of it all is remarkable in person, from the restaurant's dramatic descent-into-the-earth staircase to the human-size bronze sculpture of an anthropomorphic soup dumpling (his name is Bao Bao; he's Din Tai Fung's mascot) and the dining room so enormous that its vastness can appear to be a cognitive glitch, some kind of mirror trick or optical illusion. The brand had more modest beginnings, with the founding of a family-run cooking-oil business in Taipei, in 1958. In the nineteen-seventies, the owner, Yang Bing-yi, pivoted to selling dumplings and noodles, and his single shop eventually grew into an empire. The world of Din Tai Fung is now overseen by Aaron and Albert Yang, Bing-yi's grandsons, who marked the New York opening with a ribbon-cutting ceremony before a rapturous crowd. The restaurant's specialty is the *xiao long bao*, whose delicate, whorled wrappers hold rich morsels of meat and an explosive splash of hot, savory broth. But there are plenty of excellent soup dumplings in this city, and the wait for a table isn't nearly as long down at Joe's Shanghai, in Chinatown, or Pinch Chinese, in SoHo (whose kitchen is run by a former Din Tai Fung executive chef). The real excitement was for the brand itself: as is the case with so many chain restaurants, Din Tai Fung

is in the business of not only selling dinner but also selling nostalgia, selling familiarity, selling Din Tai Fung.



Honestly, it's not that hard of a sell. As at Americans' favorite quasi-upscale chain, the Cheesecake Factory, Din Tai Fung's success hinges on utterly reliable, totally consistent quality. On each of my two recent visits, the food was exactly the same; each time, it was unimpeachably excellent. A beef noodle soup was warming and rich; a dish of Taiwanese-style cabbage, sautéed with incredible amounts of garlic, was bright and crisp-tender. Chilled cucumber salad, a signature, is plated with thick slices stacked in a ziggurat; it arrives dripping with chile oil so bright it verges on safety orange. The fried rice is just fine, but the fried pork chop you can get on top is phenomenal—boneless, juicy, duskily aflame with black and white ground pepper. But we're here for the *xiao long bao*, which come in four varieties, to suit a range of gastronomic moods. The pork dumplings, the most traditional and seemingly the most popular, are served as a brace of ten in a steamer basket. On my visits, the meat—which comes from Kurobuta pigs, the Japanese name for the heritage Berkshire breed—was nicely seasoned and the broth both expectedly sticky and surprisingly bright; encased in thin, nearly translucent wrappers, the dumplings were lighter and more lively than nearly any I'd had before. A pork-and-crab iteration was heavy on the crab, with an appealingly intense minerality. For the high rollers, there's a deluxe

pork-and-truffle option, at twenty-eight dollars for a mere five dumplings but worthy of the price, with huge slices of black truffle slipped inside the wrapper with the meat, making the whole package earthy and wild. My favorite, perhaps controversially, was the chicken variety, whose meat was tender and whose broth was sweet with carrot and sharp with ginger, a golden panacea. (For vegetarians, there are vegan dumplings and wontons of the brothless variety, and they're quite good, but against the dizzying excitement of the soup dumplings they do land a little bit like an afterthought.)



From the moment you're greeted, by a tablet-wielding host in the glass-box entrance, the entire Din Tai Fung adventure is choreographed with the friendly inflexibility of a mass-entertainment experience. The restaurant is a machine, though not an unpleasant one. You check in with one of the half-dozen people manning a long counter reminiscent of a hotel reception desk. They'll direct you to one of two spacious lounges (one with curve-edged wooden benches, the other with plush upholstered banquettes), from whence you'll be gathered and brought through the ocean of tables to your appointed place. In classic dim-sum style, you order by marking up a paper version of the menu with tick marks next to dishes you'd like; a server reads your order back aloud, just to be sure. There's plenty of hand-holding for beginners—cards positioned on each table offer illustrated guides for mixing your own

dipping sauces (the restaurant recommends a three-to-one ratio of black vinegar to soy) and for eating a soup dumpling (dip; place on spoon; puncture; devour)—but the food is serious stuff, no cut corners, no dumbing down.



Helen, Help Me!

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

Dishes start to arrive moments after they're ordered, emerging from a kitchen that's visible behind glass walls in the back of the hangar-size dining room. Runners zip and zag among the tables, bearing teetering stacks of bamboo steamer trays, shedding the vertical layers table by table. Servers swing by to ask if you're interested in some boba tea (they make it in-house), or a cocktail (see that enormous U-shaped bar all the way over there?), or another round of cucumbers, or maybe some dessert—dumplings, naturally, filled not unappealingly with chocolate ganache, or smooth, warm, sweet black-sesame paste. Time flows quickly, and also slowly; the walls are black, and far away; there are no windows. The transparent walls of the kitchen echo the uncanny fishbowl effect of the street-level entrance far above. The grid of tables and their identical accent lamps recede into the distance with mathematical regularity, the lighting somehow both overdim

and overbright. More than once, I was struck with the disorienting feeling that I was hovering at the edge of the void. You could be deep below the streets of midtown Manhattan, or you could be on the ninth floor of a casino in Vegas, or you could be on a space station, or in Taipei, or in a shockingly real-feeling, slightly uncanny, notably delicious dream. ♦

The Talk of the Town

- [How Trump Hopes to Exploit the Myth of Voter Fraud in November](#)
- [The Roots of the Tony-Winning “Stereophonic”](#)
- [Sebastian Stan’s Crash Course in Becoming Trump](#)
- [Which Party Has Cornered the Tattoo Vote?](#)
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Comment

How Trump Hopes to Exploit the Myth of Voter Fraud in November

For years, the former President has claimed that undocumented immigrants vote illegally. That fiction is now the explicit position of the Party establishment.

By Jonathan Blitzer

September 22, 2024



The threat of voter fraud is one of the more durable myths in American politics, probably because it has proved so useful. Lately, it has taken a radical turn: Donald Trump and his allies have combined their two principal obsessions—immigration and election “integrity”—to conjure the spectre of immigrants crossing the border to elect Kamala Harris President. “A lot of these illegal immigrants coming in,” Trump said, at the September 10th Presidential debate, “they don’t even know what country they’re in.” Gesturing toward Harris, he added, “These people are trying to get them to vote. And that’s why they’re allowing them to come into our country.”

The fiction that undocumented immigrants are illegally voting is now the explicit position of the Party establishment. Earlier this year, the House Republicans passed a bill forbidding non-citizens to vote in federal elections, even though it's already against the law and actual cases are exceptionally rare and statistically negligible. A Brennan Center for Justice study of twenty-three million votes cast in 2016 found just thirty cases in which state election officials suspected that non-citizens had tried to vote. A 2022 audit in Georgia determined that, in twenty-five years, roughly two thousand people lacking citizenship documents tried to register to vote, but that none cast a ballot, because of the state's screening procedures.

Facts won't deter Republicans on this point, however, for the same reason that Trump and his running mate, J. D. Vance, keep repeating their scurrilous lies about Haitian immigrants eating the pets of Ohio: white anxiety about a diversifying country has become one of the Party's greatest assets. This spring, when the House Speaker, Mike Johnson, said that "illegals" were voting and Democrats were abetting them, he was forced to admit that he had no real evidence. But, he said, "we all know, intuitively."

The House bill foundered in the Senate, but Johnson has since tried to force Democrats to vote for it as part of a spending package to keep the government from shutting down this fall. His latest attempt failed last week. Yet the bill has already fulfilled its purpose: Party-line support has spurred parallel measures in states across the country. Republicans have hastily tried to purge voter rolls and add deliberately burdensome identification requirements to register. Last year, at the behest of Virginia's Republican governor, the state removed more than three thousand people from the rolls who were, in fact, legally qualified to vote. (The state later admitted the error.) This summer, in Ohio, the secretary of state removed five hundred people, some of whom turned out to be naturalized citizens. According to the *Times*, on a recent call with Republican activists and officials in several states, one person proposed combing through voter lists "to look for ethnic names."

Other Republican officials have taken advantage of the situation to harass anyone who might be aligned with Democrats. Ken Paxton, the attorney general of Texas, created an Election Integrity Unit that uses "undercover operations" to root out voter fraud. In the early morning of August 20th, an

eighty-seven-year-old woman named Lidia Martínez opened the door of her home in San Antonio to find nine armed officers in tactical gear who'd arrived to execute a search warrant. For decades, Martínez, working with the oldest Latino civil-rights organization in the country, known as *LULAC*, had helped veterans and senior citizens register to vote in South Texas. She was now accused of "harvesting" illegal votes. Agents questioned her for several hours and seized her phone, computer, and personal calendar. The homes of other Latino Democrats were also searched, in what Paxton's office called an "ongoing election integrity investigation."

What makes these maneuvers most worrisome is that they seem aimed to cast doubt on the election results in November. Not only do the majority of Republican voters say that they still believe the 2020 election was stolen; much of the Party leadership professes to as well. Michael Whatley, the co-chair of the Republican National Committee, whom Trump handpicked to serve alongside Lara Trump, his daughter-in-law, is an ardent election denier. The head of the R.N.C.'s "election litigation" team currently faces criminal charges for her alleged role in the fake-electors scheme to overturn the 2020 results in Arizona. (She denies any wrongdoing.) At the direction of the Trump campaign, the R.N.C. has all but abandoned any get-out-the-vote efforts and has instead shifted its money and resources into mobilizing a hundred thousand volunteers to stand watch anywhere votes are cast or counted.

In 2020, Trump supporters were effectively improvising when they challenged the election returns. Since then, many have developed strategies to insure that their next effort is more systematic. A national coalition of G.O.P. activists and state and federal Party officials, called Only Citizens Vote, recently began to organize rallies and to give training sessions for poll monitors. They have the support of an ever-larger number of public officeholders: as of last year, in a third of the country, an election denier is responsible for administering the 2024 elections at the state level.

At the center of the operation is Cleta Mitchell, a longtime conservative activist and lawyer who advised Trump on how to block the certification of the 2020 election results. After Trump left office, Mitchell started the Election Integrity Network. For the past three years, it has recruited volunteers to hunt for voter fraud and to research the personal backgrounds

of state and local election officials to determine whether, according to a training manual, they are “friend or foe.”

Earlier this month, a chapter of the network led by a county election official in Georgia held a Zoom call to make preparations for November. The state’s election board, which is controlled by Trumpists, had recently changed the rules to allow any county officials to halt certification on the basis of undefined concerns about voting irregularities; last week, the Georgia attorney general’s office rebuked the board after it voted to require a manual count of every ballot cast on Election Day. On the call, participants discussed how poll monitors could try to challenge voters if they, say, spoke shaky English or came with a utility bill as proof of their address. “People are going to have to be pains in the ass,” a former Trump Administration official named John Zadrozny said, according to a leaked recording of the call. “You’ve got to be creative without breaking the law.”

All these actions may help lay the groundwork to potentially dispute the certification of the Electoral College vote on January 6th. The big lie of a stolen election is predicated on the smaller one that non-citizens are voting. Neither can be ignored. ♦

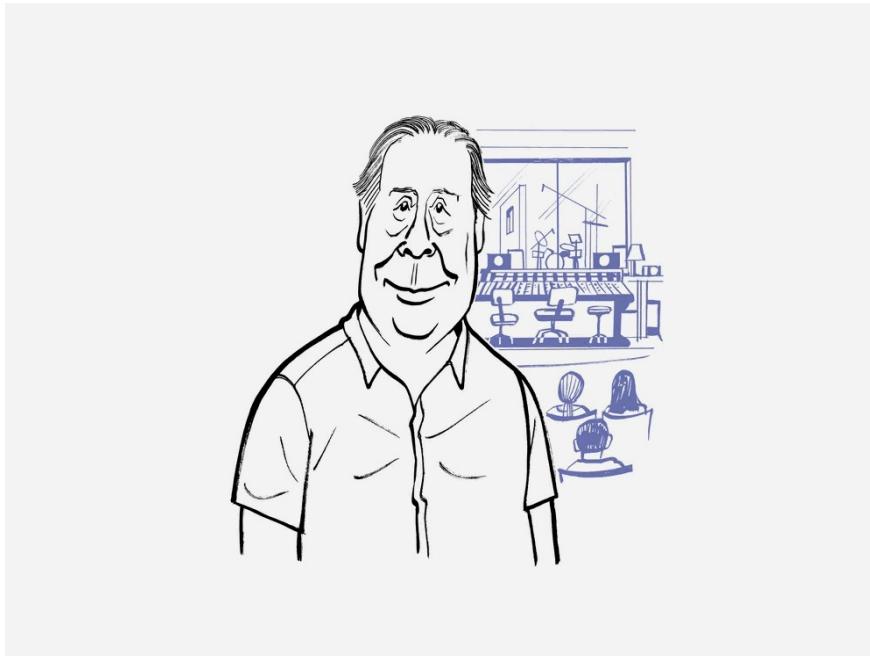
Dept. of Influences

The Roots of the Tony-Winning “Stereophonic”

Ken Caillat, who was an engineer on the Fleetwood Mac album “Rumours,” went to see David Adjmi’s hit play and was surprised by the similarities with his own memoir.

By Michael Schulman

September 23, 2024



In 1976, Ken Caillat was a twenty-nine-year-old sound engineer in L.A., a shy, long-haired techie in Levi’s who loved Steely Dan and had “good ears,” as he put it recently. One Thursday, the studio he worked for asked him to mix a session with Fleetwood Mac for the “King Biscuit Flower Hour.” He’d never heard the band’s music, but he and the musicians hit it off. Soon he got a call from the group, which was about to record a new album in Sausalito with a different sound man. “They said, ‘The guy was an idiot. How about you come up?’ ” Caillat recalled. The album was “Rumours.”

Caillat soon realized that he'd walked into a minefield. "One day, one couple was arguing, and then the next day one person threw champagne in the other person's face," he said. In the course of a tense, druggy, exhausting year, Caillat watched as the two couples within the band—Stevie Nicks and Lindsey Buckingham, and John and Christine McVie—went through breakups, and the fifth member, Mick Fleetwood, got divorced. They wrote their recriminations into songs, which they recorded and rerecorded with agonizing precision. "If I'd been aggressive, they would have fired me," Caillat said. "I went with the flow. I basically wanted to get laid." Midway through, the band made him one of the producers of "Rumours," from which he still gets six-figure royalties; the album has sold more than forty-five million copies.

Caillat worked with Fleetwood Mac on three more records (the cover of "Tusk," from 1979, shows a photograph of his dog Scooter biting his jeans) and in 2012 published a memoir, "Making Rumours," drawing on his detailed tape logs. Earlier this year, he caught wind of the Broadway play "Stereophonic," about a band that strongly resembles Fleetwood Mac recording an album that strongly resembles "Rumours." Maybe they could sell the book in the lobby, he thought. After the play won five Tony Awards, in June, his daughters—Colbie, a singer-songwriter, and Morgan, a sommelier—saw it. "They called up and said, 'It was like your book, Dad,'" Caillat recalled. (The critic Hannah Gold noted the similarities in *The New York Review of Books*.) So he made a rare trip from his home, near Los Angeles, where he runs an artist-development company, to New York.

"Everyone tells me I'm going to be furious at the end of the play," Caillat said, before a matinée. He is bulky, with a growly voice. It was his first time seeing a Broadway show. At the theatre, he and his girlfriend were joined by Mickey Shapiro, a lawyer who repped Fleetwood Mac during "Rumours." Heading to his seat, Caillat looked at the set, a seventies-style control room. "That's a Studer tape recorder, twenty-four track," he said. "Very nice machine."

David Adjmi, the writer of "Stereophonic," has downplayed its connection to Fleetwood Mac, calling the play a "fantasia" that uses "superficial details" about the band to "build dramatic substratum." But, as Caillat watched, certain plot points struck him as uncanny. Much of the story is told through

the eyes of Grover, a bumbling engineer in his late twenties who, yes, gets promoted to producer. In Act I, the Christine McVie character asks Grover for feedback on a take; he suggests that she have a listen in the booth, and she snaps, “*You start paying attention to the tempo and the key and the instruments and give us a little fucking help.*”

“Straight outta the book,” Caillat grunted. (Page 76: “We want you guys to start paying attention to tempos and keys and tuning and other important things and help us out here.”) Later in the play, the Buckingham character tells Grover to tape over a take, because he thinks he can redo it better; when he suddenly decides he wants the earlier take and realizes it’s been erased, he yells, “*Are you a fucking idiot?*”—then lunges at Grover and chokes him. Caillat recounts the same thing in his book, when Buckingham was recording the guitar solo for “You Make Loving Fun.” (Page 264: “‘You’re an idiot!’ Lindsey screamed at me, his hands tightening around my throat.”)

Then there were odd details that repeated odd details in “Making Rumours.” Grover has a crush on the studio’s front-office girl, as Caillat did. The John McVie character gives a boozy monologue about Sausalito’s “houseboat wars,” which Caillat describes in the book. A character mentions seeing Tony Orlando out drinking in L.A., as Caillat did—not exactly a name you’d pluck from the air. Before some takes, Grover says, “Wheels up,” which was Caillat’s studio catchphrase. (“We had airline seats in the control room,” he explained.) “I do believe in coincidence, but not that much,” Shapiro said at intermission.

Afterward, the group debriefed over pizza. “The entire play is from the perspective of the guy sitting behind the desk making the record!” Shapiro said. He was fired up: “It’s a *very* interesting case.” (Bruce Rosen, a First Amendment lawyer, later speculated, “Chances are, there’ll be a nasty note sent and maybe some negotiation.”)

Presented, last week, with Caillat’s reactions to the show, Adjmi, the playwright, responded, “When writing *Stereophonic* I drew from multiple sources—including autobiographical details from my own life—to create a deeply personal work of fiction. Any similarities to Ken Caillat’s excellent book are unintentional.”

Caillat said that he had watched the play in a daze. “I feel like kind of a numbnuts,” he said. “But, yeah, now I feel ripped off!” He did note a few discrepancies between his book and the play: “Lindsey’s a dick, but he’s not *that* big of a dick.” Comparing himself with his dorky fictional counterpart, he said, “I was a little bit more of a playboy. I was always saying, hand against the wall, ‘How you doing?’ ” And as an engineer? “I did it better.” ♦

The Pictures

Sebastian Stan's Crash Course in Becoming Trump

After a long tour of duty in the Marvel universe, the Romanian-born actor is conquering the festival circuit, with starring roles in “The Apprentice” and “A Different Man.”

By Alex Barasch

September 23, 2024



The actor Sebastian Stan glanced approvingly at the neon signage and old-school menus at the Pearl Diner, in the financial district, the other day. He’s lived in and near New York since he was twelve—around the time Donald Trump swapped his first wife, Ivana, for Marla Maples—and has watched the city evolve. “It’s funny. It’s changed, but it’s also the same buildings,” he said. “And then you’re, like, ‘The buildings are there, but *you* are not the same.’”

Stan took off a white ball cap and ordered coffee with cream; he was jet-lagged, fresh from the Deauville American Film Festival, where he’d

received the Hollywood Rising-Star Award. “Rising” is a stretch for the forty-two-year-old, who’s appeared in a dozen Marvel projects, but Stan has lately reached a different echelon. In May, he went to Cannes for “The Apprentice,” in which he plays seventies-era Trump. In Berlin, he’d won the Silver Bear, an award whose previous recipients include Denzel Washington and Paul Newman. “Everyone was, like, ‘Oh, the Silver Bear!’” Stan said. “Then you go back and you’re, like, ‘Do we know what the Silver Bear is in America?’”

The prize was for his role in “A Different Man,” Aaron Schimberg’s surreal black comedy, which nods to “Cyrano de Bergerac.” Stan stars as a man whose lifelong disfigurement is miraculously reversed; the shoot included a grisly three-and-a-half-hour session spent peeling off chunks of his face.

“The Apprentice” demanded a transformation of a different sort. At the diner, Stan pulled out his phone and swiped through an album labelled “DT physicality”—a hundred and thirty videos of Trump, which capture his tiniest gestures and his over-all mien. Marinating in Trump content was, Stan said cheerfully, “a psychotic experience.” He watched the clips so many times that when the director, Ali Abbasi, asked him to improvise in a scene about marketing Trump Tower, he could rattle off the stats: sixty-eight stories of marble in a peachy hue chosen by Ivana, because, as the real Trump put it in a promo, “people feel they look better in the pink.” (It turned out that he’d also memorized Trump’s lie: the tower is actually *fifty*-eight floors.)

Growing up in Communist Romania, Stan had just an hour of TV news each night; New Year’s Eve was an event because it meant twelve hours of programming. His instinct for mimicry—he had a habit of imitating family members and neighbors—was the earliest tell that he might be an actor. After he and his mother fled to Vienna, in 1989, Stan got his first credit, in a Michael Haneke film—an experience that nearly put him off show business. “I stood in line with, like, a thousand kids, for I don’t know how many hours—which I hated,” he said. “If I could fucking meet Haneke *now*, it would be amazing!”

When the family moved again, to America, he experienced pop-culture shock. He binged every movie he’d missed—from “Back to the Future” to

“Ace Ventura”—in a pal’s basement. Another friend roped him into the school play. “My high school was really, really small, so I didn’t have a lot of competition,” Stan said. “They were, like, ‘Please be in the play!’” Soon he was playing Cyrano himself.

After stints on Broadway, and on “Gossip Girl,” Stan was scooped up by Marvel. “I’ve been lucky to play a character for fifteen years,” he said. The blockbuster paychecks freed him up to explore edgier material. “I, Tonya,” in which he played the ice-skater Tonya Harding’s dirtbag husband, was a turning point. “It allowed me to see that a good director will bring out more in you than you can,” Stan said. It was also his first time portraying a real person—a feat that he repeated in “Pam & Tommy,” as the Mötley Crüe drummer Tommy Lee, and now in “The Apprentice.”

“It’s like learning a piece of music,” Stan said, of nailing an impression. “You’ve got to start out slow—it requires practice. Suddenly, you’re getting it more. You’re still making mistakes—but you’re playing the music. You’re playing the music every day until you can do it in your sleep. That’s when the fun starts.” He sliced the air for emphasis, then caught himself and grinned. “And sometimes it’s months later at a diner, and you’re, like, ‘Why am I doing that with my hands?’” ♦

Which Party Has Cornered the Tattoo Vote?

Lauren Boebert has a “tribal” design on her midriff, but there’s competition from John Fetterman and the tattoo caucus—and don’t forget John F. Kennedy or Theodore Roosevelt.

By Charles Bethea

September 23, 2024



A few weeks ago, a photograph of Representative Lauren Boebert, the *MAGA* Republican from Colorado, appeared on X. It showed Boebert at the beach, wearing a bikini that revealed what some observers subsequently described as a “90s-era” “tribal” tattoo. The large, thorny design ran across her midriff, then disappeared into her bikini bottom. Ginger Gaetz, the wife of Representative Matt Gaetz, the hard-right Republican of Florida, posted the image to the site with the caption “We love confident, healthy, patriotic women like Lauren.” A few questions came to mind. Among them: How many politicians are inked up?

It's no secret that Ronald Reagan's Secretary of State George Shultz had a Princeton tiger tattooed on his backside. And there are reportedly plenty of ankle tattoos on display in the House gym. Matt Lodder, of the University of Essex, specializes in tattoo history. Lodder, who is literally tattooed from head to toe, recently offered an overview of tatted politicos. "A bunch of members of the Houses of Lords and Commons were tattooed after Japan opened to the West, in 1858," he said, by telephone. "It became de rigueur to get dragons, spiders, monograms. Newspapers gossiped about who had them."

The earliest confirmed tattooed royal was the future King Edward VII. "He got sent off in 1860," Lodder said. "First to America, where he got some snakeskin boots. Then Jerusalem, where he got a Jerusalem-cross tattoo." His sons, George and Albert, got inked in Japan: with a tiger and a dancing crane, respectively. The ink was applied with "many very minute needles," Prince George wrote in his diary. But, he added, "we did not find the pricking hurt at all."

Lodder noted that the first tattoo shop in the Western world appeared in New York, in 1859. "Social-climbing New Yorkers began getting them," Lodder said. He read from an 1893 *Times* story. "Tattooing is not uncommon," it began. "Many clubmen of this city of New York have been decorated." But the tattoos were purely private. "I do not feel at liberty to mention the names of any tattooed fashionable Americans," an insider told the paper.



Reactionary legislation eventually arrived. In 1963, two years after New York City banned tattooing, the Tattoo Club of America was founded in the city by a Swiss-born optical physicist who, Lodder said, "basically wanted to meet hot tattooed guys." Eventually, his club had nearly a thousand members. Its newsletter spotlighted respectable types, like Senator Barry Goldwater, from Arizona, who had four dots enclosed by a half circle on the edge of his left hand. "It's the ceremonial tattoo of the Smoki . . . a tribe of men devoted to perpetuating the Indian lore of Arizona," the newsletter noted.

Sometimes the tattoo lobby fabulized. Lodder read an item called "Tattooed Statesmen," from a 1964 edition of the newsletter. "We were told that President John F. Kennedy acquired two tattoos on his upper arms while serving in the Pacific Fleet in World War II," it began. "He was very proud of them," the item continued. "However, Mrs. Kennedy did not like them as much." Kennedy allegedly had them removed. Winston Churchill's mother, Lodder said, "supposedly had a snake on her wrist." But, he added, "it's irritatingly difficult to find any images of her without bracelets on. Nineteenth-century European women did go to Japan to get tattoos, but there's no contemporary proof that she did." Rumors persist that Teddy Roosevelt had his family crest tattooed on his chest.

Of Shultz's tiger and its ilk, Lodder said, "Boarding-school tattoos go back to the eighteen-fifties." More recently, Greg Landsman, a Democratic congressman from Ohio, revealed a bit of scripture written in Hebrew on one shoulder. It translates to "Do Justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God." His Democratic colleague Rosa DeLauro, from Connecticut, got a rose on her upper arm at the age of eighty. Senator John Fetterman had his forearm tattooed with the dates of nine violent crimes committed in Braddock, Pennsylvania, when he was mayor there.

After noting the raven on Justin Trudeau's shoulder, the dolphin on Samantha Cameron's ankle, and a Czech Presidential candidate with a full-face tattoo, Lodder turned, finally, to Representative Boebert's midriff, which he called "black work." "That style is hyper cool right now," he said. "If she got it five minutes ago, she's on trend." He figured it cost a few thousand dollars and took a couple of days. ("Ribs hurt," he said.) As for the quality? "It's actually not bad," he said. "But if you were a hip kid who wanted a big, spiky tribal thing because it was kind of edgy, and you saw that picture of fucking Lauren Boebert with it, that might put you off." ♦

Talent Show

The Lawyer Who Wants to Paint You

Adam Dressner, who quit corporate law to become an artist—now with a solo show, “Hello Stranger”—heads to Washington Square Park to scout for subjects.

By Alexandra Schwartz

September 23, 2024



When Adam Dressner was twelve, he moved with his father to a two-bedroom apartment on the seventh floor of a building in the Peter Cooper Village housing development, in Manhattan. His dad has moved out, but Dressner, now forty-four, has left only three times: to go college, graduate school, and law school. In the summer of 2009, before starting as an associate at Sullivan & Cromwell, he went to the Francis Bacon retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum and emerged a changed man. He loved making art as a kid, but gave up on painting after a failed foray into oils. Now, with the assistance of “Oil Painting for Dummies,” he threw himself into the medium again, only to discover that an eighty-hour workweek left little time for the easel. Shortly before the pandemic, he quit corporate law to commit himself to painting.

On a late-summer Friday, Dressner was in his home studio, with Clover, his gregarious twelve-year-old mutt. A decommissioned library card catalogue held brushes and paint tubes. “That’s probably the only piece of furniture in here,” he said. He is slim, with dark hair and startling blue eyes that match the cerulean ball cap he refuses to be seen without (he has three). He was in the final stages of prepping his first solo show, “Hello Stranger,” which was scheduled to open soon in Grand Central Terminal’s Vanderbilt Hall. Canvases were propped and stacked everywhere. Many of Dressner’s paintings are big—some are six feet tall—and representational, in a frank, colorful style that calls to mind Alice Neel or a trippy Frans Hals.

“I started with naked self-portraits,” Dressner said, pointing to a painting of himself, younger, sans ball cap and everything else, clutching his head in artistic agony. He soon moved on to making paintings of clothed loved ones, including his grandmother, who lived on the eleventh floor.

Lately, Dressner has found his subjects by setting up his easel around the city en plein air. “It turns out I’m a social person,” he said. The title of his show—which is co-sponsored by the jeweller Greg Yuna, who appeared in the Safdie brothers’ movie “Uncut Gems”—reflects a democratic optimism rarely evident in the art world. “The work is a little bit skewed to the eccentric among us,” he explained.

Starting in the living room, Dressner introduced some of the show’s subjects. “This is Mr. Love,” he said, indicating a painting of a besuited Black man outfitted with a pocket square and bow tie. They met one day in Washington Square Park, where Dressner took reference photos. “I didn’t run into him until a full year later,” he said. He then went to visit Mr. Love at the senior residence in the Bronx where he lives, and a friendship developed.

Dressner moved on to the hallway, where a sturdily built bather posed impishly against an orange, turquoise, and pink background. “This is David Rosa,” he said. “He asked to be painted in a tiger-print Speedo.” Inside the second bedroom was a portrait of Mickey Boardman, the stylish former editorial director of *Paper* magazine; one of Keion Kopper, a painter and poet from Brooklyn, depicted with do-rag and paintbrush; and one of a ballerina, Georgia Duisenberg, posing in hot-pink toe shoes. Many of the

people Dressner has painted have a special skill—fencing, the piano—and Dressner had decided to turn his exhibition into a talent show of sorts. Rosa is a dancer. “He’s very versatile,” Dressner said.

He headed out to Washington Square Park in search of inspiration, pushing his supplies in a custom-built cart: the chassis of an adult tricycle soldered to a laundry basket from the Container Store. In the park, he unfurled a blue-and-white beach umbrella, tied an apron around his waist, and waited. Soon, he had a subject in his sights: Brian Boyle, who had been lounging in the grass with his girlfriend, Salma Aceves.

“I’m a lawyer and a mental-health counsellor,” Boyle said, as Dressner began to sketch the contours of his head in blue acrylics. “I’m a mental-health counsellor *for* lawyers. Lawyers are consistently in the top twenty suicide by profession.”

“I might hit you up after this,” Dressner said.

In dabs of electric yellow and lime green, a face started to take shape. “By the time Brian sees it, I will actually like it,” Dressner said. “But that moment lasts for literally the last two seconds of the entire process, because I will hate it until then.”

A flock of spectators peered over Dressner’s shoulder. “Really beautiful,” one said.

At last, the big reveal. Aceves clapped her hands. “I love it!” Boyle said. Dressner gave him the portrait to take home, then started packing up. Did he ever miss the law? “I do like the routine of going somewhere, and saying hi to your colleagues, and the cafeteria,” he said. “But this is much more fulfilling.” ♦

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Coming Alive

In the nineteen-sixties, the English neurologist treated patients who had encephalitis lethargica and wrote constant updates about their progress, and his own.

By Oliver Sacks

September 23, 2024



In 1966, the London-born neurologist Oliver Sacks, then in his early thirties, started working at Beth Abraham, a hospital for the chronically ill, in the Bronx. He soon began noticing dozens of patients, scattered among the wards, who were virtually immobile and unable to communicate. Going through their records, he realized that they were all survivors of encephalitis lethargica, also known as sleeping sickness, which had swept the globe after the First World War. This disease could be fatal; those who survived it sometimes developed syndromes that could seem like an extreme form of Parkinson's. By the sixties, some of Sacks's patients had been hospitalized for forty years, and the encephalitis epidemic itself had largely been forgotten.

In 1968, the medical community was galvanized by the news that people with Parkinson's could be helped by a new drug called levodopa, or L-dopa. Sacks wondered whether "DOPA," as he called it, could also help his patients, and he applied to the F.D.A. to use it as an experimental drug. His findings would become the basis of his groundbreaking book "Awakenings," published in 1973.

Years later, Sacks became friendly with the director Peter Weir, who was considering taking on the film adaptation of "Awakenings." In the end, Penny Marshall directed the movie, which came out in 1990 and was nominated for three Academy Awards. Robin Williams was cast as the doctor modelled on Sacks, and Robert De Niro as one of his post-encephalitic patients.

March 26, 1969

Dear Ma and Pa [Elsie and Samuel Sacks, both doctors],

I hope you are keeping well and in good spirits. . . .

Things at Beth Abraham continue on their blundering course. The *DOPA* still never came (my chief, a schnorrer at heart, is trying to beg for some . . . despite the fact that he is rolling in funds specially donated for its purchase), and I can hardly bear to face my poor Parkinsonian patients who have been promised and promised, and let down and lied to, a dozen times in the past six months. You will not be surprised that this stupid situation fills me with rage and guilt. Fortunately, there are a few other patients whom I can study quietly, in my own time, in my own way. It is obvious, however, that I can depend on Beth Abraham for nothing. . . .

Before I forget, thank you, Ma, for the motorcycle leathers which arrived a few days ago.

I imagine Spring is arriving in England, and things are bursting from the ground.

Keep well, write soon, say a special hello to Michael, Auntie Len, David and family, etc.

Love,

[c. April, 1969]

Dear Ma and Pa,

. . . My three patients are doing extraordinarily well on the *DOPA*: one of them, who was virtually unable to talk or move . . . is now chatting and toddling down the corridors. I am inclined to think that *DOPA* may indeed turn out to be as useful for Parkinsonians as insulin for diabetics, or nearly so. In the meantime, I have been studying the three patients closely, and am gathering some novel and fascinating insights into their state. . . .

As usual, I have said more than I should; but you will gather, if nothing else, that the emotional Barometer (to which all other things are secondary) has moved to *FAIR*: occasional showers, but sunny intervals. . . .

Love to everyone (as the Hippies say),

May 17, 1969

Dear Ma and Pa,

. . . I now have 15 patients on *DOPA*, and am staggered and gratified at its ability (in many though not all cases) to reanimate patients who had been virtually petrified for years. . . . This, of course, in turn leads to a very complex state of affairs: one cannot restore the potential of movement and independence to someone who has been helpless and dependent for decades without creating a most complex, unprecedented situation for them and everyone associated with them; I am fascinated by *this* aspect, among others. . . .

I have been working like a madman for the last fortnight. . . . I am gathering almost more information than I can deal with and starting to nibble on the huge Parkinson literature. . . .



[Charles] Messeloff [Beth Abraham's medical director] still wants to get everyone involved . . . in his stupid American concept of a Big Deal and a Multidisciplinary Approach, etc. I try to ignore all this and arrogate the patients to myself. . . .

I have very little to say otherwise, for I have indeed had very little life outside the hospital lately. . . . I hope you are all keeping well.

Love,

May 25, 1969

My dear Mike [Warvarovsky, a friend from California],

I should have replied earlier to your charming letter written in Venice, all bubbling with the freshness and joys of travel. I adore the wide-openness, the *innocence*, with which you see the world. . . . How right you are about catacombs and secret thoughts!

Everything we build is an allegory of ourselves: the whole human world a metaphor of the human state. My own love is for city walls . . . those high stone walls which enclose, defend, and unify a city, as we wall off the citadel of ourselves. . . .

I have started the intensive work on my Parkinson patients . . . and I have had the intoxication of seeing l-DOPA, a ravishing drug, restore to an incredible life . . . patients who had been almost literally turned to stone, speechless, motionless, and even thoughtless, for twenty years or more by the horror of their disease. My first patient, a man of fifty, who had had the severest Parkinsonism since the age of fifteen and had not spoken or moved for more than ten years, said (his first words): "I am reborn. I have been in prison for thirty-three years. You have released me from the custody of my symptoms."

Neurophysiology shows what poetry and philosophy have always known: that we are—in a very fundamental sense—automata, reflex-machines; and also that we are *composite*. Knowing that we are necessarily passive and composite, we can then make ourselves, for daily purposes, active and unified. But there is no "soul" and no "will"—these are fictions, universal fictions, like the Garden of Eden.



Oooh! I am sorry, I didn't mean to ramble ahead like this. . . .

July 30, 1969

Dear Ma and Pa,

A very brief note, whose arrival I may myself precede.

You sound like you enjoyed Malta very much—islands have something lovely about them. . . . I nearly blue [sic] everything I had to go for a voyage to the Galapagos Islands with the Darwin Society, but alas! have had to content myself with reading *The Voyage of the Beagle* as my bedside book. . . . The last three months will turn out to have been, I suspect, the most interesting and productive in my entire life: what I started, reluctantly, as a trial of just another drug has proved an almost incredible tool for the dissection of a vast range of human behavior, from the most primitive postural reflexes to the most complex psychotic reactions. . . .

Will look forward greatly to seeing you all, and to a calm month of (alas! it has to be almost entirely) work.

Love,

August 14, 1969

My dear John [Z., a former lover],

For others a postcard, but to you I cannot send less than a letter. But what there is to write, or what I should write, is another matter. . . .

It was a lovely flight (once we were off the ground), and I had a beautiful soaring sense of freedom as soon as we were on our way, which became sort of ecstatic (and made me weep to myself) as we floated down, at the end, through great soft fleecy clouds . . . down to funny little Gatwick Airport, which is so rural that we almost landed in a flock of sheep (they scattered, bleating, as we neared the ground). . . .

I have spent ten days—how? I am not quite sure. A lot of time with my old friends, afternoons in Kew Gardens . . . swimming in the lakes on Hampstead Heath . . . smoking an infinite number of delicious Havanas (which one cannot, of course, buy in the States, because Cuba is the “foe”), and doing a certain amount of thinking, reading and writing for my book. I think I will have to start on its serious composition almost at once, but the whole subject has extended itself so much in my mind, and excites me so

much, that I am afraid to take the plunge: it is exactly the feeling one has before leaping from the top diving-board. . . .

I have thought of you a certain amount, and have wondered what was a-doing with you. I hope we can construct some meaningful but not-too-intense relationship when I return in September, something calm and civilized, and not at all devouring-torrid-enslaving, etc. . . .

Yours,

OLIVER

September 12, 1969

Memo to Dr. Messeloff:

I think it essential that the administration ruling confining our patients on medication to the Hospital be modified with regard to our *DOPA* patients. Several of our patients have been going home regularly . . . others have gone on summer camps . . . and others on day trips. In all cases the patients have been given l-*DOPA* and other medications to cover their needs while out of the hospital. There have been no problems whatever. *Is this all to stop?*

Going out is the very breath of life for these unfortunate patients who have been not only institutionalized, but imprisoned in their symptoms, for up to fifty years. . . . Two of my patients, Lillian G. and Tillie A., have been institutionalized for more than 35 years, and have not seen the outside world for more than ten years. They were both looking forward eagerly to going to the beach on September 10, and were both heartbroken when this was suddenly vetoed at the last moment.

It is a great cruelty to activate these patients and then deny them activity, to animate them and then deny them the amenities of life. *I consider excursions an absolute necessity for their well-being.* . . .

O. W. Sacks

September 13, 1969

Dear Jonathan [Miller, director and friend],

I imagine that you are once more surrounded by wife and family (you look terribly *lost* even in a few days of enforced bachelordom), and working up for your opening of *Twelfth Night*. . . .

For myself I am working about as hard as I could hope to do for a sustained period without breakdown. . . .

When I returned [from London], it was to find myself the focus of a little minor fame, the consequence of [Israel] Shenker's *NY Times* article ["Drug Brings Parkinson Victims Back Into Life," August 26, 1969]. I had about two hundred letters from patients (and their doctors) as far afield as Australia. . . . This has brought me a little pleasure (I confess), but more distress. Especially as it has all gone to the head of Charlie Messeloff, the old fool who runs Beth Abraham. . . . In my absence he assumed dictatorial powers, summarily fired the Chief of Medicine (an excellent man . . .), capriciously altered the medication, and did endless harm. . . . I found that *five* patients of mine had broken hips: Charlie, in his senile logic, had thought that if they were doing well on X Gm. daily, they would do twice as well on 2X Gm.: they were wildly activated, hurled themselves to and fro on their weak and contractured legs, and of course went down like ninepins. . . . It is ironic and even tragic that my position at Beth Abraham should be rendered intolerable by him, at a time when everything else is going beautifully. . . .

I do hope that your poor father is out of his nightmare complications, and being restored to his former state. . . .

Yours,

October 3, 1969

Dear Mike [Warvarovsky],

Thank you for your postcard (postmarked Sept 2). . . .

In the last six months or so I have been almost continuously involved and buoyed up by my current work . . . and now feel like a treasure-ship

staggering into port laden with almost more than it can carry. A unique group of patients . . . a unique drug, and a unique observer (myself) have combined to give me a remarkable insight into human behavior. . . .

From getting up at 4:30 each morning to write, to my exhausted sleep—which is usually filled with dreams of Parkinsonism and the teeming theories of the moment—I have little time to myself, and almost none for human relationships or ordinary pleasures. . . . In a paradoxical way, my existence has become tolerable and pleasant by having become, in a sense, impersonal or suprapersonal. There is much less fear, less craving, less blaming, less claiming, and all that. Monk-like, the Spinoza of 78th St. . . .

February 7, 1970

Dear Michael [Sacks's brother, who was diagnosed as having schizophrenia as a teen-ager],

I was very happy to receive your short note of January 4, and have been guilty and angry at myself for not having made any reply to it in the month since its arrival. . . . My reactions . . . are contradictory, and this has made the writing of a return letter difficult.

One general thing is quite clear, and a requisite for your survival (as a person). You must have some third mode of existence, some middle ground, between living at Hospital (which, with the exhaustion of its initial promise, is barely tolerable for you) and living at home (which is less tolerable): you must have some middle ground between feelings of doom . . . and fantasies of redemption. . . . Above all, you must secure some release from your conscience, which is the most merciless I have ever known: like Kafka, you labor constantly under a sense of infinite guilt. . . .

I spend a great deal of my life in just this paranoid posture, filled with feelings of hate, vengeance, abjection, hopelessness. And I too (though obviously much less than yourself) regard every moment as a moment of crisis, full of threat and promise. . . .

I have just heard (in a letter from Ma and Pa) that you have secured a job in the West End, partly inside and partly outside. I am very glad to hear this.

Please let me know more of it.

Besides a job you need (not economically, but for your very sense of existence, and for the possibility of release from the knots of hate and spite which bind you, and our parents, at Mapesbury) a place of your own—a hostel, a little furnished room, *something you can get away to*. . . .

Anyhow, I have said much too much, and sounded pompous and patronizing, which I was afraid I would.

Do drop me a line, when you feel like it, and tell me how things are going with you.

Love,

Oliver

[c. April, 1970]

Dear Jonathan [Miller],

Lovely to get your letter yesterday. . . .

When I tot things up, I realize that first I have another dozen articles to write, and . . . *then* I must get on with my next subject . . . which is “dementia” . . . and *then* “schizophrenia.” So I see years of work stretching ahead, which gives me a good privileged feeling (the “task,” the “mission,” etc.) but also a feeling of being walled-in, and having to shelve the wild wanderings and wanderlusts and extravagances of youth, neurosis, drugs, etc. But it is not a bad bargain. Thank God I have a remarkable ability to sublimate and to become dedicated to things, otherwise I would end up catatonic, like my brother in Bedlam.

Physically life has become a good deal better, now that I have a car (a 1967 Rover) and a pleasant apartment. The hospital is renting me this for a fairly token sum. I have six rooms (which is large for NY) which occupy the ground floor of an oldish house . . . and also a little garden fore-and-aft thrown in. . . . I hope you will consider staying over for a day or two when you next come to NY.

Naturally . . . I also feel aghast at the thought of such comfort and security etc. and feel that a) I will be punished for it, b) that it will suddenly be taken away, and c) that it will cause an immediate stultification, petrification, mummification. . . .

And the resistance one must fight to find new ideas! So much emotion, so much attachment, goes with the old. And one feels like a murderer when one must smash down one set of ideas to make room for a new set. . . .

My love to the family—I will hope to see you all in August.

Yrs,

Oliver

May 6, 1970

Dear Ma and Pa,

This letter will arrive, I imagine, about the time you return from Israel. I hope you had a good, relaxed time there: what is the general atmosphere like? From the outside, of course, the whole Middle East seems to be boiling in a particularly dangerous way, or about to blow up. Indeed the whole world seems that way at the moment—tensions are extremely high here, following the invasion of Cambodia and the brutal shooting of those students in Ohio. . . . Most of the colleges throughout the States are putting on strikes or boycotts; there is a very fearful, ominous atmosphere, something like that in the first days of 1939, I imagine.



It seems almost improper to pursue one's personal life, when everything around one is so agog. . . .

One way and another . . . my beloved post-encephalitic patients, and their infinitely varied reactions to l-DOPA, have led into a vast landscape of clinical study, really into a life's work. And by the time I am "through" with them, I will have derived an experience and knowledge of primitive (subcortical) behavior matched by nobody else around, to say nothing of the "bonuses" like the study of tics, obsessions, mannerisms, perceptual distortions, memory upsurges, etc. as these occur in the patients. . . .

I feel myself almost diagrammatically divided into a "good" self and a "bad" self. The good self is full of love and wonder and praise etc. This is the part which makes me see my patients as miraculous concatenations of disordered brain-systems, and to feel endless sympathy, understanding, compassion, etc. for them. . . . The bad part is full of hate and fear and blame, and is as selfish and destructive as the other is altruistic and constructive. . . . Teaching, patients, poetry, philosophy, Nature, etc. bring out the good, lyrical part of me, which is much pleasanter for me, and for everyone concerned. . . .

It was lovely to hear you all over Pesach, and I will look forward to your next letter.

June 8, 1970

Dear Augusta [Bonnard, psychiatrist],

. . . I suddenly bethought myself of your paper on “The primal significance of the tongue,” and want to say how full of interesting observations and insights I have found it. . . .

For the first two years of analysis, I was consumed with feelings of reproach and even hatred against my parents, seeing them as all-culpable vehicles and inducers of neurotic misery. These feelings I have worked through, and now I find myself loving and admiring them for a quality (indeed, the most valuable human quality) which has been the center of their lives, and is now the center of mine: namely, a feeling of *devotion* and dedication to their patients and their problems. . . . And it is obvious, from my knowledge of you and from re-reading your paper, that something very similar and intense must be a mainspring in your own life. . . .

I will be coming to England this August . . . and will hope to see you then.

Best wishes . . .

Oliver Sacks

September 12, 1970

My dear Paul [Turner, physician],

. . . It was an enormous pleasure seeing you in London again, and—I realize in retrospect—a meeting which certainly coincided with, and possibly prompted, a change of mood. . . .

I went to see C. [a neurological colleague and distant cousin] at Hammersmith, the day after meeting you, whom I found very bright, eager, but essentially pedestrian. That’s a mean word to use after his receiving me so pleasantly. . . . He sat in his clinic, alert, neat, quick, with a pile of ruled

test-sheets in front of him, rapidly reducing his patients to test-scores, and paying (unless I do him an injustice) almost no attention to them as people: tremor 3, rigidity 2½, akinesia 4, next patient please, etc. . . . In some very fundamental sense, when all the gradings and rating and testings and measurements have been done . . . the very flesh of the subject has escaped, like a jellyfish through a tea strainer. . . .

I am forgetting that this is a letter, and getting all hot-under-the-collar and polemical. Actually, I think I am rehearsing the preface to *my* book on Parkinsonism, which I have just started writing, and which perhaps C.'s book has, in part, stimulated. . . .

Thank you again for everything, and looking forward to hearing from you.

Best regards to your wife,

November 7, 1970

Dear Ma and Pa,

It seems a long time since I wrote or received a letter, but I don't suppose it can really be so long. . . .

In the meantime, I have decided to split my originally planned book into two. The [first part] will deal specifically with l-DOPA, laying stress on its dangers, on the reasons why these have not been adequately reported. . . .

I have held my hand for nearly two years, refraining from any premature publication of large studies (as . . . my own common sense advised, although Messeloff, of course, was always pestering and nagging me to publish "something positive," in less-than-no-time, etc.). But now I have seen the whole melancholy round of l-DOPA (and it is *round*—like the Earth: a man cannot escape from his Parkinsonism any more than he can walk off the surface of the earth: at the point when l-DOPA seems most effective, when the patient shows anti-Parkinsonism, or is in the Antipodes of Parkinsonism, at that moment his course is already rounding itself to return to where he came from)—now I have seen the whole round, I am ready to pour out a spate of publications. . . .

I should be grateful, Pa, if you could refrain from mentioning my *DOPA* book to anyone at the moment, especially cousin C. Do write and tell me how you all are, and what is happening in London.

OS

August 18, 1971

Dear Wystan [W. H. Auden, poet],

Your letter was forwarded to me a few days ago, and it (or your poem, or you) was the best of palliatives. Does there come a point (if one is very lucky, or has the right gifts, or grace, or works at it) when style, feeling, content, judgment all flow together and assume the *right* form? . . .

In some sense, I think, my medical sense is a musical one. I diagnose by the feeling of discordancy, or of some peculiarity of harmony. And it's immediate, total, and gestalt. My sleeping-sickness patients have innumerable types of strange "crises," immensely complex, absolutely specific, yet completely indescribable. I recognize them all now as I recognize a bar of Brahms or Mahler. . . .

I hope I can find some way to describe these, because they are unique states, at the edges of being . . . and when the last of the sleeping-sickness patients die (they are very old now) no memory will be left of their extraordinary states. Writing seems more of a struggle now—maybe I'm trying something harder—I find meanings go out of focus, or there is some sort of "slippage" between word and meaning, and the phrase which seemed right, yesterday, is *dead* today. . . . And medical jargon is so awful. It conveys no real *picture*, no impression whatever, of what—say—it feels like to be Parkinsonian. . . . One patient called it the push-and-pull, another the goad-and-halter. It's a most hateful condition, although it has a sort of elegant formal structure. But no book that I know of brings home that Parkinsonism *feels* like this. . . .

I *hope* I can join Orlan [Fox, a mutual friend] on a lightning visit to Vienna. . . . [Auden spent his summers in Kirchstetten, outside the city.] But if I cannot come I will surely see you in New York. . . .

Yours ever,

August 28, 1971 [unsent]

Dear Sir [George L. Fite, editor at the *Journal of the American Medical Association*],

I must acknowledge, somewhat belatedly, your letter, and your return of my manuscript on l-DOPA.

And, of course, the list of “comments” provided by your consultant(s). The latter is a quite remarkable production, not for its intrinsic value (for it seems almost entirely valueless as a rational critique), but for the light it casts on the state-of-mind and emotional attitudes of your consultant(s), who—if I do not misunderstand you—must be regarded as representing, after a fashion, the “official” attitude to l-DOPA.

I need scarcely say that I was at first distressed, and even shocked, that innumerable observations based on years of daily contact with patients . . . could be so ignorantly and wantonly dismissed, or “wished away”: the attitude immortalized in Dickens’ Mr. Podsnap (“I don’t want to know about it; I don’t choose to discuss it; I don’t admit it!” . . .). Your consultant(s) do not make . . . any substantive criticisms of my work, and have therefore descended . . . into petty jibing, pomposity, vapid rhetoric—in a word, Podsnappery. Indeed, if I did not know it directly, I could infer the importance of my own work from the very intensity of this threatened, denying, and defensive reaction. . . .

I know you will appreciate that feelings must be discharged and expressed once in a while. With this letter, therefore, I shall regard the *JAMA* “episode” as closed.

Yours sincerely,

Oliver Sacks

October 25, 1971

Dear Mr. Haycroft [sic; Colin Haycraft, publisher, Gerald Duckworth & Co.],

It was a very great pleasure meeting you last month, and an immense encouragement (and surprise) that you were interested by the case histories I wrote in 1969. I am exceedingly sorry to be so tardy in replying to you. . . .

My chief reason for holding back, though, is connected with . . . my fears that publishing such detailed information about living people might be distressing to them. . . . I have spoken to most of the patients whose case histories I gave you, and none of them have raised any special objections. . . . It was due to such misgivings that I put the histories away in a drawer after writing them.

I have just been reading *The Three Christs of Ypsilanti*—I don't know if you know the book—which may have some analogies to *Awakenings*. . . . And Freud's “Dora” analysis, which *he* put in a drawer for five years after writing!

I *hope* therefore that some of my conflicts being resolved, I can get on with the necessary revision and emendations. . . . I will write relatively short . . . epilogues bringing each case up to date—this is bound to add a rather tragic element . . . because in many cases the superb effects of the drug were not maintained, or [were] otherwise compromised. . . .

November 24, 1972

Dear Professor Kermode [Frank Kermode, literary critic],

I was overcome with pleasure and gratitude when I saw your letter last week. . . .

I felt a great need to express myself and my “data” in a wholly different way and to a wholly different audience; I was delighted—and scared—when the *Listener* commissioned my article; and breathed the biggest sigh of relief I have ever breathed when I saw that someone like yourself approved. . . .

If one gives them a chance, patients always describe their Parkinsonism or whatever in terms of worlds and landscapes. They *depict*. It has taken me

years and years . . . to learn to listen to them, and to try and feel my way into the nature of their experiences. . . .

Back in 1966, I saw my first post-encephalitic patient—he had once been a librarian—with a look on his face at once infinitely clenched and infinitely remote, but I couldn't begin to imagine his state until he whispered “Panther” and suddenly put Rilke’s Panther into my mind.

I have tried to convey the sort of lives some of these people have in my forthcoming book *Awakenings* (Duckworth). It is bound to be a partial failure because one really needs to be a novelist as well as a neurologist, but I hope it will convey something of what these extraordinary, tormented, involuntary explorers of the depths experience. . . .

February 10, 1973

Dear Colin [Haycraft],

I have returned to find a distressing and potentially calamitous situation at Beth Abraham—and one which is reflected in thousands of Beth Abrahams all over the country. Nixon’s latest budget has upped defense (I mean “defense”) expenditure by twenty billion or whatever, and has made a merciless cutback in monies available to schools and hospitals. . . . I found on my return that Margie (our devoted speech therapist), all the physiotherapists, occupational therapists, etc. had been summarily sacked. There has been an abrupt (and probably permanent) closing-down of our Workshop, our Rehabilitation Department, etc. . . . I went up to the ward and found almost every patient speechless-motionless with fear. . . . Indeed, this is a death sentence for many of them . . . and for many of the 3 million patients in the US in so-called “extended care” institutions. . . . Horrible. And the fact that it has come from the highest level gives one an absolute sense of impotence. . . .

Enough said. I will cease to shoot letters and footnotes in your direction for a while. . . .

Best regards,

March 31, 1973

Dear Wystan [Auden],

When I got your lovely letter of February 21, I was filled with a rush of affection and gratitude, immediately wrote an answer, put it in an envelope and stamped it, placed it under a volume of the OED to flatten it, took it the next day meaning to post it—and I *cannot* be sure whether I actually did so or not. . . .

Thank you immensely for your magnanimous reaction to my book. [Auden wrote, “Have read *Awakenings* and think it a masterpiece. I do congratulate.”] You are the only person, other than my publisher, to whom I have shown a copy; and there is *nobody* whose favorable response could make me happier than your own. . . . The positive experience with the *Listener* article, like the five years of negative experience which preceded it, persuade me that it is all-but-impossible to have any real and fruitful dialogue in Medicine and medical circles (especially the barren neurological ones to which I belong), whereas there is obviously a mass of real, *alive* people outside Medicine who *will* listen to me, and with whom I can enjoy the delight (the *necessity*) of real converse. . . .

Essentially, at the moment, I am mourning. . . . [Sacks’s mother died unexpectedly, in November, 1972.] I felt diminished almost to zero by my mother’s death . . . and it is only in the last few days, perhaps, with the signs of Spring all round me, that I have started to feel a re-stirring of my own sap, and a re-realization that I exist in my own right, that—unexpectedly, amazingly—I am still here, and the world is here. . . .

I do not know whether you will still be in England when I come there in May. . . . If (as I fear) I will miss you then, I will at least hope to hear from you, and to see you here, there or somewhere soon.

p.s. I will now go and post *this* letter instantly, lest it get caught up in indecision like the last one!

June 11, 1973

My dear old friend Seymour [post-encephalitic patient] . . .

Thank you very much for your letter which I got today. . . . It is always a pleasure, and a compliment, to receive letters from you (and even to be a voice amid your “voices,” when you hear voices). I have always had the greatest esteem and affection for you—as has everyone who knows you at Beth Abraham. . . . Indeed, in a sort of way, you have always represented (at least, in my eyes) the conscience of Beth Abraham, the epitome of that unconquerable human spirit which disease, drugs, and the isolation and imprisonment of institutionalization can never oust or conquer. . . .

To turn a patient, a friend, into a “character” in a book seems monstrous in a way; and I would not do so were I not convinced, over-and-above all personal considerations, that your lives and stories (I speak of *all* of you—victims of the sleeping sickness . . .) are of the deepest interest, and deeply moving, and that they could cast a unique light not only upon the peculiar illness from which you have suffered so long, but upon the nature of human nature, the human spirit, in general.

But, you will understand . . . this is a very difficult and tense period, awaiting its publication. . . . My feeling is that I should *not* show the book to you—to *anyone*—before it is published. . . .

So, I will ask you, as I ask others in Beth Abraham, to be patient. . . .

With kindest regards,

August 26, 1989

Dear Peter [Weir, director],

Delighted to get your letter—I should have delayed my own, because I saw *Dead Poets Society* almost immediately after I wrote, and thought it *magnificent*—one of your finest. . . .

(In my ignorant way) I had not, in fact, seen Robin Williams *until* I saw him here—and having since seen him in *Good Morning, Vietnam* etc. I am extremely glad I saw him in your film first. I thought he gave a wonderful performance—performance *as*, incarnation *as*, the schoolteacher—that you

had brought out marvellous “straight” acting; whereas in *Vietnam* I had the sense of him playing himself. . . .

Now I have met him, and found him (not only coruscatingly, quasi-Tourettishly spontaneous and funny, but also) warm and empathetic—I was most moved by the patience and tenderness he showed when I took him to meet and listen to two of my aging post-encephalitic patients. I feel happier (tho’ not really happy!) about the question of the “real me” and the fictional one. . . . But at least I can be assured that Robin will infuse all his intelligence and warmth and humor and personality into the part. . . . (When we went, with Robt De Niro, and Penny [Marshall] etc. to see a psychiatric ward in Bronx State, Robin *suddenly* exploded, in the car on the way back, with the most incredible, phantasmagoric replay of the entire scene, taking on different voices, different personae, with kaleidoscopic rapidity—it was a most amazing, even *neurologically* amazing, eruptive achievement. . . .)

Robert De Niro seems, at first, a polar opposite—shy to an almost pathological degree (I felt this, since I sometimes have this frozen shyness myself . . .)—but he has been becoming easier and warmer each time we’ve met. I am going to London tomorrow, will meet him there, and show him the last-remaining group of post-encephalitics (just 9, out of the 20,000 originally brought to the Highlands Hospital in 1920). . . . I will try to show Penny and the actors the clinical realities (of patient, of doctor, of hospital, etc.—and then, I think, disengage myself, and watch from the sidelines; since filmmaking is as deep a mystery to me as book-making to them . . .).

I very much look forward to you coming to New York again, and to Thai dinners in the rain!

Affectionately, Oliver

March 10, 1990

Dear Robin [Williams, actor],

. . . I find quite a sense of loss now the shooting is over—which surprises me, in a way, because I often cursed it when it was going on! But it was also

very fascinating in a way, and a real delight—and honor—to work with people like you and Bob (etc.) . . .

I was very moved by getting your copy of the *script* (with all its evocative photos), and the beautiful leather-bound copy of [the screenwriter Steven Zaillian's] script, with your lovely inscription—thank you so much for both! I will certainly treasure them in my (chaotic) archives. . . .

I am adding . . . about 50,000 words to *Awakenings* [including an appendix] . . . about the many (and *all* wonderful) dramatic representations of AW. . . . Above all the film and the filming have been for me quite extraordinary experiences. And *real* ones too: as real in their way as working with the original patients, and as real as the . . . “scientific” model-making and world-making which followed.

But you—as actors, as dramatists—are also making worlds; and though these are “illusions,” they are also full of truth. . . .

My warmest best wishes to you and Marsha—and hopes to see you in New York, or California, before long.

Love,

Oliver ♦

This is drawn from “[Letters](#).”

Annals of Gastronomy

Can Your Stomach Handle a Meal at Alchemist?

At the Copenhagen restaurant, diners are served raw jellyfish—and freeze-dried lamb brain served in a fake cranium—while videos about climate change swirl on the ceiling. Is it “gastronomic opera,” or sensory overload?

By Rebecca Mead

September 23, 2024



Rasmus Munk, the celebrated Danish chef, has such memorable eyes—they are a piercing blue, and often bloodshot—that when a waiter at Alchemist, his restaurant in Copenhagen, served me an eyeball, I recognized it immediately. The iris was flecked with brown and rimmed with red, and the eye stared up at me unwaveringly, at least until I picked up a long-handled spoon and dug in. It had a gleaming gelatinous surface and was both salty and creamy, with a surprisingly nubby texture and a distinct taste of—what was it?—shrimp.

Alchemist, which opened in its current incarnation in 2019, in a waterfront warehouse district of the city, is one of the most sought-after reservations in the fine-dining world. Less than a year after opening, it was awarded two Michelin stars for a tasting menu of about forty courses which is served, four nights a week, to some fifty diners for five or six hours, in a sequence of spectacular spaces. These include a luxurious lounge bar featuring a fifty-foot-high tower lined with wine bottles on shelves, as in a library, and a vast dining room with a planetarium-style dome that offers an ever-changing visual accompaniment to the dishes below. The eyeball—a dome-shaped resin object, like an upside-down bowl, hand-painted with blood vessels and fashioned by a model shop in Copenhagen—is seven times the diameter of Munk's own, and offers an appropriately surreal flourish during a culinary experience that can feel more like Buñuel than like Bobby Flay. The night I visited Alchemist, the edible pupil consisted of a blend of minced shrimp, raw peas, roasted pistachios, and crème fraîche. One of the restaurant's thirty-five steady-handed chefs had spooned this mixture into a cavity in the eye's center, then topped it with black caviar suspended in a gel made from codfish eyes and razor clams, to simulate a wet cornea-like surface. The flavor was considerably subtler than the presentation; after staring the dish down, I slurped up every last globule in the blink of an eye.

Munk, who is thirty-three, and has been in the kitchen full time for more than half his life, acknowledges that some diners will feel queasy scooping out a replica of a human eyeball, even if they don't think twice about consuming a mouthful of gametes extracted from the ovaries of a fish. Such queasiness is part of the intention of Alchemist, which offers what Munk calls "holistic dining"—an experience that integrates elements of the visual and performing arts, through which a range of challenging social issues, including problems of food production and scarcity, are explored. A diner might be served a freeze-dried butterfly atop a crispy faux leaf made of kale, spinach, and nettle, balanced on a silver replica of a branch, while a server extolls the high protein content of insects. (In terms of flavor, the kale predominates.) A meatball made from Thai-curry chicken comes appended to the rubbery severed claw of a chicken, which a diner grasps, as if shaking hands, and extracts from a straw-strewn metal cage as nightmarish images of caged poultry in factory farms appear on the dome overhead. The eyeball dish is named 1984—all the dishes, which at Alchemist are called "impressions," have names—and servers deliver it with a brief disquisition

about the paradox of self-sought exposure on social media and unwelcome surveillance occurring on the same platforms. Hundreds of pictures of the dish have been posted to Instagram.



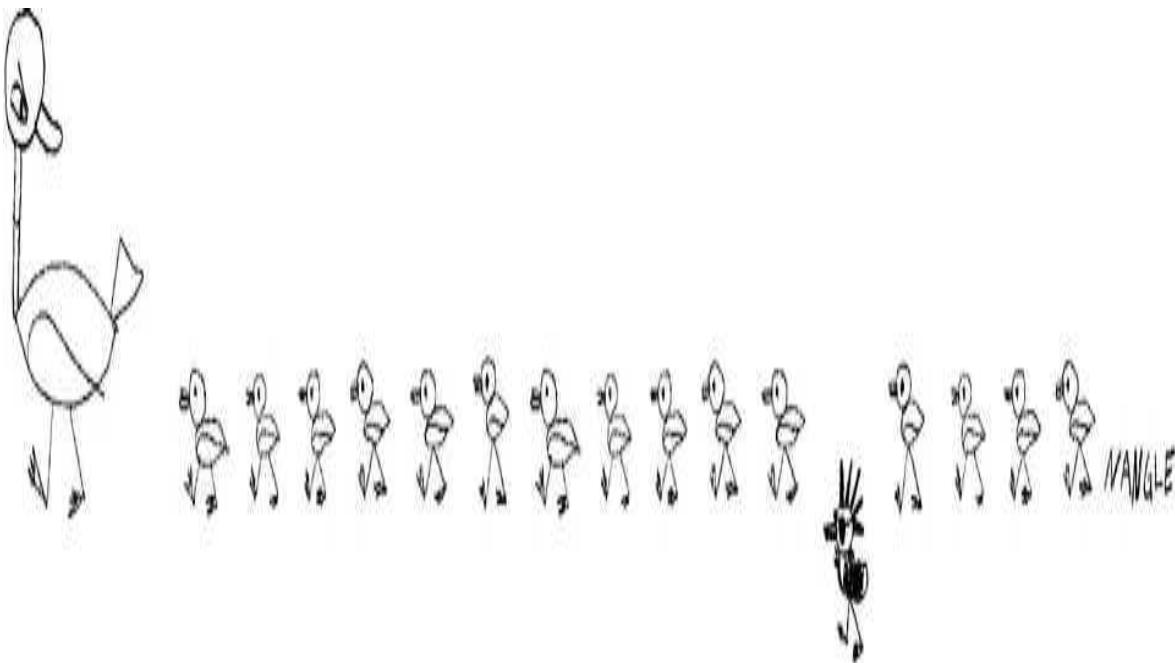
A meal at Alchemist costs at least eight hundred dollars a person, and the basic wine pairing brings the price to more than a thousand dollars. The most exclusive experience, called the Sommelier's Table, goes for twenty-three hundred. Munk knows that this is costly, but, when we met in Copenhagen in August, he told me, "We try to create a place where you get more than just good food, and just the pleasure of caviar, and the highest-quality ingredients. At Alchemist, you don't fly in for only *that*." If contemporary visual artists and theatre directors are allowed to make their patrons uncomfortable, Munk asked, why aren't chefs? "People talk about chefs being artists, but it's always within this box of 'pleasure,' and 'you need to be nice,'" he said. "There also needs to be a part of disgust in art, and something that challenges you." The video sequences, which Munk conceptualizes along with the food, can be especially unsettling: what initially appears to be a dreamy vision of jellyfish swimming around a reef evolves into a visual reprimand about ocean pollution, with plastic detritus outlasting dying coral. Alchemist, which occupies the former scenery shop of the Royal Danish Theatre, introduces a theatrical dimension from the start: diners gather on the sidewalk, as before a play, and are confronted with

a daunting pair of bronze double doors, reminiscent of [Rodin's](#) "The Gates of Hell," that depict the gnarled roots of a tree. Hidden cameras allow staff to observe their arriving guests' confusion before the doors suddenly swing open.

Inside, there's no natural light, and a soundtrack of New Agey electronic music creates an otherworldly atmosphere, leaving a diner as disoriented as someone entering a casino or a haunted house. Munk consulted with architects when designing the restaurant, he told me, but they all advised him to let light flood in, and to deck the place out with Nordically fashionable concrete and blond wood. "I was, like, 'No, no, no,'" Munk said. "I wanted to create our own reality, so it could be anywhere in the world." Munk is similarly unconcerned about signalling seasonality or emphasizing local ingredients: fatty, vintage Ibérico ham imported from Spain is served on "airy bread" made from croissant-like sheets of potato starch and topped with a foam that includes egg yolk and crème fraîche; it's a symphony in animal fat which, depending on your taste, is either the best thing you've ever put in your mouth or gag-inducingly excessive. Munk is at least as interested in texture as he is in flavor, and he devises ways to make something that might seem off-putting—say, slices of raw jellyfish—into something appealing. (He places them in lychee-and-lemongrass-infused water, then adds a chili oil made, in part, from lactose-fermented habanero peppers.) The sophistication of Munk's cuisine could be compared to that at Noma, Copenhagen's celebrated culinary temple, which sits less than a mile away, alongside a lake amid Arcadian vegetable gardens. But going to Alchemist is more like attending a lurid Vegas extravaganza—or committing to a shaman-led adventure with psychedelics.

For some, the Alchemist effect is exhilarating. "It was one of the top five experiences of my life," Kristen Segin, a dancer with the New York City Ballet, told me after she visited the restaurant on the same evening that I did. Segin and her dining companion, Harrison Coll, another dancer in the company, both had the night off from performing at the Tivoli Concert Hall, and both reported being thrilled by dishes like The Scream—a postcard-size reproduction of [Edvard Munch's canvas](#) made out of kudzu starch and milk proteins, and flavored with saffron, Cointreau, licorice, and mandarin—and suitably disturbed by the caged chicken. Coll said, of the chicken meatball affixed to the severed claw, "It was so good, but I was going down it

gingerly, because I didn't want to eat the leg." Coll admitted to being so distracted by the general spectacle that, when he was served Danish Summer Kiss, a silicone replica of a human tongue, smeared with tomato-and-strawberry tartare and garlanded with flowers, he bit into it rather than giving it a French kiss, as the servers advise. (My own encounter with the slathered tongue left me feeling that, like many an unanticipated French kiss, it was best chalked up to experience.)



The service is scrupulous: by the time diners have emerged from the lounge bar and entered the domed dining room, the waitstaff have observed whether they are right- or left-handed, and arranged utensils and dishes accordingly. And the images on the dome, such as a pulsing heart, become more charged through their association with Munk's food. Around the moment at which my 1984 dish was served, the dome filled with video footage of recognizable figures (Mark Zuckerberg, Edward Snowden) alongside surveillance images of the diners themselves. It felt like an enthusiastically didactic submission to the Venice Biennale. The choreography is impeccable: at one showstopping instant, the already dim lights were extinguished, so that the diners could simultaneously be served a coconut-and-honeydew concoction that glowed in the dark, courtesy of a powdered extract from bioluminescent jellyfish. There were gasps all around as each guest raised an eerie, glowing blob. I saw only one person who, after hearing

a request that cell phones not be used to capture the moment—dozens of illuminated screens would ruin the effect—decided, like the dickish, doomed foodie in the horror-comedy film “The Menu,” that the rules didn’t apply to him.

Timid eaters might be advised to cross Alchemist off their bucket lists altogether. One celebrated offering is pigeon meat cured in a casing of beeswax and served suspended, like a ham, with the bird’s feathered head intact. Another is ice cream made from pig’s blood and filled with a ganache of juniper oil and deer-blood garum. (“Fatty, with a weird umami aftertaste,” in the judgment of a food blogger.) Not all diners appreciate being scolded during their meal. “I care deeply about climate change, yet I don’t necessarily go to a restaurant to worry about it even more,” Jeff Gordinier wrote in *Esquire*. “I go to a restaurant to get away from the awful news for a few hours.” One night, a guest threw the chicken cage across the domed room, declaring that he hadn’t signed up to be lectured by Greenpeace. But that was in itself a satisfying moment of theatre. On only three or four occasions has a diner walked out in disgust.

When a visitor shows up at Alchemist expecting a more conventional experience and is visibly unsettled, the team adjusts—for instance, offering silverware to a guest who isn’t comfortable eating with her fingers, or switching out the blood ice cream for raspberry. Certain dishes, though, are never modified. “We always give out the tongue,” Munk told me. “It’s putting a question mark: what is cutlery? If you put the tongue kiss on a plate—a beautiful tomato salad with flowers—you won’t have any problem eating it, but it will not resonate that long with you. But when you have to put that tongue kiss in your mouth there are so many other things happening to you. If we stopped doing that, we would compromise our philosophy.”

Alchemist isn’t the first restaurant to challenge the limits of a visitor’s comfort. At Dans le Noir?, a restaurant chain originating in Paris, the dining room is completely dark, and the servers blind or visually impaired; at Ithaa, in the Maldives, the dining room is submerged five metres underwater, and has a barrelled glass ceiling; at Sublimotion, in Ibiza, twelve diners per night eat dishes that are served dangling from wires above the table, and wear virtual-reality headsets for part of the meal. (The experience costs more than seventeen hundred dollars a person.) But no other restaurateur has expressed

his idiosyncratic creativity as lavishly as Munk has. The first space a visitor to Alchemist enters is an anteroom that establishes the theme of the evening, as conceived by Munk. The night I visited, the theme was identity; the anteroom was lined with mirrors and occupied by an antic mime in a black leotard and spangly makeup. She silently beckoned me onto a raised platform, so that I could regard my own multiple reflections, then offered me a black box containing the début “impression” of the evening: a membrane-thin square of apple leather. Meanwhile, a voice piped in through a speaker asked alarmingly existential questions: “How do you see yourself?”; “Are you free?”; “What are you ashamed of?”; “Are you having fun?” Segin and Coll, the dancers, told me they’d embraced the mime’s invitation to join in the performance, but, though Alchemist attends to customers’ dietary restrictions—a computer screen in the kitchen tracks food intolerances and prohibitions—little accommodation is made for diners who, like me, are allergic to audience participation.

For an enfant terrible, Munk is surprisingly modest and self-effacing. When serving diners—he’s constantly leaving the kitchen and circulating among his guests—he’s approachable and warm, nothing like the stereotype of the tyrannical maestro. He is touchingly self-conscious, and would doubtless hate the interactive first course at Alchemist if he ever went as a guest. He told me that he has only once been seriously drunk, and has never taken drugs. Some guests at Alchemist seek to enhance their experience with hallucinogens; Munk does not approve. When he and his girlfriend of seven years, Lykke Metzger, who heads his waitstaff, recently toured Asia and visited dozens of renowned bars, Munk had to be pushed to sample anything more adventurous than a gin-and-tonic. He works incessantly, and, despite the theatricality of his restaurant, his own cultural experience is narrow. He has been to only one play in his life—several years back, he was invited to see a production of “Miss Julie” at the Royal Danish Theatre. He was alarmed when the actors addressed the audience directly, but he ended up enjoying the experience. “I’m inspired by the theatre, but, like, the *feeling* of it, that I’ve seen in movies, or seen on Google,” he told me. (Among his favorite films are “Avatar,” “Star Wars,” and “Silence of the Lambs.”) He’s never seen a ballet, or attended a concert of either pop or classical music. “I just listen on [Spotify](#),” he said. Ed Sheeran ate at Alchemist, but when he invited Munk to attend a show the chef declined: the restaurant was open that night, and he never misses a service.

Reservation Wars

How bots, mercenaries, and table scalpers have turned the restaurant reservation system inside out.

Fortunately for Munk and his financial backer—a Danish investor named Lars Seier Christensen, who also owns Geranium, a more sober Michelin-starred establishment in Copenhagen—the pool of sensation-seeking diners is enormous. Alchemist has a waiting list in the tens of thousands, and there are lively Reddit threads in which foodies try to exchange or sell reservations. Even though most Alchemist diners must also factor travel into the cost, not all of them are rich; Munk often meets diners who have saved up for years to afford their meal. (Segin and Coll told me that they'd paid for Alchemist partly by redirecting their meal allowance for the dance tour.) Still, anyone who can countenance spending four figures on one dinner belongs to a certain income bracket; as I waited outside the restaurant's gates, I heard a conversation in which the term “angel investor” bubbled up more than once.

Diners of this sort were on my mind—and, indeed, were sitting nearby, in rolled-up shirtsleeves—when another singular creation was placed on the gray marble tabletop that snakes through the domed room. This dish came in a silicone vessel even more innovative than the fake eyeball: a replica of a man's bald, pallid head, severed just below the eyebrows. Munk, who is stocky, with ruddy skin and a shock of strawberry-blond hair, served this course to me himself. With a surgeon's delicacy, he lifted the top of the skull to reveal a morsel within: a crispy meringue, about the size of a golf ball, filled with cherry gel and lamb-brain mousse, and topped with a freeze-dried slice of lamb brain.

The lamb brains had been salted and poached before being chopped up and aerated, Munk explained, and the dish—at first glance, an homage to Hannibal Lecter—was intended to highlight the issue of food waste. “In Denmark, we produce a lot of animals, and over ninety per cent are exported. But still there are some cuts we don't export—we just waste it, and lamb brain is one of those things,” he said. (In fact, Munk acknowledged later, the waste-product narrative doesn't quite hold together: because the farmers from whom he buys lamb brains aren't set up to process them

efficiently, they are costlier to procure than tenderloin.) Munk discreetly left me alone for my moment of simulated cannibalism. As the brain ball melted on my tongue, sweet and meaty, my own skull reverberated with a revolutionary slogan: “Eat the Rich.”

Rasmus Munk grew up outside Randers, a small city in Jutland, Denmark’s rural heartland, where his father was a truck driver, his mother a care worker. Munk was bullied mercilessly in elementary school for wearing hand-me-down clothing and shoes. Once, some older boys beat him up and locked him in a closet. When he was about eleven, his parents divorced; his mother remarried and moved with Munk to the countryside, where his stepfather had a small farm. In his teens, Munk began working for an industrial-scale pig farmer, who instructed him that it was necessary to beat the animals with a shovel or they would bite. “One time, I saw him nearly beat a pig to death,” Munk told me, with revulsion. “So long as it was alive enough to go in a truck, you could get paid for it.” Munk, a sensitive child, preferred to be bitten.



He was branded a poor student by his teachers; the only thing he excelled at was drawing. He remains a skilled draftsman, and he designed the tattoos that cover his forearms: a forest on the left, an abundance of vegetation on the right. But as a youth he couldn’t conceive of a career as an artist. Munk

thought that he might become a mechanic, since he enjoyed taking cars apart and putting them back together. When he was sixteen, however, a friend enrolled in a local cooking school, and Munk decided to do the same.

The culinary arts weren't an obvious choice. Apart from a family outing to [McDonald's](#) every Friday—and a visit to an all-you-can-eat buffet chain for his confirmation—Munk had never been to a restaurant. Meals at home consisted of spaghetti with ketchup, or fish sticks. One dish at Alchemist, a cantaloupe sorbet served in a pinkish puddle of distilled Ibérico ham, is inspired by one of his mother's failed attempts at culinary refinement. "My mom is a terrible chef—it was always unripe melon, bad ham," Munk told me. On Munk's first day at culinary school, his class was assigned to prepare a dish of chicken and carrots. "I thought, This must be so boring for the teacher—because in my mind there was only chicken breast, overcooked, with soft skin on top, and carrots sliced and boiled for hours," he recalled. He watched with amazement as other students poked butter under the chicken skin. Munk learned to make béarnaise sauce, which he'd thought came out of a Knorr package. "I'd never seen any herbs in my life besides parsley, so seeing chives and thyme was really an eyeopener," he said.

Students were required to apprentice in a professional kitchen, and Munk went to work for a former Michelin-starred chef who'd set up a business in Jutland supplying food to office cafeterias. Munk spent endless hours peeling and chopping vegetables. When, after a year, the students were required to demonstrate the skills they'd learned to culinary-school faculty, Munk made a Waldorf salad. "I was one of the first ones presenting my dish, and everybody was looking at me a bit weird," he said. "Then I saw all these other people bringing in pickled things, and ballotines of meat, and I was, like, 'Where is all this coming from?' I asked my mentor, 'Why am I making salads, and they are actually cooking?' And he said, 'You are so slow, you spend eight hours making a salad bar, and I don't have time to teach you. You need to make some investment in yourself—go home, read up on some things, and do your job faster.' "

Stung, Munk threw himself into studying technique. He got an evening job in a well-regarded restaurant, and started entering competitions for apprentice chefs. Soon enough, he was winning them, with such dishes as chicken stuffed with herbs and meat, accompanied by baked carrot marrow

glazed with orange-infused butter. He further deepened his skills by watching videos and reading books by celebrated chefs, including Thomas Keller, the founder of the French Laundry, in California's Napa Valley. When Munk graduated from culinary school, he hoped to seek work in Keller's kitchen, but his application for a U.S. work visa was denied, on account of his inadequate spoken English: he'd been too terrified of his classmates to raise his hand in school. Munk's command of English, however, was good enough for him to have a maxim by Keller—"Respect for food is respect for life"—tattooed on his right arm. Munk is now fluent in English, which is the lingua franca of Alchemist. (Only three or four servers can speak Danish.) In the course of several days together, there was only one word I said that Munk didn't recognize, and that arose during a conversation about body parts he hadn't yet used as inspiration: "genitalia."

With the United States off limits, Munk went to London. He interviewed at North Road, a restaurant run by a Danish chef, and started work there the next day. "I don't think I even brought extra underpants, to be honest," he told me. The learning curve was steep, and when, after a year, the chef quit, Munk was offered the job. Instead, he decided to return home. "I was on the way to having a depression—working six days a week, from seven or eight in the morning until two at night," he said. He'd been living in a moldy apartment in a rough part of London—a murder was committed outside his building—and he found the atmosphere at North Road harsh. "You got yelled at every day," he said. "When I became a sous-chef, I was expected to yell at people, too. That's not the person that I am."

Some people who are bullied become cruel in turn, but, in an industry notorious for abusive behavior, the kitchen at Alchemist is known for its atmosphere of mutual respect. Despite the length of the waiting list, the restaurant is open only four nights a week, Tuesday through Friday, so that its hundred or so employees can enjoy their weekends. Munk told me, "Some chefs say, 'It's like being on the national team, or in the Champions League.' Well, maybe it is for me, and for key elements of the team, who get something out of the brand or the profile. But you have eighty people here who maybe *don't* have the ambition of being head chef. So you can't compare that to playing on the national team."

Back in Denmark, a friend asked Munk to help revive a restaurant called Treetop, in the Jutland city of Vejle. Appointed head chef in 2013, Munk was given generous funding and considerable creative license. He instituted a twenty-two-course tasting menu, and invited critics and foodies from all over Denmark to come. Among them was Ken Tellefsen, a businessman whose global explorations of restaurants are followed by thousands on social media. “Rasmus was twenty-two years old at the time, and I’d never heard of him,” Tellefsen told me recently. “I was just blown away. It was the best thing I’d had for maybe six or seven years.” Munk’s small-bite menu was novel for Danish eaters, and his creations were unusual: they included an apple-jelly “earthworm” presented in a flowerpot filled with soil.

A decade earlier, a group of twelve Scandinavian chefs had formulated a New Nordic manifesto, declaring their fidelity to hyper-local, seasonal dishes that drew on traditional techniques and practices, such as pickling and foraging. [Noma](#), whose chef, René Redzepi, was a signatory, had repeatedly been named the best restaurant in the world. At Treetop, Munk found himself repeating the New Nordic mantra without really believing in it. “What can I say? I played the game,” he told me. “When journalists interviewed me, I was nearly saying, ‘My mom is an amazing chef, and I got my childhood memories from her, and that’s why I started cooking, and I really get my inspiration from going to the sea and the forest.’ I mean—I grew up in the forest. I don’t get *any* inspiration from the forest. The silence is nice, but it doesn’t inspire me to do a new dish.”

Munk was more interested in an approach that some gourmands already considered passé: [molecular gastronomy](#), which was explored most famously in the early two-thousands at El Bulli, Ferran Adrià’s restaurant in Catalonia. Munk never visited El Bulli, which, before it closed, in 2011, was celebrated for such radical creations as a white-bean foam with sea urchin, and a trompe-l’oeil olive that was actually liquid. But Munk studied Adrià’s cookbooks, using Google Translate to parse the details. These days, Munk’s idol, who has dined at Alchemist, returns the compliment. “A restaurant, besides the whole gustatory component, is an experience for all the senses,” Adrià told me, in an e-mail. “In Alchemist’s case, they take this to the maximum level, so that the experience of the design, the lighting, the audiovisual elements, the technology—is unlike anything I’ve seen elsewhere. It is the restaurant that most resembles a gastronomic opera.”

After two years at Treetop, Munk moved to Copenhagen, and borrowed money from a bank to lease a fifteen-seat former bistro. He had sufficient handyman skills to renovate the interior himself, and dim lighting was forgiving of his less than professional paintwork. He called the place Alchemist. Tellefsen, by now Munk's champion, bought out the restaurant's opening night, inviting influential critics as his guests. They were confronted with dishes that were the opposite of New Nordic purity. Munk served an ashtray filled with smoked pork belly, caramelized onions, and puffed potatoes, covered in leek ash. (The dish had been inspired, Munk told diners, by his grandmother's death, from lung cancer.) A lamb heart stuffed with lamb tartare was accompanied by a transfusion bag filled with "blood" made from a cherry-juice-and-chicken-stock reduction. Munk had initially hoped to make the heart appear to be beating on the plate. "I went to a sex shop and bought fifteen to twenty vibrators—I wanted to put them inside to make the heart move," he told me. "But it didn't work." Diners were given organ-donor cards along with the dish. During the next two years, fifteen hundred visitors to Alchemist signed up.

Among Alchemist's early diners was Lars Seier Christensen, whose restaurant, Geranium, was close by. Christensen told me that he was dazzled by Munk's "extraordinarily provocative dishes," which were "not at the cost of wonderful taste, as you otherwise see sometimes with very experimental restaurants." Munk confided to Christensen that, if he had sufficient resources, he'd build a restaurant whose architecture was as audacious as his cooking. Christensen recalled to me, "As I paid the bill, I told him, 'If you ever want to take this to the next level, give me a call.' He did so, the following week." Munk told Christensen that his building plans would cost twenty million kroner—about three million dollars—adding, "We want to change the world of gastronomy." The new Alchemist ended up costing more than four times that amount. Initially, Munk had a thirty-five-per-cent ownership share, but the cost overruns led him to accept a share of just under ten per cent. The restaurant now does slightly better than breaking even, though it has yet to turn a profit on the over-all investment.



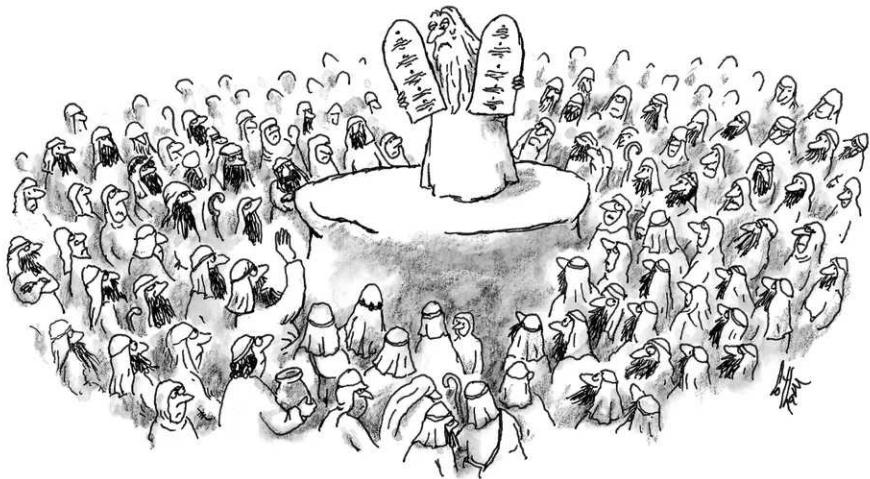
Some of the first Alchemist's more challenging dishes have been retired. Munk no longer serves the ashtray or the lamb heart with a blood bag; instead, the menu includes an organ-donation-inspired dessert—a cherry mousse molded to resemble a human heart. (When you pierce it with a spoon, a viscous mixture of hibiscus, muscovado, and deer blood flows out.) Alchemist also stopped serving a bowl containing half a dozen wood lice, which remained frantically alive until a boiling broth was poured over them. "The first Alchemist was a little more punk," Munk told me. He insists, though, that he has never created anything for mere shock value. When a staff chef proposed a tartlet filled with fish eyes, Munk decided against it: what was the social message?

Several dishes I ate at Alchemist played around with unexpected states of matter, like a sea-buckthorn vodka tonic served as an icy frozen disk—it was delicious, if challenging on sensitive teeth. The Perfect Omelet consisted of a mixture of Comté cheese and egg yolk—warmed to only a hundred and eighteen degrees, to preserve its raw taste—miraculously encased within an egg-yolk membrane that had been cast on a 3-D mold. (The dish was, indeed, perfect.) For all the technical prowess on display at Alchemist, however, some dishes seemed surprisingly reliant on the staples of mass-market food production: salt, sugar, fat. After all, the menu at McDonald's—with its proprietary processing of potatoes which results in familiar fries

from Albuquerque to Zagreb—is a remarkable technical achievement, and Munk sometimes jokes to his staff about the fast-food chain as his earliest culinary influence. Munk’s Plastic Fantastic, which features edible simulated plastic made from collagen and algae atop a piece of fried plaice, is a conceptual marvel that evokes the garbage clogging our seas. It also tastes a lot like a Filet-O-Fish.

Munk, since the early days of his culinary career, has made efforts not just to cook for the rich but also to feed the poor. At Treetop, he used the kitchen to prepare holiday meals for children in need. During the pandemic, he set up a nonprofit called Junk Food, which distributes meals daily to homeless shelters and addiction-service centers in Copenhagen. The project has just moved to a larger kitchen, which can provide meals for five thousand people a day, across Denmark. (Junk Food also employs addicts who are newly in recovery, recognizing that loneliness, and the struggle to find meaningful work, can drive individuals to relapse.)

Munk readily acknowledges the contradiction inherent in trying to raise social consciousness in a hedonistic environment like Alchemist. Serving fifty affluent guests a night a dish called Hunger—rabbit carpaccio, delicately flavored with harissa and laid atop a scaled-down replica of a human rib cage—does not solve the problem, even when the server notes that more than eight hundred million people go to bed hungry each night. Alchemist, in its reliance on financial inequality to generate its customer base, might even be said to exacerbate it.



The restaurant's success, however, has given Munk a platform for promoting ways to address deficits in the food chain. Recently, with more funding, he opened Spora, a laboratory and research center a short walk down the street from Alchemist. One day, Munk took me to the Spora building. It is a light-filled structure with modernist wooden furnishings and large windows overlooking gardens, in the mode of the designs he'd rejected for his restaurant. On a table, some small bites had been prepared for me, including a taco filled with a by-product of canola oil. Uncooked, the foodstuff resembled green nuggets of animal feed; when the filling was sautéed and stuffed into a crisp shell, then topped with onion and cilantro, it tasted wonderful. So did half-moons of chocolate that had been made from the processed husks of cacao bean. Husks represent a fifth of the weight of a bag of beans, Munk explained, but are typically discarded in the chocolate industry, which is horrifically exploitative of both human labor and environmental resources. "It's a no-brainer that this should go to the market," he said. Other projects borrow technical processes developed at Alchemist. For a planned children's hospital, Munk has proposed a formula for colostrum-based ice cream, which is far higher in protein than the regular treat. The technique behind Alchemist's Space Bread dish—freeze-dried meringue made with aerated soy sauce, which has a lunar texture and is light enough to evoke zero gravity—could be repurposed to make a snack for a

sick child who has difficulty swallowing a potato chip but craves the sensation of crunch.

The “bread” was developed in collaboration with a researcher from M.I.T. who is studying ways to prepare food for space, Munk explained. Munk is also associated with a startup called Space V.I.P., a luxury space-travel company that intends to take people into the upper stratosphere, eight at a time, in a capsule attached to a balloon. Munk plans to serve a meal on one of the flights, accompanying six high-paying guests and a pilot into the heavens. I remarked that it was a curious choice for someone so conscious of his own need to be in control. “I’m afraid of flying, and of heights,” Munk told me. “But I’m doing it for the research. It’s like Formula 1—you take innovations from those batteries and brakes, and you can get that scaled to a broader society.” Alchemist’s head of communications, who had joined us at Spora, cheerfully noted that Space V.I.P. must complete fifteen test flights before it can conduct manned missions. I asked, as a point of comparison, if it would be enough to test a dish in the Alchemist kitchen fifteen times before offering it to guests. Munk laughed nervously. “No,” he said. “For spaceflights, fifteen is completely fine. For mouthfeeling, it’s not good enough!”

Even if Munk does safely make it to space and back, he doesn’t expect to be cooking at Alchemist that much longer. “With our waiting list, we could run for twenty, thirty years more,” he said. But the demands on his time are unsustainable, and he wants to channel more of himself into Spora. “I love it, don’t get me wrong,” he told me one afternoon, as we sat in Alchemist’s after-dinner lounge. The previous night, more than six hours after my arrival at Alchemist’s doors, I had flopped into one of the lounge’s velvet armchairs to consume a final sequence of desserts, including a lozenge of faux amber, made from ginger and Tasmanian honey, inside which a real red ant was suspended. As Munk and I talked, there was less than an hour to go before his first guests of this next evening would arrive.

“I don’t know when we will close—it’s probably sooner than people expect,” Munk went on. “What is the meaning, at the end of the day? We’re on the path where we can maybe show that food can be equal to art. We have scientific projects. But, if I use my time more wisely—and instead of being here every night and talking about my story and the dishes—if I used that

time only on creating the future protein of tomorrow, we could maybe speed the process up even faster.” He smiled modestly, offering his next thought as if he were presenting a diner the most outrageous dish of all. “The ambition is to get the Nobel Peace Prize,” he said. “I know it is completely ridiculous, and we will probably never succeed. But, just as the old alchemists wanted to create gold, the ambition is the same.” ♦

An earlier version of this article inaccurately described the funding source of Spora.

Among the Gaza Protest Voters

Some progressives in Michigan say that they won't support Kamala Harris unless she changes her policy on Israel. Will their tactics persuade her, or risk throwing the election to Trump?

By Andrew Marantz

September 23, 2024



One of the few Jewish dynasties in American politics is the Levin family of greater Detroit. They may not have the national name recognition of the Cuomos or the Kennedys, but in Michigan politics, from generation to generation, they have been impossible to miss. The federal courthouse in Detroit is named for Judge Theodore Levin, who served from the mid-nineteen-forties to the volatile end of the sixties. The Port Authority building fronting the Detroit River is named for Carl Levin, who represented Michigan in the U.S. Senate for three dozen years and was eulogized in the *Times*, in 2021, as the “scourge of corporate America.” Carl’s brother Sander (Sandy) Levin, now in his nineties, retired from the House of Representatives in 2019, and was succeeded by his son Andy Levin, who had been elected to replace him. All are Democrats—all could even be

called, with some qualifications, progressive Democrats—but within that capacious category there have always been fissures, and those fissures only grew deeper last year, after the Hamas-led attacks of October 7th and Israel’s invasion of Gaza.

“Dad would never step out of line the way I’m doing now,” Andy Levin said one morning this past February. We were at his house in the Detroit suburbs, which was appointed in the haimish style of the noncoastal NPR listener—binoculars for birding, Crocs for gardening, crayons and playing cards on a coffee table. At sixty-three, Levin still has a boyish demeanor, with wiry curls and a gap-toothed grin. A few weeks prior, he had been conscripted by a small group of left-wing activists who were urging Democrats to vote “uncommitted” in the upcoming Michigan primary, to protest the Biden-Harris Administration’s support of Israel’s war in Gaza. Their message was half offering, half threat. If Joe Biden, then still the Democratic candidate, moved in their direction—by making military aid to Israel conditional, say, or taking decisive steps toward brokering a peace agreement—then the activists would try to deliver him the votes he needed in November. If he didn’t, they claimed, then he might lose Michigan, and with it the general election. Now the primary was days away, and Levin, one of the most prominent Democrats in the state, was about to give a speech at the University of Michigan, in Ann Arbor, encouraging his neighbors not to vote for the incumbent President. He found the prospect of a second Donald Trump Administration too terrifying to contemplate; still, he insisted that the primaries were the best time to put pressure on his own party. “It does make me nervous, if I’m being honest,” he said. “I just don’t see any other way.”

Only a few states are considered tossups, and Michigan is one of them. For months, Biden trailed Trump there in polling. Since Kamala Harris formally became the Democratic candidate, in August, she has held a small but shaky lead. The margins are slim. In 2020, Biden won Michigan by a hundred and fifty thousand votes; in 2016, Trump won it by about ten thousand. In the past few election cycles, Democrats have lost support among the white working class, famously, and among Latino voters without college degrees; there is also growing concern about the Party’s softening support among working-class Asian voters and Black voters. The Party’s coalition has turned out to be more rickety than it once seemed—not a sturdy edifice of

regional and demographic blocs but a Jenga tower, always one tremor away from collapse.

On top of all this, there's the war in Gaza—grisly, relentless, and surprisingly persistent in the news—which has unsettled the American progressive coalition in ways that we don't yet fully understand. Most voters don't list the war as their top concern, but it seems to be contributing, fairly or unfairly, to the perception of a world going to hell on the Democrats' watch. In May, a survey asked voters to assess how the current Administration had handled a variety of issues, including crime, immigration, and the economy. Nothing ranked lower than its response to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even more vexing, the respondents' reasons for disapproval were split evenly between “too pro-Israel” and “not pro-Israel enough.”

Troy Zukowski, a representative of the Michigan Jewish Democrats who considers himself “center left,” told me, “If Harris were to threaten to cut off aid to Israel, that would be political suicide. But I’m confident she won’t do anything like that.” Other Michigan voters have the opposite view. In 2022, Michigan had the highest youth turnout of any state, and it has the largest proportion of Arab American residents. According to a poll in March, a majority of Americans disapproved of Israel’s military actions in Gaza. Another poll showed that a majority of Americans did not want to send weapons to Israel; among likely Democratic voters, young voters, and Black voters, the proportion was at least three-quarters. “The D.C. bigwigs I talk to are in total denial about how pissed off people are,” Andy Levin said. When it comes to the general election, “they go, ‘What are these people gonna do? Stay home?’ ” He widened his eyes and smacked a palm against his forehead: *Yeah, no shit they will.*

For at least a generation, he argued, the Democratic Party has taken its left flank for granted. “When there’s a swing voter who wants the Democrats to tack to the center, we’ll spend enormous effort trying to make that voter feel at home,” Levin said. “And we should! We should fight for every vote. But then, when the left demands something, it’s ‘Tough shit, get over it.’ ” During the primary, many antiwar Democrats swore that they would never vote for Biden, whose posture toward Gaza they considered callous, or worse. Harris may represent a slight reset, but not a fundamental one. Now

that the election is imminent, and the choice has come into sharper focus—either Harris or Trump, who fulminates about an immigrant “invasion” and uses “Palestinian” as a slur—will these voters turn out for her? “I will, no question,” Levin said. “I just can’t promise that all Democrats will feel that way.”

Levin is enough of a natural politico to get along with just about anyone. “That was one of my favorite Trumpy neighbors,” he explained, after a genial phone call about back-yard tree removal. A few minutes later, he said, “Hey, Siri, call Rashida”—his friend Rashida Tlaib, a democratic socialist from Michigan and the only Palestinian American in Congress. They chatted about D.C. gossip and the Administration’s Middle East policy (“Do they *want* a regional war?” Levin asked). In his office was an award from a labor museum and a black-and-white photo from a 1968 campaign rally: a young Andy with his father and a banner in the background reading “*HUMPHREY FOR PRESIDENT*.”

Before he ran for office, Levin was a union organizer, a labor lawyer, and the president of a local synagogue; he and his wife also co-founded a renewable-energy company. “If I worked at a Ford plant, I’d be retired and drawing a pension by now,” he said. “But in D.C. a lot of people still know me as Sandy’s kid.” Like his father, he is now an ex-congressman, though not by choice. In 2021, he wrote the Two-State Solution Act, which declared, among other things, that “the establishment of Israeli settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories is inconsistent with international law.” He told me, “I was just reaffirming U.S. policy, or so I thought.” Still, he attracted the ire of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, or *AIPAC*; a former president of the group referred to Levin as “arguably the most corrosive member of Congress.” The following year, *AIPAC* put up millions of dollars to help his opponent—who is not Jewish, but is more hawkish on Israel—win a Democratic primary against him.

Levin drove me to Ann Arbor, interrupting himself occasionally to point out a red-tailed hawk, then speed-walked to the Diag, the central quad on the university’s campus, where about a hundred people stood in a circle. An organizer from the “uncommitted” campaign handed Levin a bullhorn, and he gave a brief speech: “I’ve been involved in politics in Michigan since I was a child, and I feel the power of this moment.” Afterward, he stayed for a

long time as people hung back to talk to him, expressing all manner of angst. “We can’t have Trump, and we can’t have our tax dollars going to killing children,” Linda Wan, a baker in her fifties, said. Some attendees scolded Levin for going so far as to describe the Israeli military’s actions as war crimes; others criticized him for describing them merely as war crimes, not as a genocide. A recent graduate named Zackariah Farah said that, in 2020, he “really felt hope and enthusiasm for the Democratic Party. Now it’s just disappointment and rage.”

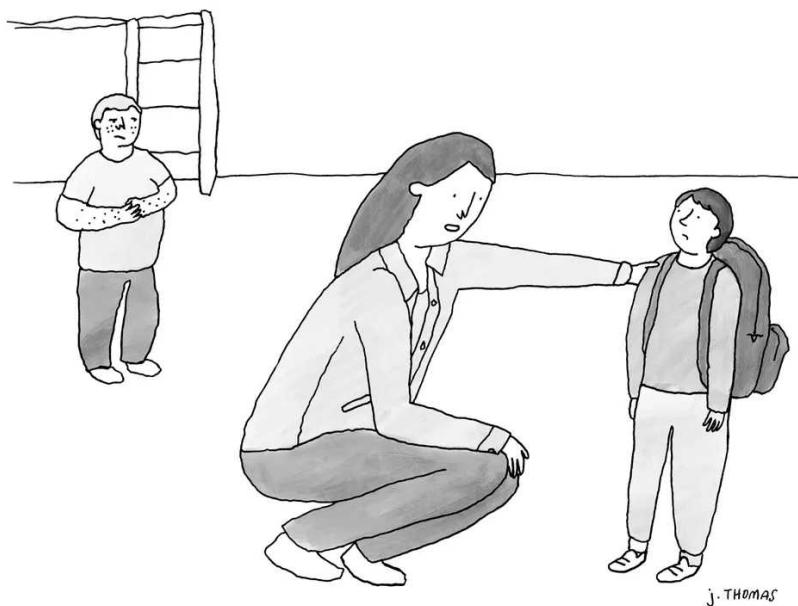
Back in his car, Levin caught up on his recent messages. “I’m sure some people, even in my own family, will see this as a mistake,” he said. That afternoon, he texted with Norm Ornstein, a moderate policy wonk in Washington and a longtime friend of the Levin family, who had caught wind of his involvement with the “uncommitted” campaign and did not approve. “Criticize him for his policies,” Ornstein wrote, of Biden. “But to undermine him now can only hurt him in a contest against Trump.”

Long before Biden dropped out of the race, it was clear that 2024 might feel, at least in some respects, similar to 1968. A high rate of inflation; an ambient sense of end-times fervor; campus protests followed by mass arrests; an incumbent President with a long list of domestic-policy achievements who, nevertheless, kept slipping in the public’s esteem. For a time, there was even a guy named Robert F. Kennedy running for President. The Vietnam War was America’s war in a way that Israel’s current one is not. There is no draft in 2024, and large numbers of American soldiers aren’t dying in Gaza. Still, the war remains deeply divisive: Americans disapprove of it by wider margins than they did the Vietnam War in early 1968.

“There was a sense everywhere, in 1968, that things were giving,” Garry Wills writes in his book “*Nixon Agonistes*.” “The cities were in danger, and the college campuses.” When Martin Luther King, Jr., said that “a riot is the language of the unheard,” in 1968, he was giving a speech in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, and referring in part to the previous summer, when residents of downtown Detroit, worn down by segregation and neglect, torched more than five hundred buildings in less than a week. The following month, King was murdered. Bobby Kennedy, the leading antiwar candidate, was assassinated that summer. As Wills puts it, “Senator Kennedy’s death made

men realize that worse can follow worse indefinitely, no terminal worst in sight.”

Lyndon B. Johnson, after campaigning as a peace candidate, had rapidly reversed course, escalating the conflict in Vietnam and ramping up the draft. In terms of American deaths, 1968 was the war’s worst year, without a close second. Students for a Democratic Society, a group of antiwar radicals, was founded at the University of Michigan in 1960. According to its mission statement, adopted in Port Huron, “The American political system is not the democratic model of which its glorifiers speak.” By the end of the sixties, at a gathering in Flint known as a “wargasm,” S.D.S.’s guerrilla offshoot, the Weathermen, was plotting to assassinate police officers. Explosives were planted at a University of Michigan building, and a car blew up outside an R.O.T.C. office.



From inside the White House, Lyndon Johnson could hear chants of “Hey, hey, L.B.J., how many kids did you kill today?” In a biography called “LBJ: Architect of American Ambition,” Randall Woods writes, “Antiwar liberals seemed to be willing to go to any lengths to stop the war and get rid of LBJ, even to the point of sacrificing Democratic rule.” Johnson, the most adept politician of his era, took a look around and decided not to run for reelection. The historian Luke Nichter, in “The Year That Broke Politics,” highlights

more personal factors contributing to Johnson's retirement, including his failing health and his almost supernatural premonition that 1968 wasn't destined to be the Democrats' year. The Party had to decide whether to nominate the antiwar upstart Eugene McCarthy or Hubert Humphrey, Johnson's Vice-President. "I admired Humphrey, and I personally disliked McCarthy," Sandy Levin, who was the chairman of the Michigan Democratic Party at the time, told me. "But the war was so divisive—I couldn't support someone who wouldn't make a clean break from that."

Humphrey got the nomination at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago, but it was a Pyrrhic victory. TV networks cut to footage of the so-called Battle of Michigan Avenue: Chicago police officers indiscriminately beating street protesters, as onlookers called the police "pigs" and "fascists." On September 30, 1968, after trying for months to dodge the issue, Humphrey gave a speech on Vietnam, drawing a tepid contrast between Johnson's policies and his own. It helped, but not enough. "Because of our actions in Chicago, Richard Nixon will be elected," Abbie Hoffman, a leader of the Yippies, said. The group's theatrical antics—dancing naked and dropping acid in Lincoln Park, nominating an actual pig for President—were great at attracting media attention. Silent-majority voters, watching TV in their living rooms, saw a country that looked increasingly disordered, a perception that played into the Republicans' hands.

But, of course, 2024 is not 1968. Nixon, who had not yet revealed his crookedness and paranoia to the nation, was able to run as a levelheaded centrist; Trump is running more or less openly as a vengeful maniac. Nixon had a "secret plan" to wind down the Vietnam War, and eventually did, after several more years of brutality. Trump's stance on the war in Gaza is not particularly coherent, but he would probably escalate it. During the debate in June, Trump criticized Biden for not letting Israel's military "finish the job."

In the sixties, most states were battleground states, and the rancor in the streets corresponded with fluidity at the ballot box. Nixon won Illinois; Humphrey won Texas; George Wallace, running to Nixon's right, carried five Southern states—the last time a third-party candidate won any electoral votes. These days, the nation's discontent doesn't have a reliable democratic outlet. The political scientists John Sides, Chris Tausanovitch, and Lynn Vavreck refer to calcification—the politicians may get crazier, but voters'

partisan allegiances stay mostly the same—and to a related phenomenon called parity: almost no matter what happens, the two parties remain perpetually neck and neck. The result is that even a few thousand votes in the right state can be enough to swing a national election. The 2000 Presidential race, which came down to five hundred and thirty-seven votes in Florida, may have been tipped by “*el voto castigo*”—thousands of Cuban Americans who, outraged at the Clinton Administration’s handling of the Elián González affair, voted as a bloc for George W. Bush—or by Muslim voters in the state, who overwhelmingly voted for Bush.

If past is prologue, then what should Harris do? Make a play for the antiwar youth vote, or accept that much of it will remain out of reach? Harris often reaffirms her “unwavering commitment” to Israel’s defense, yet she clearly also sees some upside in distancing herself from Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who is now wanted by the International Criminal Court. In July, when Netanyahu came to Washington to address a joint session of Congress, Harris skipped the speech, citing a scheduling conflict; she then gave public remarks expressing “serious concern about the scale of human suffering in Gaza” but announcing no change in policy. “Harris is not going to come out tomorrow and say, ‘I’m not sending Bibi one more bomb,’ ” Levin told me. “But if she changes nothing, and she loses a few thousand votes in Michigan because of it, there’s a chance it could cost her the election.”

On most domestic issues—guns, abortion, climate change—the Democratic coalition is, by historical standards, remarkably unified. But foreign policy, and particularly the war in Gaza, is an issue that seems almost designed to highlight dissension within the Party. After the October 7th attacks, Biden gave an Oval Office address in which he implied that Volodymyr Zelensky’s Ukraine, Netanyahu’s Israel, and Biden’s America represent a sort of twenty-first-century axis of democracy. After that idea didn’t seem to land, he apparently switched to a quieter strategy that involved mostly supporting Netanyahu in public, pushing for diplomacy in private, and hoping that the issue would fade from voters’ minds.

Meanwhile, a group of left-wing political strategists formed a Signal group to brainstorm ways to prevent it from fading. “People are opposed to the war, but it’s not a top-priority issue for them,” Waleed Shahid, a strategist who helped recruit Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Jamaal Bowman to run for

Congress, said. “The way it becomes a top-priority issue is we need to keep driving the urgency.” Shortly after October 7th, he set up an outfit called Israel Palestine Communications and started sending e-mail blasts, multiple times a day, to the hundreds of journalists and political flacks in his contact list. In December, a producer at MSNBC told him that cable news would soon pivot from war coverage to election coverage. “If we wanted to keep the same amount of media attention on Gaza,” Shahid told me, “we would have to find a way to make it an election story.” For Shahid’s cohort, this was not a new strategy. “In 2016 and 2020, if we wanted to drive coverage of Medicare for All, we had a go-to frame—‘That’s a priority for Bernie Sanders, and Bernie Sanders is running for President,’ ” he said. In December, a member of the Signal group published an opinion piece urging Andy Levin to run against Biden as a protest candidate. “I’m not running for President,” Levin told Politico. He did add, though, that the people who’d tried to recruit him were “serious” about their concerns.

By late January, the group had identified another opportunity: the Michigan primary. Abbas Alawieh, a thirty-three-year-old organizer with a clean-shaven head and a linebacker’s frame, helped lead a meeting of community leaders in a back room of a Lebanese restaurant in Dearborn. (The city, which is just outside Detroit, recently became the first majority-Arab city in the U.S.) Alawieh was born in Lebanon, and his family moved to Dearborn when he was six; after grad school, he spent five years as a legislative staffer in Congress. Some people at the meeting were eager to see the Democrats suffer at the polls. “I don’t love Trump, but I will not vote for Biden even if he stands on his head from now until November, and he can’t even stand on his feet,” Osama Siblani, the editor of a local paper called the *Arab American News*, told me in February. “We gave him our support last time, and he gave us the middle finger.” Already, local leaders were spearheading a campaign called Abandon Biden, asking voters to pick any candidate other than the President. Alawieh argued that they should mobilize the community to vote “uncommitted” in the primary instead. If they got just ten thousand votes, the margin there in the 2016 Presidential election, they could claim victory.

The campaign raised about two hundred thousand dollars to buy some online ads and contact several thousand voters. One night, a few days before the primary, Alawieh and Levin met up at Spot Lite, a record store and art

gallery in Detroit, where the campaign was hosting a phone bank. “On weekends, they have Arab techno dance parties here,” Alawieh said. “Coolest spot in town.”

“I’m sure my kids know this place,” Levin said.

“Oh, they do,” Alawieh said.

Lexis Zeidan, an “uncommitted” co-founder whose parents are Palestinian Christians, sat at a folding table next to Layla Elabed, another co-founder and Rashida Tlaib’s younger sister. Marianne Williamson, the self-help author and occasional politician, walked in and sat next to them. “I was a nondenominational minister in Michigan for many years,” she said, in her unplaceable cosmopolitan accent. She is now a proponent of “universal spiritual themes,” but she was raised, in Houston, as a Conservative Jew; one of her formative political experiences was hearing her childhood rabbi speak out against the Vietnam War. She had made a memorable run for President in the 2020 Democratic primary, and another bid in 2024, but she had recently announced that she was suspending her campaign. The organizers wanted her to encourage her supporters to vote “uncommitted” instead. “Let’s make a video of you endorsing us right now, and I’ll put it on TikTok,” Zeidan said.

“Not yet,” Williamson said, leaning forward in her chair. “I’m here with an open heart, but I need to hear more. What’s your ultimate goal?”

“Permanent ceasefire,” Elabed said.

“Which I support,” Williamson said.

“Conditioning aid to Israel,” Zeidan said.

“We should have conditioned aid years ago,” Williamson said. “And how does ‘uncommitted’ get us there?”

“Right now it’s ‘uncommitted,’ ” Nasser Beydoun, then a long-shot primary candidate for the Senate, said, taking a seat. “If nothing changes, it’ll be ‘Abandon Biden.’ Then it’ll be ‘Fuck Biden.’ Matter of fact, maybe I’ll make that my campaign slogan.”

Elabed inhaled between gritted teeth. “His views, not ours,” she said. She tried pivoting to flattery: “With you out of the race, Marianne, there’s no real antiwar candidate.”

“You know who was an antiwar candidate?” Beydoun said, with a roguish grin. “Trump.”

Williamson stood up and left without making an endorsement. “I have a sense for when an electoral strategy is coming from a centered place, a grounded place,” she told me, under her breath. Still, more than a hundred thousand people, or thirteen per cent of the total, voted “uncommitted”—enough to send two delegates to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. On the evening of the primary, the organizers held a watch party, dancing into the night. (In later weeks, they picked up delegates in other states—eleven in Minnesota, seven in Hawaii, one in Rhode Island.) Abdullah Hammoud, the Democratic mayor of Dearborn and a supporter of the “uncommitted” campaign, told me, “The Democrats have done good things. But the scales of justice will not allow voters to weigh that over a genocide unfolding in front of their eyes.”

One night in March, Alawieh parked at a strip mall in Dearborn Heights, between Eight Ball Pool and Point Blank Firearms, and entered a high-ceilinged hookah lounge. “We’ve been treating this place like our office,” he said. He was so busy greeting people as they passed his table (“Habibi! What’s good?”) that he could barely sit down. “Is your family safe?” an acquaintance asked him, in Arabic. “They’re in Palestine, right?”

“Southern Lebanon,” he said.

“Oh, so they might get hit, too.”

NARCISSUS GAZES INTO THE WRONG LAKE



Eventually, he sat in a booth next to Elabed and Zeidan, who moved their plates so that three laptops could fit on the table. He ordered a steak quesadilla, then turned to me. “Please write that I did not order *shisha*, in case my mom reads this,” he said.

The server who brought Alawieh’s quesadilla, a young hijabi woman, asked what he was working on, and they started chatting about politics. She hadn’t voted in the primary. “Who is there to vote for?” she said. “All I want is peace.”

“And in November?” Alawieh asked.

“I’ll probably vote for Trump,” she said.

“But he’s horrible,” Alawieh said. “He hates us!”

She shrugged. “Something’s got to change,” she said. When she was gone, Alawieh told me, “I meet voters like that every day. Not just Muslims. You can scold them all you want, but that’s how they feel.”

As the war in Gaza ground on, it became a focus of protest energy around the world. Sit-ins emerged at American universities, then spread to Australia and the University of Tokyo. Some demonstrators exhibited remarkable

message discipline; others exhibited whatever the opposite of message discipline is. The day before Netanyahu spoke in Congress, two hundred peaceful protesters, led by Israeli and American rabbis chanting the Shema, were arrested in the Cannon House Office Building. The next day, “revolutionary” groups spray-painted pro-Hamas symbols around D.C.’s Union Station and burned effigies of Biden and Netanyahu in the street. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Bernie Sanders, two of the few American politicians who support conditioning aid to Israel, spoke at a campaign rally for Jamaal Bowman in the Bronx. Bowman had referred to the military campaign in Gaza as a “genocide,” and *AIPAC* had funnelled millions of dollars to his opponent. Still, leftist protesters heckled all three, holding a sign that read “AOC, Bowman, Sanders: Shills for ‘Genocide Joe.’” Bowman went on to lose the race by seventeen points.

At the White House, Andy Levin and a group of antiwar Israelis had a meeting with members of the National Security Council and a Harris aide. Although the Administration didn’t commit to any policy changes, Levin said, “at least they acknowledged that they have a real problem.” When James Zogby, the founder of the Arab American Institute and an informal adviser to the “uncommitted” campaign, spoke with a top Biden Administration official, he had the opposite experience. “I said, ‘There have been all these civilian deaths,’ and the response was ‘We find that intolerable,’ ” Zogby told me. “I said, ‘So we need a ceasefire.’ ‘No, that’s also intolerable.’ I said, ‘So you’re between two intolerables, and you’re choosing the one that continues the civilian casualties.’ I left feeling like nothing would change.” In March, at a speech in Selma, Alabama, Harris called for a temporary ceasefire in Gaza; a few weeks later, Biden paused a shipment of two-thousand-pound bombs to Israel while continuing to authorize other aid. The “uncommitted” activists tried to claim credit for these developments while criticizing them as inadequate.

Then, in June, Biden faltered in his debate against Trump, and dropped out of the Presidential race three weeks later. Many pro-Palestine organizers told me that, compared with Biden, Harris and her team seemed more amenable to hearing them out. It remains to be seen whether this is simply an affordance of the Vice-Presidency, where Harris has little direct control over U.S. policy. I called Zackariah Farah, the recent graduate I’d met at the “uncommitted” rally in Ann Arbor, to ask how he felt now that Harris was

the nominee. “I had a brief glimmer of hope when she first came in, but she’s repeatedly said she would do nothing to change the policy in the Middle East. Now I and most people I know are voting Green.” Osama Siblani, of the *Arab American News*, said, “Abandon Biden, Abandon Harris—nothing has changed. It’s the same rhetoric, same bullshit.” I spoke to many supporters of the “uncommitted” campaign who told me that they planned to vote for Jill Stein, the Green Party candidate, or for Cornel West or Trump, before I could find anyone who was voting for Harris. This is anecdotal, of course, but there is some evidence to corroborate it: one poll of Muslim voters, conducted in late August, found that Harris and Stein were tied.

Waleed Shahid told me that his parents, Pakistani immigrants who live in Virginia, have voted Democrat in every election since 2008. Now, he says, his father is threatening to vote for Trump, and his mother plans to vote for Stein. “I can tell them, ‘Trump would be worse, we have a long-term strategy to push the Democrats on this issue,’ but normal voters don’t always care about long-term strategy,” Shahid told me. “Sometimes they vote based on ‘I just saw a video of a baby getting blown up—who’s gonna do something about it?’ ”

As a matter of raw electoral math, it’s possible that, for every Dearborn voter who wants the Biden Administration to stop sending bombs to Israel, there is another Democratic voter in Michigan who wants to send *more* bombs—a Christian Zionist in Grand Rapids, say, or a Jewish moderate in Oakland County. (And then there’s Pennsylvania, where the polls tend to be even tighter than in Michigan; the state also has more Jewish voters than Michigan has Muslim voters.) One Friday night, I went with Andy Levin to the Congregation for Humanistic Judaism in Farmington Hills, where the rabbi, Jeffrey Falick, had invited him to give a talk during Shabbat services. Afterward, there was the post-service noshing and bickering, and Levin stayed for more than an hour. Rabbi Falick, who calls himself “a proud gay liberal and a proud Zionist,” told me that he saw the “uncommitted” movement as deeply misguided. The allegation that Israel is carrying out a genocide in Gaza, he said, is “as offensive as it is inaccurate. Humanistic Jews rely on reason, and my reasoned opinion is that Hamas is the problem, and Israel is trying to root it out.” Later, I spoke to Adam Jentleson, a former staffer for Senators Harry Reid and John Fetterman, who told me, “I

understand the Rube Goldberg move the ‘uncommitted’ organizers were trying to pull off, using the vehicle of a primary to extract a change in policy. But it’s high risk at best, and at worst it’s a pure gift to Trump.”

In early August, Harris flew to the Detroit airport on Air Force Two for a campaign rally. The crowd was so big that Donald Trump asserted, falsely, that a photograph of it must have been faked. Before the event, in a photo line backstage, Alawieh and Elabed asked Harris to meet with them and others to discuss the prospect of an arms embargo against Israel. Alawieh told me that Harris was noncommittal, but seemed receptive: “She looked me in the eye and said, ‘I’d very much like that.’” (The campaign later denied this account to reporters.) During the rally, though, two unrelated protesters heckled Harris, shouting, “Kamala, Kamala, you can’t hide, we won’t vote for genocide.” As the moment dragged on, she gave them a stern glare and said, “If you want Donald Trump to win, then say that. Otherwise, I’m speaking.” The following day, her national-security adviser put out a statement saying that Harris “does not support an arms embargo on Israel,” and it became clear to Alawieh that the proposed meeting with Harris might not happen after all.

A lot of Michigan voters, probably a majority, will base their votes on something other than foreign policy, if they decide to vote at all. Yet when I talked to these people, including several who had been reliable Democrats in the past, many did not sound fired up about the Party. In another year, a pocket of voter discontent in one part of a swing state might be offset by base turnout elsewhere; in 2024, though, the Harris campaign can take little for granted. At a United Auto Workers union hall in an industrial part of Dearborn, I mostly heard about the untenable cost of living. A few weeks later, I met a half-dozen locals at a Starbucks in Pontiac—all African American men, all self-described “leaders in the community.” Sean Preston, who owns a small clothing company, told me that he was considering voting for a third-party candidate: “A lot of us have become independent thinkers.”

“The Democrats just don’t have a great elevator pitch,” Bryan Killian-Bey said. “Hard to hear anyone’s elevator pitch, anyway, over the echoes of your empty pockets.”

Kermit Williams called Trump a “bravado artist with no substance,” and Killian-Bey didn’t disagree. “Trump doesn’t give a fuck about us,” he said. “But he is a marketing genius, you’ve got to admit that.” Williams was excited to vote Democrat in November, especially after Harris became the nominee—“This just makes motivating friends and family that much easier.” Killian-Bey, for the first time in his life, was toying with the idea of not voting. Money from the Biden Administration had recently paid for a fleet of electric school buses in Pontiac, and for highway repairs and training for new construction jobs across the state. The men at the Starbucks hadn’t heard about any of that, and learning about it didn’t seem to change anyone’s mind.

In 1960, four political scientists at the University of Michigan published a landmark study called “The American Voter.” They found that a tiny minority of the electorate, about three per cent, were true “ideologues” who based their voting decisions on policy preferences. The rest voted based on group affiliation (“The Democrats are the party of farmers”), or because they associated certain candidates with broad societal states of “war or peace, recession or prosperity,” or because they liked a candidate’s personality. Some of the non-ideologues were called “nature of the times” voters. (Had the study been published in the twenty-twenties, they surely would have been dubbed “vibes voters.”) This framework became known as the Michigan model. It has since been widely critiqued, in part because it sounds so condescending. (“Voters are not fools,” the political scientist V. O. Key retorted.) But it remains true that, no matter how much attention we lavish on swing voters, we still don’t really understand them. Some are moderates, but many have an unpredictable hodgepodge of views. Some are single-issue voters, or no-issue voters. Some are mostly in it for the vibes.

A good test of the Michigan model, this time around, was the candidacy of Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., an inveterate weirdo (bearish on antidepressants; bullish on Bitcoin; into falconry and meditating with ravens) who drew support from both parties. He promised to put “peace and diplomacy first,” but at other times he sounded downright bellicose, saying that any other nation in Israel’s position would “level” Gaza with “aerial bombardment.” This is the sort of incongruity that might be expected to kill the mood, but, for many of Kennedy’s supporters, it didn’t. “I do still think of him as the peace candidate,” a woman named Maddie Garvia told me in February.

We were at a café in Northville, an affluent suburb between Detroit and Ann Arbor, at a weekly meetup of Kennedy supporters. For some, predictably, the top issue was “vaccine safety”; for others it was “holistic health,” or the “deep state.” Many of them did little to dispel the caricature of the Kennedy voter as someone who fixes you with a fervent stare, corners you at less than socially distanced range, and launches into an uninterrupted diatribe about the difference between ethylmercury and methylmercury. “None of my kids are vaccinated,” one attendee said. Another countered, “None of my *cats* are vaccinated.”

The most pleasant conversation I had was with Patricia Van Bonn, who was eighty-six, with half-rimmed spectacles and white hair pulled back in a bun. She was a Navy nurse just after the Korean War, then a labor-and-delivery nurse at a hospital in Ann Arbor. “The obstetricians—all men, of course—would tie women down with leather cuffs, and knock them out with sedatives, and that’s how they’d give birth,” she said. “That just seemed so outrageous to me.” She grew skeptical about the medical system, and then about other institutions: if that sort of cruelty was routine in hospitals, then what else was going unquestioned? She raised her children “half wild,” mostly without vaccines, on a rural plot of land with horses and chickens. “I kept telling the school, ‘Oh, silly me, I forgot to hand in those forms again,’ and they let it slide,” she told me.

She got the local newspaper delivered to her house for decades, until it went out of business. “Now I’m dependent on the computer,” she said. “One day it popped up on there—Yahoo News, or whatever it was—‘There’s a Kennedy running for President.’ So I followed the links.” She’s since listened to dozens of hours of Kennedy’s podcast interviews with Joe Rogan, Russell Brand, and the like. “He always sounds so well informed, so confident,” she said. “I’ve become convinced he’s a man of integrity.” When the meetup was over, she took my arm and said, “You can’t go without meeting Flat Bobby.” I followed her to her car, where there was a life-size cardboard cutout of Kennedy, with his retro skinny tie and rolled-up sleeves. If Kennedy weren’t running, Van Bonn told me, she might vote Democrat. The only person she wouldn’t consider voting for was Donald Trump, whom she considered “dishonorable and dangerous.”

In April, at an Art Deco theatre in Royal Oak, Michigan, the Kennedy campaign put on a fund-raiser in the form of a comedy show. Van Bonn went, clutching Flat Bobby under her arm. Inside were about seventeen hundred kindred spirits—a diverse and energetic community relishing its right to live free. The comic Rob Schneider did a few Henny Youngman-style jokes (wives: so annoying, right?), followed by a bit of observational humor about straining on the toilet, followed immediately, with no segue, by a heartfelt written speech about “why I love Bobby Kennedy.” Then came R.F.K., who gave a plodding campaign speech, although he did have one funny line: “I have something in common with these comedians. We all come from families that wish we had a different job.” At the after-party, in a bar down the street, Van Bonn was waved to the front of a photo line, where she posed for a picture: Flat Bobby and Real Bobby, with Van Bonn beaming in between them. On her way out, she made ecstatic small talk with everyone, including a heavyset bouncer who jutted a chin toward Flat Bobby and said, “I hope you and your boyfriend have a lovely evening, Ma’am.”

In August, after Kennedy dropped out and threw his support behind Trump, I talked to Van Bonn again. “I can hardly say it out loud,” she told me, “but if I trust Bobby enough to be President, and if his judgment now is that Trump is the best choice, then . . .” She trailed off. I reminded her of her earlier assessment of Trump, and she didn’t take it back. “As a human being, I like Harris, and I’d love to see a woman in that role,” she said. “But I’ve become quite disillusioned with the Democratic Party. I don’t know who’s really pulling the strings.” She had until November to continue doing her own research. “I do worry that Trump might try to become a dictator on Day One, trying to jail people who’ve spoken out against him—I don’t like that part,” she said. “But politics is all about trade-offs.”

The day before the Democratic Convention, Alawieh was in Chicago, in a rented meeting room a mile from the United Center, wearing a kaffiyeh bearing the words “Democrats for Palestinian Rights.” He was now a delegate, and he was leading an orientation, telling the other “uncommitted” delegates—thirty in all, from eight states—the plan for the coming week. “The Party wants to brush this issue under the rug,” he said. “But we represent the majority.” They had nowhere near the numbers to challenge Harris’s nomination, and it wasn’t clear that they would have tried if they did. Their more immediate goal was to circulate through the hallways,

recruiting Party insiders to their cause. On my way out, I spotted a list of “best practices,” including “Find common ground” and “Use calm and respectful language.”

Already, a separate coalition called March on the D.N.C. was massing in a nearby park. “Our strategy has been to build power from within,” an “uncommitted” organizer who lives in New York told me. “Demonstrating in the streets—it’s all good, as long as it stays chill, but it’s not our strategy.” If the demonstrations were less than chill—if, for example, they included property damage or violence—then the “uncommitted” activists might be conflated with the less disciplined ones. “I can’t control what anyone else does—I can only keep my people on message,” she went on. “Our motto all along has been: Let’s make this 1964, not 1968.”



In 1964, the Democratic Party held its Convention in Atlantic City, to nominate Lyndon Johnson for his first full term. This was, of course, the pre-Voting Rights Act Democratic Party, and the delegation from Mississippi comprised sixty-eight white men, all outspoken segregationists. In response, Fannie Lou Hamer, Robert Moses, and other civil-rights activists formed the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, selecting their own unofficial delegation. They took buses to Atlantic City, subsisting on “cheese and crackers and baloney” and sleeping several to a hotel room. Johnson offered

the activists a symbolic “compromise”: two of them could be seated alongside the segregationists. “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats,” Hamer said. Instead, they stood on the Atlantic City boardwalk, holding up protest signs about the Party’s hypocrisy. In the short term, such demonstrations were a blow to Party unity, forcing Johnson to choose between keeping his promises and “losing the South.” In the long run, it’s hard to imagine how the Democratic Party could have survived without such agitations.

Ahead of this year’s Convention, the activists asked Party leaders to allow a Palestinian American to speak from the main stage. At first, they were given only an untelevised daytime panel, held in a separate building. Hala Hijazi, a San Francisco city commissioner and a longtime Kamala Harris ally, identified herself as a “proud moderate” during the panel and said, “I’m really here because my family’s dead.” The following night, while walking out of the stadium after Barack Obama finished his address, I ran into Alawieh in the lobby. Everyone around us was buzzing—twenty thousand Beatlemaniacs who had just seen their favorite band come out of retirement—but Alawieh looked wrung out. “I appreciate a well-written, well-delivered speech, but I just can’t bring myself to be in that headspace right now,” he said. That night, outside Chicago’s Israeli consulate, protesters passed out flyers reading “Make it great like ’68!,” and fifty-six people were arrested. But none of the protests came close to the mayhem of the Battle of Michigan Avenue.

On the penultimate night of the D.N.C., the activists got the final word that, although the parents of an Israeli American hostage would appear on the main stage, no Palestinian would speak. Alawieh called an impromptu press conference outside the United Center. About fifty feet in front of him, V.I.P.s lined up to enter the CNN-Politico Grill, an invitation-only pop-up. Alawieh sat cross-legged on the ground and said, of the D.N.C., “I’m staying here until they change their minds.” About a dozen “uncommitted” delegates sat down next to him. Organizers linked arms and sang in Arabic, Hebrew, and English; Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez joined via FaceTime. Around 1 A.M., when the Chicago police were shutting down the area, they asked the Secret Service what to do; the Secret Service asked the D.N.C. what to do; the D.N.C. said to leave the protesters alone, so the police left them alone. The whole time, a D.N.C. official was hanging around quietly in the background,

sitting on a nearby bench and vaping, negotiating with the protesters off camera and ordering pizza for them when they got hungry. Someone went to an Airbnb and came back with a few bedsheets, and the protesters did their best to sleep on the ground.

I visited them again early the next morning. “If I’d known we were gonna do this, I would have at least brought my makeup with me,” Asma Mohammed, an “uncommitted” delegate from Minnesota, said. Ruwa Romman, a Democratic state representative from Georgia whose parents are Palestinian, delivered a version of the speech that she’d wanted to give onstage. “Our party’s greatest strength has always been our ability to unite,” she said.

“They could have let her do this speech Monday night at five-thirty,” a British American journalist behind me said—in fact, it might have received less press coverage. He repurposed a mordant Israeli aphorism, applying it to the Democrats: “They never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity.”

“Dad and I have always been super close,” Andy Levin told me. “But my whole life we’ve had this back-and-forth where I try to move him to the left and he explains, very calmly, why what I’m asking for is not realistic.” Alawieh told me that he’d attended an “epic Shabbat dinner at Andy’s house, where it was Sandy making some mild critiques of Israeli policy, Andy’s kids making way more radical critiques, and Andy trying to keep the peace.” Over the years, Andy had urged his father to be more boldly progressive on trade policy, military actions in Central America, and the Middle East. “Then I got to Congress,” Andy said, chuckling, “and my kids started telling me *I wasn’t* going far enough.”

Many political strategists see it as their job to assess the prevailing electoral climate and then adapt their message (and perhaps their underlying ideology, if they have one) to fit it. The “uncommitted” organizers took the opposite approach, starting from a set of stubborn moral beliefs and then trying to change the political weather accordingly. Several times, I pressed them on the dangers of their strategy. If Harris acceded to all of the movement’s demands, wouldn’t she risk alienating centrist voters? Given the vertiginous stakes—the threat Trump poses to American democracy, not to mention to the people of Gaza—how could they take a chance on a tactic that might, even indirectly, help him win? For the most part, the activists stayed on

message. They quoted Martin Luther King: “The time is always right to do what is right.” They paraphrased the Talmud, and the Quran: Whoever saves one life saves the whole world. At times, though, they fell back on a version of a rhetorical shortcut that they derided when their opponents tried it: My constituency’s votes need to be earned, but other constituencies will eventually fall in line.

In “What It Took to Win,” a history of the Democratic Party with occasional glints of memoir, the historian Michael Kazin writes, “By 1968, like most New Leftists, I was ready, even eager, to see the Democrats lose power as a fitting punishment for their sins.” He now regrets that stance. He told me, “When my students say they can’t bear to vote for a government that is doing these intolerable things, I say to them, ‘You can vote morally. When I was twenty, I voted morally. Now I vote strategically.’ ” Mark Rudd, a former leader of the Weathermen, also told me that he now thinks of his late-sixties activism as counterproductive. “Some of us thought there was no difference between Humphrey and Nixon, and some of us knew Nixon was worse but didn’t give a shit,” he said. “We were utopians, and as such we were essentially apolitical.” Still, as the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party realized, there are political horizons beyond winning the next election. “With Dixiecrats out of the coalition, it got much harder for Democrats to win, for decades, but it was worth it,” an “uncommitted” activist told me. “If we’re now reaching a point where donors who support Israel above all else don’t feel comfortable in the Democratic Party—well, that may be painful in the short term, but it would still be worth it.” Even if the antiwar movement did contribute to Nixon’s victory, it may have hastened other developments in American life, such as ending the draft, that were arguably as important.

Earlier this month, YouTube ads, apparently sponsored by a *PAC* with Republican ties and targeted to viewers in the Detroit area, highlighted Harris’s support of Israel and her Jewish husband. In the recent debate between Trump and Harris, only Trump made a direct appeal to “the Arab population.” Alawieh said, “I see him preying on my community’s pain, and I fear, for some people, it might actually work.” He told me that he has implored the Harris campaign to “give us something so that we can go mobilize voters on your behalf,” but that he and other local leaders had heard “very little” in response. “If they’ve decided they can win without us, maybe by reaching rightward, then I hope to God their calculation is the

correct one,” he said. “But they can’t ignore this issue long term.” Last week, the “uncommitted” movement announced that, given “Harris’s unwillingness to shift on unconditional weapons policy,” they would not be endorsing her; yet they also discouraged their followers from voting for Trump, or for any third-party candidate. Alawieh, as an individual, will vote for Harris; other “uncommitted” organizers will not. “Movements have long worked to rid the Democratic Party of hateful forces,” the announcement read, “and we will work in that legacy to rid our party of *AIPAC*’s pro-war extremism.” (The Harris campaign sent me a statement that read, in part, “The Vice President is committed to work to earn every vote, unite our country, and to be a President for all Americans.”)

One afternoon, between a lunch meeting and a dinner meeting, Andy Levin stopped in Royal Oak to visit his father. “I’ve been fighting radicalism my whole career, on the right and the left,” Sandy Levin said, sitting in his living room. “Whenever I hear ‘My way or the highway’ or ‘Now or never,’ my instinct is to step back and say, ‘Well, I’m sure there’s a way to find some consensus position.’” He reflected on 1968, when he was the chair of the Michigan delegation at the Democratic National Convention: “My job was to keep the delegation together, and I almost wasn’t able to do it.”

“You were not a Humphrey guy, right, Dad?” Andy asked.

“I was supposed to be neutral, but everyone who knew me knew I was for this guy,” Sandy said, picking up a photo on the mantel: himself as a young man standing next to Bobby Kennedy, Sr. “We kept begging Humphrey to distance himself from the war, and it took him far too long.”

Andy drew the obvious parallel: “Humphrey should have had his break much earlier—so doesn’t that mean that the Administration should be making a big break with Netanyahu, like, yesterday?”

Sandy gave his son a patient smile. Then he turned to me and said, “I’m proud of what Andy’s doing, because he’s not part of some radical, ‘It’s got to be now or never’ sort of group.”

“I kinda do think it has to be now or never,” Andy said.

He hugged his father, said, “I’ll call you tomorrow,” and walked out to the driveway. “Dad was shaped by the pre-sixties left, where everything is about going through the proper channels,” he said. “I accuse him of being too cautious, and he says I’m too impetuous. And maybe he’s right. He spent thirty-six years in Congress, and I only lasted four.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated Abbas Alawieh’s role in the meeting in Dearborn.

Profiles

The Priest Who Helps Women in the Mob Escape

Don Luigi Ciotti leads an anti-Mafia organization, and for decades he has run a secret operation that liberates women from the criminal underworld.

By D. T. Max

September 23, 2024



Luigi Ciotti was pacing by the open gates of a low concrete building in Turin. He had been waiting for an hour. In front of him was a wide street smelling of diesel and flanked by the bollards that keep Italians from parking where they shouldn't. With his shrewd eyes, flowing white hair, untucked black shirt, and black pants, Ciotti could have been a theatre director waiting for his lead to show up. Rather, he was a priest. He chatted with three bodyguards, who stood just behind him, their eyes fixed on the road. Finally, a Fiat 500 approached. As soon as the car cleared the gates, the security detail slammed them shut. In the back of the vehicle was a young woman in a pink Converse sweatshirt and leopard-print leggings. On her lap sat a small boy with a pacifier. A teen-age girl was next to them.

Ciotti opened the car door and said, in Italian, “Welcome! Are you tired? How was the trip?”

All three were exhausted, and got out cautiously. Ciotti declared that it was a joy to see them. The boy began crying, and Ciotti promised him *un ottimo dolce*—a wonderful pastry—if he’d follow him inside. The mother echoed the promise, and the boy consented.

The building was the headquarters of Gruppo Abele, a social-services organization that Ciotti founded in 1965. We sat around a dining-room table with a chintz tablecloth. Coffee, a hazelnut tart, and cheese awaited us. The girl spoke of liking sweets. “You should become a cake-maker!” Ciotti told her. He was getting her started on imagining a new life.

The girl’s mother, L., was the wife of a mobster in the Camorra—Italy’s oldest organized-crime group, which is based in the area around Naples. Now thirty-one, she had met her husband when she was fourteen, and gave birth to their daughter at fifteen. After that, he grew violent with L., once beating her so badly that she couldn’t leave their house for a month. He controlled what she ate, what she did, and whom she saw. (L. was not from a Mafia family and had expected to lead a normal, modern life.) Roughly two months before L.’s arrival in Turin, while her husband was in jail on a charge of Mafia association, she fled her home with her children to a *casa rifugio*—a nonprofit shelter for abuse victims and their families. She abandoned all her belongings and locked her phone in a strongbox, afraid that her husband or his allies could use it to track her. The *casa rifugio* was set up to keep women safe from violent spouses, not to protect them from hit men. L.’s situation was considered so dangerous that she wasn’t allowed to even enter the back yard; her older child couldn’t attend school.

In desperation, a woman at the facility reached out to Ciotti, who has become famous in Italy as the priest who helps women escape from the Mafia. In Ciotti’s view, the Italian government doesn’t do enough to protect women like L. Men in the Mob generally insure that they discuss their illegal business activities out of earshot of their families, so women such as L. have often never been direct witnesses to crimes—making them ineligible for the country’s witness-protection program. Because they cannot help the state, the state won’t help them. Yet L. was in imminent peril. Mafia wives

who leave their families are considered traitors, and some are assassinated. In 2011, Maria Concetta Cacciola, a thirteen-year-old whose parents were involved with the 'Ndrangheta, was married off to an associate. She eventually fled Calabria for northern Italy, leaving behind her three children. Cacciola's mother lured her home, using her kids as bait. Less than two weeks later, Cacciola's parents called her to the basement, where there was a container of acid. Most likely, she was forced to drink it—one of the Mafia's punishments for being a snitch. Cacciola was pronounced dead at a hospital; her father told the police that she had died by suicide.

To help such women, Ciotti, who is seventy-nine, has spent the past twenty years creating an informal network of safe houses, burner phones, and coöperative policemen. When he needs an officer or a government official to facilitate someone's flight, he often makes the request in person, thus avoiding any phone logs or digital traces. "You have to be smart," he told me. "Any small mistake is enough to get people in trouble."

In addition to Gruppo Abele, Ciotti runs a nonprofit network called Libera. Its primary role is encouraging Italians to oppose the organized-crime groups that originated in the south of the country, principally [the Cosa Nostra](#), in Sicily; the 'Ndrangheta, in Calabria; and the Camorra. It presses politicians to pass stronger laws against organized crime, and runs a group of agribusinesses on land seized from the Mafia by the government. At these sites, Libera hosts summer camps where teen-agers learn about the harm done by crime syndicates. Libera has fifty employees and some ten thousand volunteers; just a handful of people are involved in its sensitive rescue operation, and Ciotti has previously discussed it only glancingly with the press.

For many years, Ciotti has worked closely with Vincenza Rando, an anti-Mafia lawyer based in Modena. Rando was in Turin the day I was there, and she joined us at the dining table, wearing a cheery pink sweater. She had brought a carful of toys for L.'s son, to smooth his transition. As a lawyer who deals with Mafia trials for a living, she knows how to be cold-blooded, but she was empathetic with L., reminding her, "Now you can fall in love again." Rando explained later that she and Ciotti had decided they had only a week to install L. and her children in a secret location. The husband had just filed a lawsuit against L. from prison, for taking his children without his

permission, and was trying to terminate her parental rights. “This suggests she’s on his mind,” Ciotti told me. “If they find her, they will kill her.” He added that the husband was now being investigated on a murder charge.



Ciotti and Rando wanted to move L. and her family into the ground floor of a safe house in northern Italy. For the past few days, a dozen volunteers had been sprucing up the place, renovating the kitchen and repainting the walls with bright colors. L. and her family, Ciotti told me, would “have to heal in *here*.” He touched his heart. L. would be given a food supply that could last for several weeks—that way, they would not have to go outside until they felt comfortable.

A friendly family from southern Italy with a small child was already living upstairs in the house. (They would not be made aware of L.’s past.) Ciotti thought that it was unwise to stick a Mob family somewhere alone in the chilly north. “They need their culture,” he said. At the same time, he admitted, his job was to sever them from that culture—to furnish them with new names and new histories that would make their pasts untraceable and shield them from curious locals and Italy’s ubiquitous bureaucrats.

At the dining table in Turin, L. seemed bemused by all the attention, and said little. She mostly tried to care for her children. At one point, her son

grabbed a focaccia and hit her in the face with it; she gently took it away. She did say that being the wife of a Camorrista was not as glamorous as many people imagined it to be. She noted, “I’ve never even been to the most famous piazza in my city.” Rando promised to dress her in a disguise and take her there. L. showed everyone her wrist—it was tattooed with her husband’s name. That would have to be removed, Ciotti and Rando agreed. What about the names of her children, which were imprinted on her shoulder? L. could keep those, she was told, even though the tattoos might provoke questions once the children had different names. “She has been through enough,” Ciotti explained to me.

In a corridor, Ciotti and the boy started playing soccer with a balled-up napkin—the boy had a lot of pent-up energy, but it wasn’t safe to play outside. The priest returned to the table with a flushed face. He has been undergoing treatment for a severe illness for a decade. He used WhatsApp to let L. watch a live video of volunteers sweeping and painting her new house. “At five-thirty this afternoon, this will be yours,” he said.

Ciotti was born to a bricklayer and a stay-at-home mother in 1945, in the Belluno province, in a valley in the Dolomites. Italy was economically devastated after the Second World War, and Belluno was poorer than most places in the north. When Ciotti was young, his family moved west to Turin, the embodiment of Italian affluence and sophistication, and his father found work in construction. Ciotti doesn’t remember much kindness toward his family growing up. His intolerance of injustice showed itself early. In first grade, when a teacher called him a hick, Ciotti threw an inkwell at her.

Ciotti began training to become a radio technician. Every day after school, he came across a homeless man who was underlining passages in a book with an elegant red/blue editing pencil. The man told Ciotti that he was a disgraced doctor. He’d performed a procedure on a friend’s wife while inebriated, and she had died. Ciotti offered to help him. “I’m old and don’t need anything,” the man told him, then pointed at some street kids nearby who were using drugs and alcohol. “Do something for *them* if you can.”

Ciotti took the advice. Instead of becoming a radio technician, he started working with charities that assisted people living on the streets. In 1965, with funds he’d received from a local priest, he opened the organization that

came to be known as Gruppo Abele, in honor of the Biblical Abel—he would be his brother's keeper. In the early seventies, when addicts were viewed as criminals or morally deficient, Gruppo Abele became a nonjudgmental refuge for homeless people and juvenile offenders. Anyone could come in for a hot meal and a place to sleep.

During these years, [the Catholic Church's](#) social conscience was on the rise. A movement of clergy calling themselves Azione Cattolica gained prominence. Its doctrine held that priests had a responsibility not just to prepare souls for the afterlife but also to fight for the rights of the poor and the oppressed. The movement's message appealed to Ciotti, and, in 1963, he decided to enter the seminary. "I had a girlfriend, not a very serious one," he said to me. "But I told her, 'Look, I have to see if this is my calling.'" He recounted, "During the day, I dedicated myself to my studies." At night, he rode a motorcycle around Turin, offering aid to strangers.

In 1972, at the age of twenty-seven, Ciotti was ordained by Michele Pellegrino, a left-wing cardinal. He was assigned to the Archdiocese of Turin, where Pellegrino allowed him to continue working as a street priest instead of having him head a parish where he would have to focus on christenings, marriages, and funerals. Ciotti summarized his theology to me by quoting his friend Tonino Bello, the Bishop of Molfetta: "I don't care who God is. It's enough for me to know what He stands for." When other priests criticized his social activism, Ciotti remembered, Cardinal Pellegrino told them to "come back when *they'd* done something to help people." Ciotti celebrated one of his first Masses at Le Nuove, a historic prison. When it got cold in Turin, he sometimes slept alongside homeless people and drug users who sneaked inside trains that were parked overnight at the Porta Nuova station, and offered them a sympathetic ear. In the late eighties, after *aids* hit Europe, Ciotti provided free assistance to the sick. His politics were progressive and not always in line with the Church's—among other things, he supported distributing free condoms, including to addicts. He is vocal in his support of gay and trans rights.

In Ciotti's memoir, "L'Amore Non Basta" ("Love Is Not Enough"), from 2020, he writes that he became known in Turin for offering sex workers a safe haven at Gruppo Abele. He was more interested in aiding victims than in punishing criminals, but his work inevitably drew him into the orbit of

drug traffickers, pimps, and others who lived outside the law, and he received many threats. When he was forty-three and visiting his parents for an Easter meal, two men lurked on a landing outside their apartment. A watchful neighbor screamed, and the men ran off—all Ciotti saw was their shadows. At about this time, Ciotti agreed to let the Turin police follow him around town. As the threats grew more intense, Ciotti recalled, an officer told him, “We don’t think you should keep using your car. You should travel in ours.”

Italian organized-crime groups were not significantly affected by Ciotti’s efforts in these early years. He was an irritant only in Turin, far from the southern regions, where their power was centered. Besides, he was a priest, and the Mafia claimed not to kill priests. But in 1992, when Ciotti was forty-seven, the Cosa Nostra shocked Italians by using bombs to assassinate the most important anti-Mafia prosecutor in Sicily, Giovanni Falcone, and his lieutenant, Paolo Borsellino. Shortly afterward, an anti-Mafia priest in Sicily, Don Pino Puglisi, and a priest outside Naples who opposed the Camorra, Don Peppe Diana, were also killed. For two centuries, the Mafia had been a parasite in Italy; now it was threatening to destroy its host. Ciotti, who knew three of the victims, was appalled not just by the murders but by their savagery—eight bodyguards also died in the attacks, as did Falcone’s wife. He decided to add fighting the Mafia to his life’s mission.

In 1993, Ciotti launched *Narcomafie*, an anti-Mafia magazine, and its unsparing reporting on such vicious crimes as the assassination of Borsellino made it harder for Italians to view people in the Mafia as romantic antiheroes. A year later, Ciotti founded Libera, and soon became the champion of a proposed law that would allow the government to give nonprofits land that had been seized from organized-crime groups. The bill passed in 1996. “We gathered a million signatures for it,” Ciotti told me. Previously, people were too afraid of reprisal to develop property formerly owned by the Mob. Now the confiscated land became agribusinesses and educational projects for teen-agers. The Mafia, Ciotti understood, would hate the idea of young Italians gathering on seized farmland to discuss how they could rid the country of organized crime, as if it were some sort of mid-tier social problem, like pesticide runoff or drunk driving. The law cunningly reframed Italy’s fight against the Mafia: taking away their land domesticated them, shattering the mystique that had allowed them to maintain control.

Ciotti was also instrumental in passing a law to establish March 21st as a day of remembrance for innocent victims of Mafia violence—now estimated at more than a thousand people. For the first time, families of victims could receive public consolation for their loss, rather than feel frightened and isolated. The day has become an eventful one in Italy, with commemorations, marches, and speeches. Every year on the holiday, Ciotti hosts a prayer vigil for family members of organized-crime victims. In 2014, at the Church of St. Gregorio VII, in Rome, Pope Francis joined Ciotti to bless the families. An image of Ciotti and the Pope walking into the church while grasping each other's hands—allies in battle—was broadcast around the world. A newspaper in Bergamo praised the “delicate, disarming gesture.”

Libera’s actions may be largely symbolic—the ’Ndrangheta alone makes an estimated fifty billion dollars each year, and Ciotti’s group has done little to change that. But he believes that the Mafia’s status in Italy depends on a fragile mixture of inevitability, invisibility, and apathy on the part of some Italians. A small crack might cause a bigger rupture, he told me. The key to breaking the Mafia in Italy, he added, was to convince Italians that it *could* be beaten, and that it was not an inextricable part of their society. He uses the word *mafiosità* to describe the attitude of Italians who adopt the unscrupulous behavior of mobsters.

Ciotti’s campaigns—from the exposés of *Narcomafie* to the lobbying by Libera—turned him into a household name in Italy, and they have also infuriated the Mafia. In 1993, Salvatore (Totò) Riina, then the chief Mafia don, who had ordered the assassinations of Falcone and Borsellino, was convicted of murder and Mafia association and was sent to a maximum-security prison. While incarcerated, Riina was secretly taped giving a confederate some orders regarding Ciotti: “You’re going to get out, and I’m not. When you’re out, I want you to kill this son of a bitch.”



In 2018, on the final day of an anti-Mafia conference in Calabria, a man with a hidden weapon sneaked past a barricade and into a conference hall where Ciotti was speaking. Ciotti’s security detail spotted the man moving through the crowd toward him, and wrestled the man to the ground just twenty feet from where the priest was standing. Within minutes, a helicopter had spirited Ciotti away.

The state now provides Ciotti with five bodyguards and an armored car; whenever he travels to a new place, the local police sweep the area. Ciotti calls his security team “a deterrent” to assassination but said that the Mob could still kill him if it really wanted to. (Riina, who died in 2017, once said, with grudging admiration, that Ciotti was so relentless that he should have been a police commissioner, not a priest.)

Ciotti told me, “My protective detail is now part of my house. They’re part of my family.” He has officiated at marriages and christenings not just of members of his detail but of their parents and children.

One night, in the summer of 2021, I met Ciotti at a restaurant in Rome, in the working-class neighborhood of Ostiense. He travels almost every day—giving presentations; meeting with lawyers, prosecutors, magistrates, police, and other priests; supporting the workers and volunteers under the Libera

umbrella. The restaurant was crowded and loud, but, for security reasons, Ciotti and an assistant were in an empty room in the back. At a table near them, five burly men with soft stomachs—Ciotti’s security guards—were quietly enjoying a meal and watching a soccer match on TV. Their guns were out of sight.

Ciotti speaks only Italian. He is lithe, and his skin is pink and mottled. That evening, he was wearing what I came to recognize as his usual priestly ensemble: a long-sleeved dark-blue knit shirt, black trousers, black lace-ups. (He doesn’t like to wear a clerical collar outside church; “I just feel more at ease in other clothes,” he told me.) With his light eyes, strong nose, and long bangs swept across his forehead, he could be mistaken for Liam Neeson—if Neeson never slept in the same place two nights in a row.

Ciotti may live on the run, but that does not wall him off from the joys of ordinary experiences. He enjoys good restaurants, supports the Turin-based soccer team [Juventus](#), and is able to discuss brutal crimes while savoring a *vitello tonnato*. His frantic travel schedule clearly suits him. He told me that he had visited the U.S. several times. (Once, in New York, he was repeatedly recognized by Italian tourists while he roamed around *moma*.)

Ciotti ordered one of his favorite dishes, *carciofi alla giudia*—deep-fried artichokes—and a glass of the house white. As we ate, I asked him what had motivated his anti-Mafia work. He said that it was part of a lifelong attempt to grant dignity to the powerless. “My two points of reference, as a man and a Christian—as a person—are the Gospels and the Italian constitution,” he explained. He added that, wherever he goes in Italy, he tries to do two things: meet with the families of Mob victims, and recite Mass with a priest at a local church. “There isn’t a province in Italy I haven’t celebrated Mass in,” he told me.

I asked Ciotti how many people had made use of his escape operation, and he said about forty, nearly all of them women; another two hundred or so women and children had come to Libera and been placed in safe houses, through the judicial system. “The numbers are growing, because they see that there’s someone to give a hand,” Ciotti said. When I asked why women were likelier than men to make use of Libera’s services, he gave an old-school answer: “Women are the generators of life. They have an extra gear

where this is concerned.” He added, “In the town squares of the world, it’s the women who battle for liberty.” He talked forcefully, making chopping gestures with his hands, and it wasn’t hard to imagine him behind a pulpit, delivering impassioned sermons.

Ciotti noted that he has been proselytizing in southern Italy for a very long time. Sometimes, he explained, “I run into Mafia wives who tell me they remember seeing me lecture against organized crime when they were in grade school.”

In Italy, it is extremely hard to disappear. Every citizen, at the age of five, is given an identity card. The *carta d’identità* guarantees health care and social services, but in return the state can send police officers to citizens’ homes to verify that people live where they say. If you move, you generally must report your new address within twenty days. Businesses in Italy can’t legally sell anything without giving a receipt. Typically, nine signatures are required to open a bank account and fourteen to close one. Through the medical system, the state can access your health history.

But in other areas of its citizens’ lives the Italian state is curiously feckless. In 2019, the value of underground and illicit activity was eleven per cent of the country’s G.D.P. (In a confidential 2008 cable released by WikiLeaks, a U.S. official characterized Calabria as “a failed state.”) And Italy’s witness-protection program is both narrow and cumbersome. There is no governmental organization tasked with protecting someone who is seriously threatened by anyone outside the small group who can testify at a trial. The state has essentially outsourced this work to Ciotti and Libera. Anna Sergi, a professor of criminology at the University of Essex and an expert on the ‘Ndrangheta, told me, “Libera is an aspiration that is completely organized around Luigi’s ideas.” Roberto Di Bella, a magistrate in juvenile court who is often the first point of contact for women and children who want to leave the Mob, acknowledged, via text, “Many women who have requested help have done so after hearing him speak.”

Halfway through my dinner with Ciotti in Rome, his cell phone rang. He looked at the caller I.D. and answered it. I noticed that he covered his mouth with his hand, to prevent lipreading. After hanging up, he told me that the call was from the girlfriend of a young man who was the son of an

'Ndrangheta member. The boyfriend, whom Ciotti called *un bravo ragazzo*—"a good boy"—had gone to the police several weeks earlier and agreed to testify against his father, who was involved in drug trafficking. A prosecutor who knew Ciotti had interviewed the boyfriend, who had asked for the state to hide him and his girlfriend, to keep them safe from reprisals. The prosecutor contacted Ciotti and said, "We don't have enough yet to get state protection. As always, I'm counting on you."

Ciotti found the couple a safe house within a few hours, but there was a special complication: the girlfriend was about to give birth, and wanted to be in a hospital for the delivery. The Mob is "looking for them everywhere," Ciotti told me. "If they catch them, they'll massacre them." He made arrangements for the woman to be admitted to a hospital anonymously.

The girlfriend had called Ciotti to say that she had just gone into labor. He had reassured her that the doctors and Libera would protect her and her baby. We finished dinner with sorbet. I asked Ciotti where he was sleeping that night. He told me that his security detail would decide. "If you get into a routine, *that's* when it's dangerous," he said.

The next day, I met with Ciotti on the Via Giosuè Carducci, in the nineteenth-century part of Rome, where he was conferring with General Antonio Marzo, who was part of the Carabinieri's anti-Mafia squad. They discussed a key item on Ciotti's agenda: a law that would make it easier for Italians to legally change their names. Current law stipulates that when a change is made both your new and your old names must be posted in front of the city hall closest to where you were born—rendering the process useless for those fleeing the Mob. Ciotti told Marzo that, if the regulation was revised, "there would finally be an opening" for people in this predicament. Proponents of the law nearly had the votes they needed to secure passage. The general offered his support, and they had photographs taken with each other. Afterward, Ciotti called the woman who'd gone into labor. She had safely delivered her baby. He told me the infant's name, but asked me to keep it to myself.

After the meeting, we flew to Sicily, the power center of the Cosa Nostra. On the way in from the Palermo airport, we saw a big, hand-painted sign on Mt. Pellegrino: "NO MAFIA." In town, we had coffee in a central piazza

where a shop run by Libera sells pasta and other food from its agricultural holdings, along with buttons and T-shirts. We then drove south to a Libera agritourism hotel in Piana degli Albanesi, a gorgeous village surrounded by mountains. The land had been seized from the Mafia and handed over to Ciotti's group in the late nineties.

In Libera's early days, Ciotti told me, locals were reluctant to work on confiscated land, and the Mafia sometimes sent arsonists into fields to burn crops. Once, mobsters let sheep loose to eat chickpea seedlings planted by Libera; the following morning, they collected the herd. But the Mafia has eased up on its opposition to the government's policy, and these days it mostly leaves the agribusiness coöperatives alone. Many Sicilians are now eager to work at such places, which pay relatively well. We had lunch at the hotel's restaurant, and I sat next to a man named Vincenzo Agostino, who often participated in Libera activities. He told me that his son, an undercover police officer, had been killed because he had investigated an earlier attempt to assassinate Falcone. Agostino had a white beard down to his chest, and said that he wouldn't cut it off until the people who had murdered his son were convicted. (This past April, Agostino died. He had not shaved in thirty-four years.)

The room was filled with young volunteers, who were helping with the farmwork and running the restaurant. Ciotti gave a speech in which he said that, when young Italians come together and reject a culture of crime, "this is the sharpest slap in the face citizens can give the Mafia."

After the meal, I noted how peaceful the area seemed, and Ciotti urged me not to be fooled by appearances. The Cosa Nostra had learned a lesson from the excesses of the Totò Riina years and now operated more subtly. Spectacular assassinations were out of fashion, but the enterprises that the Mafia profited from—illegal drugs, shakedowns of legitimate businesses—continued to prosper. Ciotti worried that Italians would think that the problem of organized crime had been resolved because of this apparent "normalization—less blood, less death, fewer massacres."

From Piana degli Albanesi, we drove along unmarked roads through a landscape of olive trees and palms to a farmhouse outside the village of San Giuseppe Jato. In the nineties, a boy named Giuseppe Di Matteo was held by

a Mafia capo there and tortured for nearly two years, because the boy's father—a mobster turned informant—was set to testify against his fellow gang members. In January, 1996, the boy was strangled, and his body was dissolved in acid. The murder of Piccolo Giuseppe, as he is known in Italy, alerted the public that the Mafia no longer spared women and children. Thanks to Ciotti, the farmhouse has become part of a memorial garden. The village built an outdoor amphitheatre, set up a classroom area, and designed an informative exhibit about the case, and about other children murdered by the Mafia.

The next day, we returned to Turin. At Gruppo Abele, Ciotti updated me on the couple with the new baby. He recalled that they had fled in a car that was easy to track, so he had worked to get them another one quickly. He had reached out to a friend, the sister of one of Falcone's slain bodyguards, who ran a used-car dealership in Puglia. The woman sold Libera her own car for less than a thousand euros. "Save their lives," she'd urged Ciotti. The car had been shipped to Turin that day. I asked him what had become of the couple's old car. "It's disappeared," he said. "And we'll destroy it." When I said that he was the first priest I'd met who knew how to get rid of a car, he smiled.



I asked Ciotti who the first person he'd hidden from the Mob was, and he told me the story of a woman named F., who had escaped in 1994. Born into an important 'Ndrangheta family—her father was a capo—F. got married at nineteen and had two children. After F. learned that a rival clan had put out a contract on her brother, she intervened and warned the hit man that she knew who he was (and could therefore tell the police, if necessary). Her brother, rather than being grateful, was furious: such conflicts were to be handled only by men. He threatened her with a gun, and she fled.

F. reached out to the head of her clan, hoping to be forgiven. He told her to meet with him in the town square. When she arrived there, the piazza, normally bustling with pedestrians and Vespas, was eerily empty. Then F. saw people who lived on the square shutting their windows. Terrified, she called a policeman she knew from school. He raced to the square and drove her to the state police barracks in a nearby city.

F. was accepted into the witness-protection program. The government put her in a safe house, but she wasn't allowed to have contact with anyone, and she missed her children. When she tried to quietly begin a new relationship —she was still in her twenties—her minders told her that, for security reasons, her boyfriend, an oculist, could not visit her. In frustration, she left the program. The government gave her seventy-two thousand euros to start a new life, but, in a cruel twist, it fined her tens of thousands of euros for unlawful offenses that she had confessed to—such as transporting criminals in her car. She was destitute and a marked woman, and she couldn't even divorce her husband, because the law required that an announcement, with her current address, be published in her town of birth.

In 2002, F. reached out to Ciotti, who by then was well known in Italy. They met at a bar in Rome, and had chinotto sodas. Ciotti resettled F. and the oculist, and even lent them money so that he could open an eyeglass store. Ciotti also enlisted sympathetic administrators to allow F. to get a divorce without declaring her new address, though she lost custody of her children because she wouldn't tell the judge where she was living. In 2009, Ciotti planned and attended the wedding of F. to the oculist.

Ciotti asked an assistant to bring him a letter from a woman named C. As he began telling me her story, I realized that I had briefly met her, at a

conference that Libera had organized in Rome in 2018. C., the mother of three girls, is the daughter of an 'Ndrangheta associate. Her husband, also in the Mob, disappeared in 2008; he left for work one day and never returned. She went to the police station in her home town and asked to file a missing-person report. Within hours, her family had learned of her request, most likely through a corrupt police officer, and warned her that the Mob didn't get the police involved in its business. The police never found the body of C.'s husband, but his family took care of C. and her daughters. Still, the idea of raising her daughters alone, and the prospect of them ending up with a life like hers, horrified her.

One day, while buying diapers, C. ran across a pamphlet from Libera. The store owner delicately asked if she wanted the organization's help, and took her to a church where the priest contacted Ciotti's network. Later that day, Ciotti travelled to C.'s town. Before going, he called some local police officials he trusted, to insure that he wasn't entering a trap. "Verify, verify, verify," he said. "One small mistake can get you into big difficulties." His police contacts confirmed that C. was sincere, adding that she'd "always been a bit of a rebel."

Ciotti met with C. in a church overlooking the town's main piazza, surrounded by his bodyguards. When I had met C., she recalled what Ciotti had said upon greeting her: "'I don't just want to know your history. You matter to me—who *you* are. *Your* life.' It was the first time in two years anyone had asked me how I was." At Gruppo Abele, Ciotti told me that such empathy is essential. "The women need someone to listen to them. They need you to have two ears and a mouth that's shut." C. led him through the piazza, Ciotti remembered, to a pillar. "I think my husband is in *there*," she said, pointing. She meant that his remains might be entombed in the column.

Ciotti pulled out a map of Italy and asked C., "Where do you want to live?" Somewhere on the coast, she replied. He told her to gather her children and sent her the address of a home by the water in northern Italy. Sometime later, he drove to the new home and found her there, cooking her children a Neapolitan favorite. "She made them meatballs, for comfort," he told me. "Little children can't understand the idea of escaping."

The town where C. resettled had a mayor who supported Libera's cause. He allowed the children to attend school under false names. Ciotti checked in frequently with C., visiting with her in parks or along roadways. One time, they met at Certosa, an abandoned thirteenth-century abbey west of Turin. C. and her daughters have a modest life, he said, but C. has a job, and they are grateful to be free of a culture of killing.

Ciotti told me that he had first learned about Mob life—how gangsters think, their tradecraft—from Don Italo Calabrò, a priest who had sent Mob children into Ciotti's care before Libera existed. Ciotti told me, “I asked Don Italo how he had come to know what being in the 'Ndrangheta was like. You know what he told me? From hearing women confessing.” Ciotti has given lectures to generations of anti-Mafia investigators and corrections officers on what he has discovered about organized crime—such as the fact that the Mob never stops trying to recover its women, but is primarily intent on retrieving their kids. Children are still part of the clan; they will carry forward the business, or forge alliances by marrying into other Mob families. These conversations have helped Ciotti establish decades-long relationships with law enforcement. “There are officers I met as cadets who are now generals,” he told me.

Not long ago, I met C. again, at Rome's main police office. She had a gentle voice and the warmth of a kindergarten teacher. The fear of being murdered, she admitted, was never far away. She mentioned Maria Concetta Cacciola, the Calabrian woman whose family had forced her to drink acid. “If I went back, that's what would happen to me,” C. said. We also talked about Lea Garofalo, an 'Ndrangheta mobster's former girlfriend, who had joined the Italian witness-protection program along with her daughter. Garofalo felt stifled in hiding, and wanted to leave the country. In 2009, she decided to meet with her estranged boyfriend and ask him for money to move abroad. Before she did so, she met Ciotti at one of his presentations. He implored her to abandon the plan. “You'll end up being killed,” he warned. She said that she would bring her daughter to the meeting, because her ex wouldn't harm her in the girl's presence. Garofalo ended up being taken, alone, to an apartment in Milan, where she was strangled to death.

Ciotti told me that he'd been one of four pallbearers at Garofalo's funeral. Her killers had dismembered her body and burned it. Ciotti recalled,

shuddering, “The coffin was so light.” He said that, at Libera’s urging, Garofalo had been interred at Cimitero Monumentale, among “the illustrious people of the city of Milan—musicians, writers, artists.” He added, “When you see her tomb there, you understand its value.”

As for C., Ciotti said, she was not out of danger yet. People affiliated with the Mob regularly called his internal number at Gruppo Abele, pretending to be telephone-company employees needing to get in touch with C. or other women he has hidden. C. had nearly been hunted down several times. In 2012, two years after Ciotti had resettled her, her brother and a friend stopped by the school in her new town and demanded to see the children. (Ciotti suspects that someone tipped off the Mob for money.) Fortunately, the family had slept through an alarm that day. As the mobsters headed for the children’s classrooms, the principal called C. and told her to keep everyone at home. C. then called Ciotti, who came immediately and transferred C.’s family to a new safe house. Six months later, both of C.’s daughters performed well in a local roller-skating competition. When the girls’ real names were accidentally published online, C.’s family noticed—C. believes they had set up a Google Alert—and searched for them at the rink where the competition had taken place. Once more, C. and her daughters had to flee.

Eventually, Ciotti housed C. and her family at the Gruppo Abele headquarters, and they stayed for several years; it seemed to be the only way they could be safe. C. worked as a volunteer. Then he settled them at an undisclosed location. He read me a passage from the letter that C. had written to him: “I’ve learned so much about my past life, where everything once seemed normal, but where I tacitly consented to all the evil around me.”

In May, 2023, the streets of Turin were full of the bits of fluff that float along the spring breeze in northern Italy. Fifteen months had passed since I’d last seen Ciotti, and the previous Italian government had fallen, frustrating his attempts to get momentum on the name-change bill. On the positive side, Matteo Messina Denaro—the Mob boss who succeeded Totò Riina, and who had been convicted in absentia for kidnapping Giuseppe Di Matteo—had been arrested after being discovered near a Palermo hospital, where he was being treated for cancer under a false name.

Ciotti himself was contending with more medical problems: he had just had a coronary-bypass operation. “They opened up everything,” he said, pointing at his chest. He’d had the procedure at a Turin hospital, with his security detail guarding him day and night.

His doctors had ordered him to take it easy, or at least easier, but he clearly wasn’t listening. Ciotti was going to the Turin International Book Fair the next day, to promote “C’è Bisogno di Te”—“We Need You”—a new children’s book on how to live a life of purpose. After that, he had to be in Friuli, near the Croatian border, to celebrate a local priest who supported the anti-Mafia fight. The day after that, he was flying to Naples, where he’d speak at a memorial for the mother of a prominent salami manufacturer who might have been the victim of a Mob hit. From Naples, he’d go to Castrovilliari, in Calabria. There, on the site where, in 2014, Pope Francis excommunicated all members of the Mob, Ciotti had to do something involving a bishop. (The matter was “very delicate,” Ciotti said, and he couldn’t discuss it further.) Before returning to Turin, he’d take a ferry and drive to Palermo, to celebrate a Mass in honor of the thirtieth anniversary of Don Pino Puglisi’s murder. “We’re going to have to do all those hours in the car,” he complained. “Can you believe it?” It was the only time I ever heard him grumble.

Ciotti didn’t have time to worry about dying. “You have one life,” he said. “Find your calling, live your life—and *basta*.” Not that he was without regrets. He sometimes thought about what it would have been like to have a family; he spoke of “the marvellous, unique generative force women have.” He added, “Such choices can cost you. But I’ve been repaid by the pleasure of spending a big part of my life giving a hand to so many women, so many young women.”



Vincenza Rando, his lawyer colleague at Libera, had just been elected a federal senator, and this would be a help with the name-change bill. But there was a whole new set of ministers to contend with, a setback that Ciotti was familiar with. (Italy has had sixty-eight governments since the end of the Second World War.) The fact that Italy's new government was right-wing could cause difficulties—the name-change bill could be portrayed as feminist legislation—but he did not say so explicitly.

Meanwhile, the women and children Ciotti had brought north remained in need. They were his parish now. F., who had married the oculist, often expressed frustration with her life in hiding. "Let God's will be done," she once told me. "I'm tired of the lying and the escaping. If God decides they should find me and kill me, then let it be." Whenever F. saw on her cell phone that Ciotti was calling, she wondered if he was about to announce that her cover had been blown. She needed frequent emotional support, and was grateful that Ciotti kept in touch. Last October, Ciotti took her to meet the Pope. "It was beautiful," she said.

C. was feeling a bit more optimistic. She was excited that her oldest daughter was enrolling in a university. Ciotti had gone to speak to the school's rector, to explain why the girl's real name could not be used. I

asked him why he didn't just make a phone call. "Some things you don't do on the phone," he said, chuckling.

I recently reached out to L.—the woman I had seen brought to safety at Gruppo Abele—via video chat. Soon after she had arrived in Turin, Ciotti had advised her, "Be prudent. But don't be timid." Once Libera had set her up in a home, he told her, she should explore the town and get to know her neighbors. On the call, L., who wore a black pashmina scarf over a gray sweater, looked much healthier, and she frequently smiled and laughed. But her new life remained shadowed by her old one. A few months after she'd moved, a letter from her husband arrived. (According to government intercepts, L. told me, someone in the police had tipped off her husband.) She and her children had to be moved quickly—all those upgrades to their home had been a waste. They were put up in another house, but her husband soon let her know that, yet again, he was aware of her location. Officials in Naples told Ciotti that more had to be done to protect L.

To escort the family to safety, Ciotti put them in an ambulance that Libera sometimes used. "No one looks inside an ambulance," he told me. L. still didn't feel out of danger, though. Too many staffers at Libera knew about her situation, and people could be corrupted or pressured. You could never be sure that you had outsmarted the Camorra—widely considered the most violent of the three main Mafias. L. said, "Ciotti answered me, with great humility, that they were figuring this out alongside me. That we were learning together how to deal with this situation." She added, "To talk about errors or sloppiness wouldn't be fair, because I've seen the work, the humanity, the caring for me, my story, and my children."

L. and her kids were placed in a locale that not even Ciotti had visited—an anonymous condominium in a midsize city. In the meantime, the police raided the husband's jail cell, seized a cell phone, and placed him in indefinite solitary confinement. Italy's solitary-confinement policy—a regulation called *carcere duro*, or hard prison—is controversial in northern Europe, where it is seen as an example of southern barbarity. But Ciotti believes that *carcere duro* is a necessity if the Mob is ever to be broken. Otherwise, mobsters can run their business empires from inside prisons—including assassination plots.

Now that L.’s husband was in solitary, she and her kids could breathe a bit easier. The cover story that L. tells locals is that she and her husband are separated. (She still wears a band on her ring finger.) Libera pays the family’s daily expenses, as L.’s situation remains too fraught for her to work; her daughter goes to school and is making friends. “My daughter has a strong personality,” L. said. “She tells her friends to go fuck themselves and stop asking questions. I’m more polite.” Her little boy tells classmates, “I have no father.” He is getting counselling. “He has a lot of anger,” Ciotti told me.

L. worries that she will live to see her children become adults only if the name-change law is passed. “I have always said that I signed my death warrant,” she told me. “I know this man.” She doesn’t fear death so much as the torture that her husband would inflict on her first. She has told Ciotti, “Whatever happens, save my children, because if I die I don’t want to die in vain.”

Since I met L., numerous other fugitives had found their way to Libera’s underground railroad. One day in Ciotti’s office, he pulled out a stapled list marked “For your eyes only.” “It’s been a good time,” he said. “We are starting to get whole families who want to come north.”

Looking at his list, Ciotti described some people Libera had recently assisted. Many were minors, particularly young women who did not want their families to marry them off to a Mafia associate. Local magistrates who referred such women to Libera had the difficult job of assessing whether they really opposed the Mob or were just trying to get out of an unwanted relationship (or criminal charges). “I believe this woman is sincere, and has the potential for reform,” one magistrate had written to Ciotti. If such language is oddly moralizing, Ciotti goes even further, often describing applicants in a quasi-religious tone. He speaks of “rebirths” and says that it’s important for victims to feel that their suffering has meaning. Such language, critics have pointed out, unintentionally reinforces the power of the Mafia. Anna Sergi, the University of Essex criminologist, who generally admires Libera’s work, explained to me, “It kind of pushes away and elevates the victims of the Mafia, as if they were taking some sort of religious stand. That is not beneficial in the long term to fighting the Mafia.”

Some of the people Ciotti had helped eventually headed back south, to resume their old lives. Abandoning your culture, even a criminal one, is difficult. One young woman had told Libera that she wanted to study music, so Ciotti and his team had bought her a violin and paid for lessons. But she missed home and returned, even if it meant that she might end up a Mob wife.

Ciotti was particularly haunted by one *fallimento*, or failure. He leafed through the list until he came to the case of a man named Rocco Molè, whose family was in the 'Ndrangheta. According to Ciotti, around 2013, when Molè was not quite eighteen, he was convicted of being involved in the family business. He asked Libera for aid, promising to go clean, and the court agreed to the arrangement. At the time, Libera had dealt almost exclusively with women and with the children of mobsters. Molè came from a famous Calabrian clan with century-old roots in the crime syndicate, and his father was also imprisoned, for multiple murders. Ciotti knew that for Molè the pull to return would be strong, especially since he was now the male head of the family. Ciotti even wondered if he might be playing a double game. "He was clever, smart, a bit of a manipulator," Ciotti told me.

After spending time in the north under Libera's watch—and doing well in the program—Molè eventually asked the magistrates in charge of his case if he could visit his mother, in Calabria, to help her "with the orange harvest." Permission was granted. Not long after, Molè quit the Libera program. In March, 2020, the police arrested him after finding an enormous stash of cocaine buried on his family's property. Ciotti told the Italian press, "He chose us, and we believed him. But he couldn't break away from his world." One Italian publication characterized Ciotti as *amaro*—bitter—but that wasn't my impression. He seemed almost excited by how audacious a criminal Molè had become. "More than half a ton of cocaine!" he exclaimed to me.

Molè was now in a prison in Bari, and Ciotti told me that he planned to visit him when he could. "He got along well with me," he recalled. When I asked if he would press the young man to return to Libera, he said that he planned simply to listen. "I go from the point of view that he's just another human," he said. "It's what you should do." He then said, almost sympathetically, that Molè could not resist "taking over the father's role."

Ciotti realizes that the Mafia and *mafiosità* may be unbreakable forces in Italy. Libera's annual budget for its escape operations is a hundred thousand euros—a comically small amount compared with the Mob's billions. Yet Libera, Ciotti told me, is itself becoming an entrenched part of Italian society. This past March, the government and Libera signed a memorandum of understanding that formalizes their partnership, though the Bishops' Conference of Italy will continue to cover the group's bills. Still, Libera was no longer just a charity; it was an official force. The last time I spoke with Ciotti, he was about to spend two days with the Pope discussing the problem of organized crime. Rando, the Italian senator, is currently preparing the name-change bill for parliamentary consideration, and Ciotti thinks that it could get passed in the next few years. "I'm convinced we can do it," he told me. Individual disappointments like Molè wouldn't matter, because the path of escape would finally be unimpeded. Women such as F., C., and L. would no longer need years of assistance. Then, he added, "so many others can be free." ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

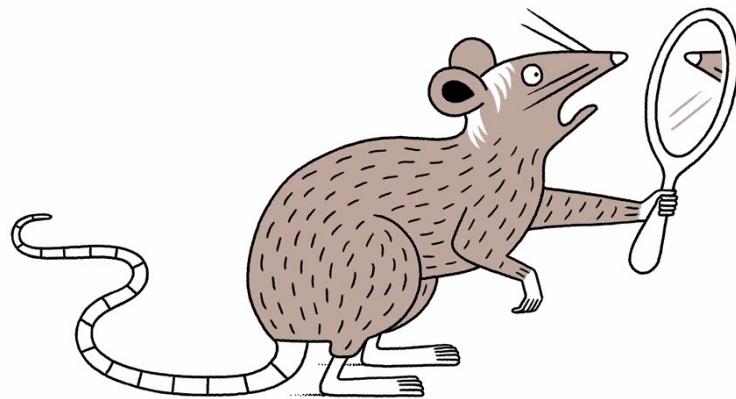
- If You Give a Mouse a Stress Test

Shouts & Murmurs

If You Give a Mouse a Stress Test

By Paul Rudnick

September 23, 2024



From a study on whether stress causes gray hair:

But a mouse study published in 2020 took the research a step forward. In it, researchers stressed mice in various ways, including by injecting them with a chili-pepper-like chemical that induced a “fight-or-flight” response. . . . The hair then grew in gray.

—*The Times*.

Other ways to cause stress in mice:

- Tell them they look tired.
- Indicate that there’s a cat behind them holding a report card.
- Ask if they’re worried about the election.

- Wonder aloud if their kids would be happier behind the walls of a less competitive school.
- Throw red paint on them for wearing fur.
- Tell them that, at their age, they have a better chance of escaping from a laboratory maze than getting married.
- Assure them that the winter weight gain looks good—“You know, like a guinea pig.”
- Ask if they identify as a rodent or as vermin.
- Hint that the cheese they’re nibbling is actually a urinal cake.
- Tell them you saw their spouse with another mouse and a hundred and thirty-eight baby mice.
- Gush that you loved the video where they dragged a slice of pizza through the subway.
- Jump on a chair and scream “Eek!” and then claim, “I’m sorry, I thought you were someone else.”
- Remark that, although Mickey Mouse is certainly having a great career, rummaging through the used Kleenex in a wastepaper basket is just as impressive.
- Assure them that the mousetrap under the kitchen sink is really an award-winning sculpture of a mousetrap: “It’s a comment on mousetraps.” Then, once they’re caught in it and screaming, say, “Now it’s a performance piece.”
- Ask, “Are those your real whiskers?,” and then insist, “No, they look great.”
- Read aloud “The Night Before Christmas,” and, when you get to the phrase “Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse,” take a pause and murmur, “Covid.”

- Fix them up with a gerbil, and mutter, under your breath, “Like you’ve got options?”
- Tell them the plastic tray with the glue is a lap pool.
- Remark, “You look good gray. I admire you.” Then tell their best friend, “I guess somebody wants to die alone in the attic.”
- Visit their burrow and comment, “So you’re still doing dryer lint and Triscuit crumbs? Bravo.” ♦

Fiction

- [Ambrose](#)

Fiction

Ambrose

By Allegra Goodman

September 22, 2024



Lily wants to live in the old days. Her mom, Debra, says, No, you don't, because in the old days all women did was cook and sew and die in childbirth, but Lily still wishes she could travel back in time. Her older sister, Sophie, says, Stop, you just hate school, and that is true. Lily hates sixth grade. However, Lily hates other things, too, like parties and kissing games and boys keeping score. Guess what? Sophie says. There were parties in the old days, too.

Sophie is more pragmatic than Lily. Debra says so on the phone late at night. Lily is more anxious, Debra says. Then Lily thinks, Am I? She sits up in bed and strains to hear her mom's voice downstairs.

"Yeah," her mom says. "Yeah, I know. Well, she's upset."

She's wrong, though. Lily is not upset. She just wants to live in a castle or a secret cottage in the woods. She is writing a novel about a girl named

Ambrose who becomes a swan at night. The novel is in a journal her teacher gave her. It's a black-and-white composition book for her feelings or whatever she wants to say.

East of the sun and west of the moon lived Princess Ambrose with her mother the Queen, her father the King, and her eleven sisters. She was a regular princess except for one thing. Every night at dusk she turned into a swan.

"How?" Sophie says, but Lily's teacher comments in green pen, "Lily, what a wonderful story! Tell me more about the swan."

"Why is her name Ambrose?" Lily's dad, Richard, asks when she's at his house that weekend.

"It's short for Amber Rose," Lily explains.

He says, "Of course. Why didn't I think of that?"

Ambrose keeps her wings under her bed and at night she slips them over her shoulders to fly across the sky and gather tiny stars. She pours the stars into the drawer of her nightstand where they sparkle secretly. She loves to look at them—but in the morning she must sit at her loom with her eleven sisters and weave nonstop. Her mother is always telling her, hurry up, work faster.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Allegra Goodman read "Ambrose."](#)

"Oh, wonderful," Debra says. "Is that supposed to be me?"

"What are the sisters weaving?" Lily's teacher asks in green.

Lily doesn't answer questions. Home with her mom, she cuts pictures of flowers and swans and diamonds from magazines. First, she glues roses and sunflowers and red poppies to the cardboard cover of her composition book. Then she adds the diamonds. Finally, she pastes a swan with outstretched wings. The swan is much smaller than the roses and poppies, but that's just perspective. When Lily is done gluing her pictures, Debra says, "It's

beautiful! But you need to protect the edges," so they drive to Michael's and buy Mod Podge to brush over the collage.

"Just keep it on the newspaper," Debra tells her.

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

Lily shoots her mom a look, because everyone remembers how Lily opened nail polish on the couch and splattered the cushions, but she has not ruined anything in years.

She is named for her great-grandma Lillian, who made all her own clothes, including her coats. Not only that, but she upholstered her own furniture and sewed all the curtains for her house in Brooklyn. And they were *lined*. Lillian went to the Lower East Side and bought Schumacher fabric covered with roses. Her house was filled with roses, on the curtains and on the sofa. When she and Great-Grandpa Morris moved to Brookline, Lillian cut roses from her new garden. The Brookline house was always blossoming. In the dining room, Lillian polished her silver until it gleamed. In the kitchen, she baked rugelach, Linzer tortes, and mandelbrot. For dinner parties, she served her own napoleons, and then she was so exhausted she had to lie down. Lily imagines Lillian lying on a bed of roses.

At night, when she is supposed to be doing her homework, Lily lies on the couch and writes.

She loved to feel the wind in her feathers, but she was always looking for something where were the other swans?

Her teacher comments, "I hope she finds them! (Watch out for run-on sentences.)"

In her cement-and-glass school, Lily opens her book, now covered with roses and red poppies.

All day long, Ambrose waited to change into a swan and fly again. After waiting for her eleven sisters to brush their teeth, she locked herself in the bathroom and fastened her wings.

During lunch, Lily hides in her empty classroom and writes.

The reason she flew all night was to look for the other swan girls who she knew were in the sky if only she could find them. She flew and flew until finally she saw a large bird coming toward her.

“Lily?” Mrs. Berman, the assistant principal, stands in the doorway. “What are you doing?”

“Working,” Lily says.

“But at lunch you need to be in the lunchroom, honey.”

When she’s supposed to be at assembly, Lily sits in the hall and writes.

Ambrose flapped her wings and quickly met the other bird in midair. Are you a swan? she asked. No, I am not said the other bird. Sorry about that I am a pelican but don’t lose heart. Go! Fly to the—

“What’s wrong?” Mrs. Berman almost trips over her. “Lily? Why are you sitting out here?”

“So I can concentrate,” Lily says.

“I hear what you are saying,” Mrs. Berman says. “It’s hard to concentrate sometimes.”

“Yes,” Lily says.

“Come on into the auditorium.”

“No, thank you,” Lily says.

“That wasn’t a question,” Mrs. Berman tells her.

“Just a second.” Lily is trying to finish her sentence.

“I’ll tell you what. Why don’t you take your notebook with you?” Mrs. Berman says.

Then Lily scrambles to her feet, because that is also not a question.

“Thank you,” Mrs. Berman says. “I want you to know we all support you.” But later that week she calls a team meeting. The team is Mrs. Berman, and Dr. C, from the Learning Center, and Lily, and both of Lily’s parents. Lily can’t stop staring at her mom and dad sitting on the same side of the table.

First of all, Mrs. Berman explains, this meeting is about safety. It is about respecting Lily’s needs but also making sure everybody knows where she is. There might be a way for Lily to alert a teacher that she needs a break from an activity like lunch, and if there is staff available Lily might be able to step outside for a few minutes and come back when she is ready.

Lily’s parents are nodding while Lily wonders what “second of all” is going to be. There should be a second, but Mrs. Berman never gets to it. She just keeps talking. If you were an animal, Lily asks Mrs. Berman silently, what kind would you be?

Debra and Richard turn toward Mrs. Berman at the same time, but Richard starts drumming his fingers on the table and ruins the symmetry.

“Dad,” Lily whispers. “Stop that!” He looks confused, and she says, “Stop fidgeting.”

Afterward, in the car, on the way to ballet, Lily’s mom says, “Were you even paying attention?”

“Yes.” Lily pulls on her tights and leotard in the back seat, because she had no time to change at school.

“What did Mrs. Berman say?”

“I can alert a teacher.”

“Why?” Sophie asks, from the front seat. “What did you do?”

“Nothing!” Lily is pinning her bun as fast as she can. Sophie will be fine, because Level 7 starts later, but Lily needs split-second timing.

As soon as her mom pulls up at the studio, Lily jumps out. Inside the studio building, she races up carpeted stairs with her dance bag and backpack. She can't be late. She's already been late twice, and her teacher, Gwen, says, If you are late again, you can't come in. But it's not Lily's fault she had to go to a team meeting.

In the waiting room, she pulls off her boots and stuffs her feet into ballet slippers. Through the glass studio wall, she can see everybody standing at the barre. Softly, she opens the inner door.

"Lily!" Gwen snaps. "No. Just no."

Lily retreats and sinks into the waiting-room couch. If she could have explained—but no excuses is her teacher's motto. Gwen's hair is short, and she has a short temper. She chops off everything, even her own name, which should be Guinevere.

If Lily were in Level 7, she would be early. She would be changing with Sophie in the dressing room. Lily watches the girls of Level 7 walk like ducks in their point shoes to the big studio. As they pass through the waiting room, Lily tucks her legs under her, so she'll be inconspicuous—but Sophie's teacher sees her. Sophie's teacher, Nastia, owns the studio, and she sees everything, even a speck of lint, because she trained at the Vaganova Academy, in St. Petersburg, where you had to *work* even when you were tiny children. Nastia wears black tracksuits. Only black. Her voice is harsh, even as she says, "What's wrong, sweetie?"

"I was late," Lily confesses. For a second, she hopes Nastia will take her to class and tell Gwen to let her in—but no.

Nastia declares, "Late students waste *everybody's* time."

And so Lily spends ninety minutes on the couch with two mothers sewing spangles onto tutus. One tutu is lilac and silver for the Lilac Fairy. The other is crimson and jet black for Don Q.

"This was Hannah's," the lilac mother says, "but I had to get it altered for Olivia."

“You can’t win,” the crimson mother says. “I had to get this altered, and it’s new.”

“They keep growing,” the lilac mother says, as Chopin seeps from the big studio.

When Level 6 is done, Maddy and Scarlett rush out to tell Lily they feel so bad and Gwen is so mean, but then they zip up their coats and run downstairs, because their moms are waiting. All the girls run down, but Lily has to wait for Sophie’s class to finish before her mom will come.

She pulls out her book and violet gel pen.

In the sky, Ambrose spent all her time gathering new diamond stars but while she did that she was looking for the other swans. If she could find them the spell would be broken and she could fly all day.

She is still writing when Sophie’s class is done, and she keeps writing in the car. At night, she sits up writing because she cannot sleep.

The next day, she writes in the lunchroom, but it’s so loud that she takes refuge under a table.

Her classmate Rachel bends down to look at her. “Are you O.K.?”

“Oh, my God, Lily’s sitting on the floor,” says a girl named Kayla, who posts pictures of herself with boys.

“Honey, you can’t sit under there,” Mrs. Berman says. “Come on out now. Do you need a break?”

Lily takes a break in the nurse’s office, with its jars of cotton balls and Popsicle sticks. Her temperature is fine, and so is her blood pressure. She tells the nurse she is not sick, and the nurse says, “I know. We just check everybody.” Then a seventh-grade boy comes in with a staple in his hand, and it’s almost an emergency. While the nurse is taking care of him, Lily grabs her bag and escapes to the girls’ bathroom. She waits and waits for a stall. Once inside, she pulls off her clothes, wriggles into tights and a leotard, and then pulls on her jeans and shirt. Camouflaged, she stands at the

sink and pins up her hair as though she were the Lilac Fairy preparing for a ball. By the time she is done, she has missed social studies.

On the phone that night, Debra says, “But I do worry about her.”

Why is her mom always talking about her? Lily slips out of bed and creeps to the stairs. Sitting on the landing, high above the entrance hall, she sees Debra pacing below.

“Mom?”

“Lily Anne Eisen!” Debra says, as though Lily is the one doing something wrong. “Get back in bed.”

Phone in hand, Debra runs upstairs and tucks Lily in and tells her she loves her, and Dad loves her, and Sophie loves her.

“And Max,” Lily says, because she can’t forget the dog.

“Right,” Debra says. And they will always be a family and that will never change.

Once her mom is gone, Lily sits up in bed with her novel and her clip-on book light.

The spell originated from a witch who turned swans into girls. The witch sends girls down from the Swan Kingdom to live on earth.

The witch wears black from head to toe and sees everything with X-ray eyes. She calls you sweetie but she is not.

In the morning, Lily has trouble waking up. When she is supposed to be eating breakfast, she says, “I’m sick. Can I stay home?”

Debra says, “What are your symptoms?”

“I’m tired.”

“Tired isn’t a symptom,” Sophie says.

Lily says, “Yes, it is.”

Since being tired is Lily’s only symptom, Debra makes her go to school and then to tutoring with Megan and then to therapy with Danielle. By that time, Lily can barely keep her eyes open. She sits on a blue couch near a window with a large plant on the sill. The plant is a philodendron with drooping leaves.

Danielle says, How are you feeling, and Lily says sleepy. Danielle says, You look sleepy. Then she asks, How is the novel going? Lily says good. Danielle says O.K.!

There are board games in Danielle’s office, but Lily would rather rest. She closes her eyes for a few minutes—actually, for half an hour.

“Lily?”

She opens her eyes.

Danielle says, “I hear you are having trouble sleeping at night.”

Lily says, “I think that plant needs more sun.”

Danielle says, “You’re probably right.”

“You could get a plant light.”

“It’s not really my plant,” Danielle says. “It’s a shared office. I’m only here Tuesdays and Thursdays.”

Lily feels bad—not for Danielle but for the philodendron who never asked to be here. “It’s sad,” she says.

Danielle looks at her encouragingly. Lily looks at the plant.

Unfortunately, the less Lily talks, the more everybody wants to know what she is thinking. On the weekend, her dad says, “How is Ambrose?” But she does not feel like showing her book to him—or anyone.

In bed, at her dad's house, Lily writes Chapter 4, which is about how Ambrose runs into trouble. Her mischievous ninth sister, Ruby, steals her wings, and it's a disaster because only Ambrose can fly. If anyone else tries, she will end up plummeting to her death. So now Ambrose has to steal back her wings and save her littlest sister, whose name is Pearl. Meanwhile, it looks like the witch is about to reappear.

"Hey, Lily." Her dad walks into her room without knocking. "It's almost midnight."

"You should be asleep," she tells him.

"You're funny." Richard sits on her bed.

"Dad," she says, "I'm trying to work."

"Maybe you should work during the daytime, kiddo."

She closes her book. "I don't have time."

"Really?"

"Dad, I'm busy every minute."

"You've been taking some expensive naps."

She looks at him, puzzled. Then she understands, and she's a little scared.
"How much does Danielle cost?"

"That's not important."

"But you said that she's expensive."

He's getting irritated. "She's not expensive if you're awake."

"I don't have to go."

"You said you like Danielle."

"I do! But I don't want to spend all your money."

“I’m not talking about money.” He shifts his weight on the bed.

“Then why did you say ‘expensive naps’?”



“O.K., that’s not the point. That’s not the message I want to convey.”

“What do you want to convey?”

“Your mom and I—” he begins.

“Why do you always say ‘your mom and I?’” Lily asks, because who else would he be talking about? Some other person’s mom?

“Listen to me. We’re worried about you.”

“What are you worried about?”

“School,” he tells her. “Sleep. How you are feeling.”

“Can I be homeschooled?”

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Who’s going to homeschool you?”

“Mom?”

“Don’t you think Mom does enough?”

“If we homeschool, she won’t have to drive me anymore.”

“No. The point is, you need to go to actual school and see people.”

“But I don’t like people.”

“Lily.” He looks like he might laugh, but he does not.

“What?”

“Nothing.”

“I don’t like school.”

“Nobody likes sixth grade.”

“Sophie did.”

“This is not about Sophie.”

Lily hugs her novel to her chest. “She’s more pragmatic.”

“Where do you come up with this stuff?” her dad says.

Then Lily feels guilty, because her mom came up with that, and now it’s plagiarism. “Forget I said it,” she says earnestly.

Her dad leans over and hugs her hard. “Just tell me what’s on your mind.”

She swallows. “Dad, I just don’t like—”

“You don’t like . . . ?” He seems to dread her answer.

“This time period.”

“What?”

“I mean, I don’t want to die in childbirth, but—”

“Lily, what are you talking about?”

Her voice is pleading. “I don’t like this century.”

Richard shakes his head, bewildered. He adjusts his glasses. “Well, what century would you prefer?”

Then she’s stuck, because all the centuries were terrible for girls, just like her mother told her, and she knows that they were also bad for Jews. As a Jewish girl, she would probably be dead. “It’s just so sad,” she says.

“What’s making you sad,” Richard asks. “Is it me?”

“No, not you,” she reassures him.

“You know you can tell me anything,” Richard says. “You know I’d do anything for you.”

Then come back, she thinks. Live with us all the time. In the nights and in the mornings. But since she can’t have that, she asks, “Could I just try learning at home?”

“You can’t run away from school.”

“I’ll do better at home! I learn better one on one.”

“Yeah, that’s why you have Megan.”

“I know but—”

“Are you learning better with her?” He’s got her now, because she is still failing math, even though she works with Megan twice a week. “Prove it to me,” Richard tells her. “Prove that you learn better one on one.”

Lily sits with Megan, and they fill in the missing numbers in equations. There is something about if there's a ten it's easy, and if there's a five you can pretend it's a ten and divide everything in half.

"Don't let decimals scare you," Megan says. She has golden hair and sapphire eyes. She could be a princess if she wanted, and she loves math. Megan used to be a ski instructor, but then she broke up with her boyfriend. She drove all the way from Aspen, Colorado, to Cherry Hill, New Jersey, to be a teacher, except she makes more money tutoring. Now she has a new boyfriend, and they are getting married in June. Lily has seen pictures of Megan's dress, which is strapless. Megan says, "Just multiply, and then deal with the decimals at the end. Don't be intimidated."

"O.K.," Lily says.

"Don't guess," Megan says. "Use the method. Are you with me?"

Lily is staring and staring at the equation $6 \times \underline{\quad} = 4.2$. "Seven?" she says.

"Good," Megan says. "You know six times seven is forty-two. But what we have here is four point two. Where do you put the decimal point?"

"Is it point seven?" Lily asks.

"*Exactly!*" Megan says. "Ding, ding, ding!"

Megan was a cheerleader in high school. She is a little bit dramatic but a good teacher nonetheless. Lily loves that word, "nonetheless." When you are with Megan you feel like you know what you are doing. Nonetheless, you take the test alone.

All alone, Lily sits with her math test in Mrs. Berman's office. It's because she got a twelve per cent the first time. She sits with her chin in her hand, and she has a method, and she's practiced, but there are a lot of problems. Fractions and ratios and cross multiplication. There are also word problems, which Lily was not expecting.

"If one bag of sugar weighs 14.5 kg, how much would 6 bags weigh?"

Isn't that a lot of sugar? Why would you need that much sugar for anything? Maybe if you were a bakery? Multiply, she thinks. Worry about the decimal later. But multiplying is tricky because you end up with more place values than you had before. She hears Megan's voice. "Don't be intimidated!" She hears her dad's voice. "Prove it!" But she isn't sure where to put the decimal point. She isn't sure she multiplied right, either.

"How was the test?" her mom asks as soon as Lily gets into the car after school.

"I don't know." She regrets sitting in front, where her mom can see her easily.

"Better than last time?"

"I'm not sure." Lily pins up her hair as they drive to the high school to pick up Sophie.

"Megan says you are doing great work," Debra says.

"But it's different when she's not there."

Lily's mom scans the front of the building. "Where is your sister?"

Sophie is five minutes late. Then seven minutes late.

Lily's arms are tired as she pins and then unpins her hair to try again. "If I'm late, I can't go to class."

"Stop it."

Lily pulls out her book and rereads the ending of Chapter 4.

You are not going to get your chance said the evil witch. I have scattered all the other swan girls and you will never find them. Yes I will said Ambrose, even if I have to travel to the ends of the earth. The pelican will help me I will find her on the mountain. Good luck said the evil witch you'll need it.

“Hi.” The car door slams.

“Could you not slam the door?” Debra says as she starts driving.

“You’re making me late!” Lily accuses her sister.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are, obviously! If your class was first, you’d be on time.”

“Oh, my God, stop,” Sophie says.

Lily turns around to glare. “You only care about yourself and your friends.”

“At least I have some.”

“I’m going to pull over,” Debra says.

“No!” Lily wails, because she doesn’t have time for that.

“What is your problem?” Sophie demands.

Lily is clutching her novel as tears pour down her face. “Please, Mom, keep driving.”

“Apologize to your sister,” Debra tells Sophie.

“Because she’s crying?”

“Because you made her cry.”

“She makes herself cry!”

“Now.”

“I’m sorry!” Sophie says when they pull up at the studio. She snatches her bag and leaves, not quite slamming the door but closing it hard.

Lily should follow, but she doesn’t. “It’s too late.”

“No, it’s not. You have two minutes,” her mom says.

“I can’t go in there looking like this.” Lily’s hair is half up, half down, her face is hot and red in the passenger-side mirror.

“Sweetie.” Her mom hugs her as best she can over the gearshift and the emergency brake.

“I wish I was little again,” Lily sobs.

“Me, too,” her mom says.

“You wish I was little, or you wish you were little?”

“I don’t know. Both!” her mom says. “All of the above.”

“Why are you crying?” Lily asks.

“Because you are.”

They look at each other, and Lily says, “I think I failed my test.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Debra says.

“Yes, it does!”

“We’ll figure it out.”

“But how?”

“We’ll talk to Megan,” Debra says. “We’ll talk to your teacher. We’ll make a plan.”

“It’s too late.”

“Go!” her mom says, like the pelican. “You can do it. Run.”

Go, Lily tells herself. Go, nonetheless. She plunges Ambrose into her dance bag, wipes her face with her jacket sleeve. Dashes up the stairs. She runs as fast as she can, but she doesn’t make it.

She hears the music. Through the glass wall, she sees everybody at the barre. She almost runs downstairs again—but then she realizes that it's not Gwen teaching class. They have a substitute! It's Cassandra, who isn't strict at all.

Lily pins up her hair and takes a breath. She slips into the studio to stand between Maddy and Scarlett.

“You got lucky,” Maddy whispers, because Cassandra doesn’t mind whispering, either.

“I know!” Lily says.

“Stand tall,” Cassandra says. “Shoulders down. Elbows up.”

Lily stands tall; she points her toes as she extends her leg. Her arms are tired, and in the mirror her face is flushed, but she doesn’t think anyone can tell that she has been crying. By the time barre is done, her cheeks don’t even look that red anymore.

Cassandra says, “Come out to center.” The class stands spaced apart. “That’s it,” Cassandra says. “Lily, lift your head.”

Through the glass wall of the studio, Lily glimpses Nastia, all in black. Nastia, who sees everything—but she didn’t catch Lily sneaking in.

Only Lily’s classmates know that she was late, and they have already forgotten. That’s how it is when you are dancing. You can only think about what you are doing now. You breathe. You bend, and you come up again. You stand with your chest open and your shoulders back. Line up in threes to practice leaps. Wait in your corner, and lift your wings to fly. ♦

This is drawn from the author’s upcoming story collection.

The Critics

- [Rhythm Collector](#)
- [Is It Time to Torch the Constitution?](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Color, Class, and Carnality Collide in Alan Hollinghurst's New Novel](#)
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A Critic at Large

Rhythm Collector

Eblis Álvarez's Meridian Brothers unites the many strands of Latin music.

By Daniel Alarcón

September 23, 2024



When my parents moved from Lima, Peru, to the United States, in 1980, they brought with them the basics: three children, several suitcases of clothes, some books, and a small but cherished collection of vinyl. We were not a particularly musical family—no one played an instrument, no one sang—but the records came with us because it was simply inconceivable that they would not.

Like most family record collections from those years, ours was diminished by the arrival of CDs, by garage sales and the occasional cull. Through it all, though, my parents' Peruvian LPs remained—it's not surprising, I suppose, that a record of the criollo singer Eva Ayllón didn't sell at an Alabama garage sale in 1992—and those were the ones I eventually inherited, or appropriated, depending on your point of view. In fact, my parents' records make up an important part of the collection I have today, augmented over the

years by jazz and salsa and cumbia; and, even if they aren't my musical favorites, it feels like a real privilege to own these records, artifacts of an era and place that mean so much to the people I love that certain songs can still bring them to tears.

When I was in my early thirties, some friends and I started what could accurately, if somewhat ostentatiously, be called a d.j. collective. We named ourselves La Pelanga, and hosted an eponymous party that roamed from one house to another, and now and then to a local club, but whose truest home was the East Oakland loft where I lived at the time, which we'd pack with a hundred people or more, only a few of whom I knew. We liked everything, every kind of music, but mostly we liked how disparate styles sounded when played in succession. Rock *en español* and samba and reggaetón and salsa—somehow the people who came, our friends and their friends and the friends of their friends, danced to it all, no matter how esoteric or apparently illogical the transitions between tracks might have seemed. We could go from Lebrón Brothers to Café Tacvba to Yuri to Calle 13 to Os Mutantes, and no one would miss a beat—a joyfully scrambled Latin American songbook, spanning the continents and the decades, played at ear-splitting volumes, for a crowd that never stopped dancing.

These are boom times for Latin music. U.S. revenues reached \$1.4 billion in 2023, up by sixteen per cent from the previous year. The Puerto Rican superstar Bad Bunny was a host and a musical guest on "Saturday Night Live" last season, fulfilling both roles while speaking frequently in Spanish. From 2020 to 2022 (before he was displaced by the generational phenomenon that is [Taylor Swift](#)), Bad Bunny was the most streamed artist on Spotify. Last year, he was joined in the top five by the Mexican singer Peso Pluma, who was also the most viewed artist on YouTube. The Colombian singer Karol G sold 2.3 million tickets on her global tour, grossing more than three hundred million dollars. Latin music is a big business and, culturally speaking, a very big deal.

And yet—what even is it? A category as elastic as this one exists only for the sake of convenience, an occasionally useful shorthand to describe an entire universe of musical styles. Like so much that is branded "Latin" in the U.S. these days—Latin food, say, or the still mysterious Latino vote—Latin music is not really one thing at all but a category of such kaleidoscopic,

disorienting complexity that it dissolves upon close inspection. In 1975, when the [Grammys](#) acknowledged the presence of this music, it did so with a single award. The stand-alone Latin Grammys first aired a quarter century later, and last year more than fifty prizes were awarded, including five for various genres of regional Mexican music, six for tropical music, and several others one might not have anticipated (Best Portuguese Language Christian Album, for example). Nearly nineteen million people watched the 2023 awards, at least six million more than watched the regular Grammys. It isn't that the number of genres within Latin music ballooned; it's just that the wider culture began paying attention to its profound diversity.

Eblis Álvarez, the forty-seven-year-old composer and musician behind the Colombian band Meridian Brothers, has been immersed in this diversity his entire career. When I first heard the band, I had the same feeling I'd had back in Oakland, during those beautiful, manic parties: the intuitive sense that somehow, within the seemingly infinite ecosystem of Latin music, there was a through line I hadn't previously understood.

Long-haired, with a scruffy beard, Álvarez comes off as a laid-back, eccentric high priest of Latin music in its very broadest definition. His most evident quality is an overwhelming love of sound, of every kind that human beings use to evoke joy. Álvarez grew up in Bogotá, but his father had come to the capital from Barranquilla, a commercial hub and a center of musical innovation on the Caribbean coast. Crucially, like my parents, he continued to listen to music from home, in his case tropical music that was looked down upon in Bogotá, dismissed as folkloric and unsophisticated, but which nonetheless served as the soundtrack of Álvarez's childhood.

One of Álvarez's first instruments was a homemade drum kit, fashioned from buckets, pillows, and other household objects. At seven, he started on the flute. Within a couple of years, he was already a bandleader—organizing the neighborhood kids to reproduce songs they heard on the radio. After his mother decided to learn to play the guitar, Álvarez did, too, very quickly outpacing her. By eleven, he was playing hard rock on a nylon-string classical guitar, recording rhythm tracks onto a cassette which could accompany his solos. Guitar became his obsession, and in high school, while his classmates chose between soccer and socializing, he spent his breaks playing songs he'd learned from the radio. His range immediately

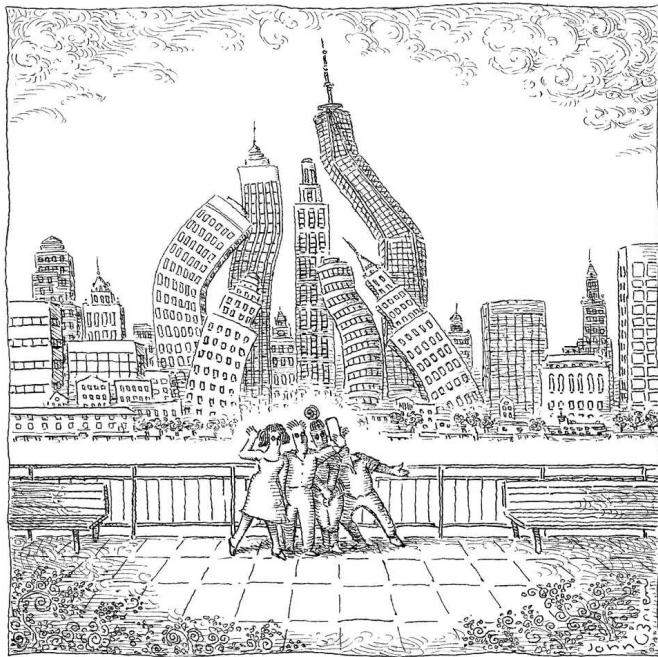
impressed: Álvarez might go straight from a cover of the Cuban singer-songwriter Silvio Rodríguez into a rendition of a [Metallica](#) song. According to a high-school friend, Pedro Ojeda, the leader of the cumbia band Romperayo and a longtime musical collaborator, Álvarez became something of a star at school after he wrote and performed a catchy bossa nova called “Canción Para Ti” (“Song for You”), whose lyrics the whole student body learned by heart. “I knew he was a genius right away,” Ojeda said.

Álvarez went on to study composition and classical guitar at the Universidad Javeriana, in Bogotá, while cultivating a parallel practice in rock, the preferred music of the city’s middle-class youth. By the time he was in his twenties, he was a classical- and jazz-guitar virtuoso, an award-winning composer, and a skilled instrumentalist on flute, cello, and clarinet. And he had fallen in love—or back in love—with the traditional music of Colombia, the same rhythms his father had brought from the coast. Álvarez studied percussion with Marco Vinicio Oyaga, and learned to play instruments such as the *gaita* and the *flauta de millo*, two traditional Colombian flutes.

In the mid-nineties, Álvarez reconnected with Javier Morales, a former schoolmate, after both had done their military service, which was obligatory in [Colombia](#). They’d scour their parents’ music collections, hanging out and listening to old vinyl and cassettes for inspiration. Together, they formed El Dúo Latin Lover, as a joke. “We liked to poke fun at merengue and vallenato,” Morales told me, because so much of what was played on the radio was, to their ears, weepy and sentimental. “We had no pretensions, but this was how we began to relate to other kinds of music that weren’t rock.” The song “Cumbia en la Cancha de Básquet” (“Cumbia on the Basketball Court”), from 1995, is representative of their style: a sarcastic, lo-fi, and danceable cumbia that does indeed sound as if it were recorded in a middle-school gym, until the rhythm breaks into a bridge that briefly evokes the melodies of Argentinean rock bands like Sui Generis or Soda Stereo.

In the late nineties and early two-thousands, as guerrilla and paramilitary violence worsened, life in many parts of Colombia became untenable; millions were forced to leave their homes. Tens of thousands of rural Colombians sought refuge in Bogotá, bringing their music and their culture with them. It was an unspeakable human tragedy and a national political failure, which had the unexpected effect of helping to transform the sound of

the capital. It was now easier to see the authentic masters of traditional Colombian music like Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto, or singers like the legendary Totó La Momposina and Petrona Martínez, playing in Bogotá. Ojeda said that these were fruitful years of collaboration and connection, and that he often found himself at after-hours jam sessions with musicians he'd only ever heard on records.



"I didn't experience this phenomenon in its fullness, and that's something painful I've always carried with me," Álvarez told me when I asked about this era. In 2002, he left for Copenhagen to study composition at the Royal Danish Academy of Music, choosing instead a kind of musical, cultural, and linguistic isolation that better suited his character. "The classic archetype is for a musician to play in a group," he said, "but I'm not particularly social." In Copenhagen, he subjected himself to arduous practice sessions, sometimes as long as twelve hours, along with ill-advised exercises designed to strengthen his wrists and arms. The combination resulted in a severe injury to his left hand. For months, Álvarez couldn't play at all, or even write notations, so he passed his time reading and, because he'd moved to Denmark with just a handful of books, rereading. Even as he recovered, the long, melodic lines of classical guitar or the fluid, inventive phrasings of bebop remained difficult to play, so he began trying out new techniques to create a sound that was staccato, jumpy, repetitive, more rhythmic and less

melodic—perfect for tropical styles. He added loops and other digital recording techniques, building layers of sound, sampling the kalimba, playing the clarinet and drums, and, in this way, he put together the first Meridian Brothers album, alone. The resulting record, “El Advenimiento del Castillo Mujer” (“The Advent of the Woman Castle”), was released in 2005. Musically, it was spare, experimental, rooted in Colombian rhythms but also often sombre. Lyrically, it was the opposite, lush and full of startling imagery—for instance, “You come from astronomy, science, and truth, while your husband, the prince, eats from your solitude”—heavily influenced by the Colombian writer Álvaro Mutis, the author of one of the novels that Álvarez had brought with him to Copenhagen and read dozens of times during his recovery.

Álvarez returned to Bogotá in 2007 to discover that the nascent tropical-music scene he’d left behind was in full bloom: there were festivals of traditional Colombian music, and local bands like Curupira were recording with icons like Paíto (Sixto Silgado) and Gualajo (José Antonio Torres). Soon afterward, Meridian Brothers became a live band—with four additional musicians tasked with re-creating the songs that Álvarez had written, performed, and produced in Copenhagen. It wasn’t easy. Álvarez and his original collaborators (María Valencia, César Quevedo, Damián Ponce, and Alejandro Forero), most of whom he knew from his student days at the Universidad Javeriana, spent months rehearsing before playing their first show, at a Bogotá venue called Matik Matik. (Ponce was later replaced by Mauricio Ramírez, and Alejandro Araujo joined as a sound engineer; even now, it can take six months for the group to learn to play a new set of Meridian Brothers songs live.) Álvarez recalls wondering, from the stage, if the show was going well. There were a couple of dozen people in the audience, most of them sitting on the floor.

Having seen Meridian Brothers live in New York and in Bogotá, I find this hard to imagine. Anyone who sat on the floor at the shows I attended would have been trampled by the hordes of people dancing. But at the time, Álvarez said, audiences in Bogotá didn’t quite know what to do with music like his, or with traditional music more broadly. “If you went dancing, you went to dance salsa,” he told me. “We were in an entirely different category.”

Over the years, this dynamic changed, and a Meridian Brothers show, whether in New York or Bogotá or elsewhere, became a roiling sea of people, even more so after the release of the outstanding 2022 album “Meridian Brothers & El Grupo Renacimiento,” a note-perfect conjuring of salsa’s heyday, released on the New York Latin record label Ansonia. For this album, Álvarez spent five years studying every aspect of the retro salsa sound, practicing at some of Bogotá’s pulsating neighborhood salsa clubs. The result feels like an extension of and an homage to the classic Ansonia catalogue, with a twist. Put the record on, drop the needle, and it’s all there: the urgent slap of the congas, the bass lines that spread over the tracks like dark ink seeping across a canvas, the piano riffs tinged with melancholy. The conceit of the album is that the songs were taken from an obscure and forgotten nineteen-seventies salsa band, but when you listen to the lyrics—which are mostly not about love or broken hearts or parties that stretch until dawn but about all-seeing drones, atom bombs, sniffing glue, and humans transforming into robots—they slide out of their supposed era and into the future. It’s salsa as performed by a singer who has been abducted by aliens, or dropped into the pages of a dystopic sci-fi novel, and is trying to make sense of his experience through music.

Since that album’s critical success, Meridian Brothers regularly plays in clubs and concert halls throughout the U.S., and has reached other significant milestones of Latin alternative hipster stardom: performances for NPR’s “Tiny Desk Concerts” and Seattle’s KEXP, a glowing profile in the *New York Times*, a summer gig in Brooklyn’s Prospect Park. For every album, it seems, Álvarez tries on a new persona, obsesses over another genre of Latin music. He only recently fully recovered from the injury he sustained more than twenty years ago, and is finally able to play the guitar without pain. The latest Meridian Brothers album, “Mi Latinoamérica Sufre” (“My Latin America Suffers”), released in June, once more centers the guitar, showcasing songs with duelling and complementary melodic lines, and references the various West African styles that arrived via the ports of Cartagena and Barranquilla and melted into Colombian tradition, giving rise to genres like champeta.

“Mi Latinoamérica Sufre” is a beautiful, bizarre collection of tracks sung by an alter ego Álvarez created—a self-pitying would-be folklorist named Junior Maximiliano III, who is searching for an identity, and whose drawn-

out, languidly performed lyrics stand in sharp contrast to the insistent rhythms of the music itself. Maximiliano's search is a caricatured version of Álvarez's own. "I have no defined identity," he told me, "because I was born in the capital, which robbed me of it." Álvarez is a chameleon, trying to decipher the meaning of each strand of the marvel that is Colombian and Latin music. The first track, "Sé Que Estoy Cambiando" ("I Know I'm Changing"), captures the essence of the record; it features a jagged, cascading guitar riff with a rhythm that feels almost too complicated to be played. But it is played, and then the percussion falls into place so precisely and unexpectedly that it shocks every time.

I met Álvarez in Bogotá this past July. At his home, we spun through some of his records—the Peruvian cumbia band Los Ases de Huarochirí, the seventies Mexican cumbia star Rigo Tovar, the Colombian vallenato legend Diomedes Díaz—and he showed me around Isaac Newton Studios, his tongue-in-cheek name for his attic, where he wrote, performed, and meticulously constructed the past several Meridian Brothers albums. He tried in vain to explain the complex alchemy he uses to assemble his songs, how he loops his guitar or uses synthesizers, along with laptops, mixers (digital and analog), effects pedals, and dozens of actual instruments. As he did, I felt the room getting smaller; with his upright bass leaning against a wall, yards of cables snaking in and out of amps and mixers and other electronic tools and keyboards, it seemed there was room for only one musician. That's enough, though, because Meridian Brothers lives principally in Álvarez's imagination, where he catalogues and curates his influences, then remixes them to his specific, capacious, and idiosyncratic taste.

One of Álvarez's other projects, the band Chúpame el Dedo (Suck My Finger), which he formed with Ojeda, has a song called "Mi Ancestro Berraco" (roughly translated, "My Badass Ancestor"). It begins as a kind of reggaetón, or as a slowly accelerating old-school Panamanian plena. Periodically, the music drops out so that he and Ojeda can speak. "We want to take a moment to show you a bit of our ancestral culture," Álvarez says, in a cartoonishly high-pitched voice, during one of these breaks. "Here, all the families gather on the neighborhood soccer field, and we invoke the spirits of the food we eat, like hot dogs and pizza," Ojeda responds, in a much deeper voice. They assume the role of tour guides—to Bogotá, in this

case, but it could be so many other places. Lima. Oakland. Maybe even Birmingham, Alabama. Then the beat comes back, speeding up steadily, ominously, until eventually it sounds less like plena and more like Jimi Hendrix's rhythm section, the musicians playing as fast as they can, watching anxiously as their bandleader prepares to set his guitar on fire.

And you know what?

We could have played this song at those La Pelanga parties, too. After all, didn't we figure out then, on the dance floor, that Latin music was salsa and cumbia and reggaetón, of course, but also, incredibly, that it was everything? ♦

Is It Time to Torch the Constitution?

Some scholars say that it's to blame for our political dysfunction—and that we need to start over.

By Louis Menand

September 23, 2024



All republican governments live in fear of the man on the white horse. A republican government, like ours, is a system of rules designed to prevent any one person or faction from hijacking the democratic decision-making process. The person on the white horse doesn't respect the democratic decision-making process, is not a product of that process, and has no stake in its survival. The person on the white horse rides into town and says, Who needs rules? Let me take care of everything. And the public, glad to simplify life, or possibly dazzled by the promise of a glorious future, lets the rider take charge. Rules that no one enforces are just so much paper.

But republican governments also live in fear of the man on the street. Political decisions can't be entrusted entirely to the will of a bare majority of voters, in part because voters tend to be relatively uninformed about politics,

but, more important, because nothing prevents majorities, once in power, from oppressing minorities. A government under the complete control of a popularly elected majority is just as dangerous as a government under the complete control of a guy on a horse.

If you try to compose a list of rules that insulate the government from both evils, the autocrat and the mob, you get a pretty complex document. You get a document that hedges every grant of political power with conditions that make the power hard to exercise, including the power to alter the document. You get, in fact, the Constitution of the United States.

The Constitution is 4,543 words long. That's roughly four magazine pages, about the length of this article (though not nearly as enjoyable). You can read the whole thing in fifteen minutes. Yet this brief text—plus its still operative amendments, another 3,112 words—underwrites our entire system of government. That system currently employs, on national, state, and municipal levels, more than nineteen million people. All those employees represent “the state,” and are subject to the Constitution’s rules about what government can and cannot do.

The individual states have their own constitutions, and municipalities have their own charters, but nothing in them may contradict what is in the federal Constitution, because, in our version of republicanism, the authority of the federal Constitution is absolute. We know that this is so because the Constitution says it's so, in the “supremacy clause” of Article VI: “This Constitution, and the Laws of the United States which shall be made in Pursuance thereof . . . shall be the supreme Law of the Land.”

Everyone agrees that, if the Constitution says you can't do it, it can't be done. The question is: Who tells us what the Constitution says you can and cannot do? And the answer is: the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court is the ultimate authority on the ultimate authority. That's a lot of authority for nine unelected individuals to have.

This is why, when people are unhappy with the way the political system is working, they tend to blame one of two things: the Constitution or the Supreme Court. They argue either that the Constitution is flawed and needs

to be changed, or that the Court is misinterpreting the Constitution and needs to be changed. When people are really unhappy, they argue both.

Erwin Chemerinsky is really unhappy. Chemerinsky is the dean of the law school at the University of California at Berkeley. He is highly respected in academic circles as a scholar of constitutional law, but his name got recognition in much wider circles last spring, after he hosted a [dinner](#) for law students at his house and one of them produced a microphone and an amplifier and started giving a pro-Palestine speech. Chemerinsky's wife, Catherine Fisk, also a Berkeley law professor, grabbed the student and tried to wrestle the microphone away from her. In a video someone recorded (there's always a video, somehow), Chemerinsky can be heard shouting, "This is my house! The First Amendment doesn't apply!"

This was particularly awkward because, in 2017, Chemerinsky had published ["Free Speech on Campus,"](#) a book that urged expansive protections for student speech. Berkeley is a public university, and its agents may not—the Constitution says so!—censor speech because of its content. Was the student with the microphone being silenced by state actors (Chemerinsky and Fisk) because of what she was saying? Or is a dinner party for students (paid for by the university) at a professor's home a private forum outside the reach of the First Amendment? These became matters of much debate. Either way, it is never a good idea to grab a student.

Chemerinsky is a political progressive and a lively thinker. In 2014, he published a book titled ["The Case Against the Supreme Court."](#) This was a blame-the-Court book. In it, he argued that "the Court has frequently failed, throughout American history, at its most important tasks, at its most important moments."

He pointed out that from the eighteen-nineties to 1937 the Supreme Court struck down some two hundred state and federal laws regulating business, many intended to protect workers' health and safety, others to pull the country out of the Depression. In 1927, the Court upheld the enforced sterilization of persons diagnosed with mental retardation. In 1944, it affirmed the constitutionality of the Roosevelt Administration's policy of rounding up Japanese Americans and sending them to internment camps.

As everyone knows, between Plessy v. Ferguson, decided in 1896, and Brown v. Board of Education, decided in 1954, and in spite of the Fourteenth (equal protection) and Fifteenth (right to vote) Amendments, the Court barely lifted a finger to end segregation and disenfranchisement on the basis of race—not that Congress or the executive branch did much, either. The Court didn’t rule that the Constitution forbids discrimination on the basis of sex until 1971.

Though Chemerinsky approved of the Warren Court’s decisions on segregation (Brown), districting (one man, one vote), and defendants’ rights (Miranda v. Arizona and Gideon v. Wainwright)—he has represented criminal defendants before the Supreme Court himself—he maintained that the Warren Court nevertheless “did so much less than it needed to and should have done, even in the areas of its greatest accomplishments.” And, as you would expect, he was scathing about the Roberts Court, which seems bent on undoing much of the Warren-era progress on rights and business regulation. In 2022, Chemerinsky published a critique of the dominant judicial philosophy on the Roberts Court called [“Worse Than Nothing: The Dangerous Fallacy of Originalism.”](#) He likes fire-alarm titles.

Chemerinsky had little to say that was critical of the Constitution, and he praised the difficulty of amending it. Something like 11,848 constitutional amendments have been introduced in Congress since 1789. (You can examine them on [Jill Lepore](#)’s Amend Project Web site.) Congress has ratified only thirty-three by the required two-thirds majority, and only twenty-seven were then ratified by three-quarters of the states, becoming law. The first ten amendments, the Bill of Rights, were written by James Madison to help the Constitution secure ratification, so they are essentially part of the Constitution itself, and two of those which followed are the prohibition amendment and its repeal—which nets fifteen amendments in two hundred and thirty-three years.

Isn’t this undemocratic, sticking us with a dead-hand document that we can’t change when the times do? Not at all, Chemerinsky explained. The reason the Constitution was made difficult to amend is the tyranny-of-the-majority problem. In times of crisis, majorities may want to suspend individual liberties, and the Constitution makes it very hard for them to do this (which

doesn't mean that it has never been done). "The Constitution is society's attempt to protect itself from itself," Chemerinsky concluded.

That was then. Chemerinsky's new book is "[No Democracy Lasts Forever: How the Constitution Threatens the United States](#)" (Liveright), and the difficulty of amending the Constitution is Exhibit A. "The framers of the Constitution went too far in preventing amendments," he now argues. As a result, we are stuck with a set of rules which not only makes addressing political problems harder but is itself responsible for many of the political problems we need to address. The Constitution's "very existence as a largely unchanged document has become a sledgehammer wielded by a minority to prop up a system that engenders polarization and festering national discord," he says. Chemerinsky doesn't just want to amend the Constitution, either. He wants us to throw it out and come up with a new one.

You don't publish a book called "No Democracy Lasts Forever" for style points, but, even allowing for that, it's repetitive and hastily written. The haste would matter less if it did not lead to misleading and inaccurate assertions. For example, Chemerinsky tells us that, according to a poll taken in 2023, "only four percent of those surveyed said that the American political system 'works well.' " But that's not what the survey said. In the poll, administered by the Pew Research Center, four per cent of respondents said that the American political system is working "extremely or very well," and twenty-three per cent said it was working "somewhat well." That leaves a lot of Americans who think it's not working well, but not ninety-six per cent.

Elsewhere, to illustrate how the Roberts Court has abandoned the deference previous Courts showed to democratically elected legislatures, he informs us that, from 1937 to 1995, the Court "did not strike down a single federal law for exceeding the scope of congressional power or infringing states' rights."

I'm not sure what this can possibly mean. The Court struck down dozens of federal laws between 1937 and 1995. The grounds differed, of course. Sometimes the Court ruled that the law violated a right, like the First Amendment right to freedom of speech or the Fifth Amendment right to due process, which would plainly exceed "the scope of congressional power."

What Chemerinsky may have in mind are cases in which the Court ruled that Congress had exceeded the powers enumerated in Article I, which lays out the rules for what Congress can and cannot do. But that doesn't make sense, either, because there were many Article I cases between 1937 and 1995 in which the Court struck down laws.

Even if he simply worded the sentence badly and meant that the Court did not strike down a federal law specifically because it infringed on states' rights, the claim is still incorrect. In *Oregon v. Mitchell* (1970), the Court threw out parts of the Voting Rights Act amendments for usurping the right of states to administer elections, and in *National League of Cities v. Usery* (1976) it struck down federal laws regulating labor markets for state employees (though the decision was overruled in 1985). "Did not strike down a single federal law" is a hyperbolic way to make a legitimate point, which is that, over the past thirty years, constitutional jurisprudence has come to tilt toward states' rights.

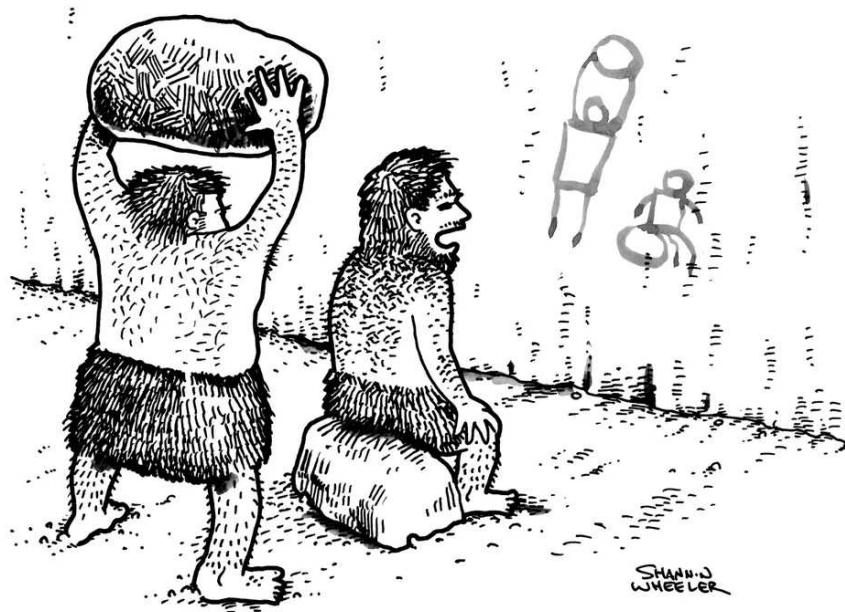
A principal target in the new book, unsurprisingly, is the Electoral College, defined in Article II and the Twelfth Amendment, which makes it possible for a candidate to lose the popular vote and still be elected President—as happened with George W. Bush, in 2000, and Donald Trump, in 2016, and as nearly happened with Trump again in 2020. Only in America is such a thing possible. Chemerinsky warns us that, because of this constitutional design flaw, "in theory, states that are home to only twenty-two percent of the country's population can choose the president."

That does sound pretty undemocratic. What Chemerinsky actually means, though, is that someone could be elected President despite winning only twenty-two per cent of the popular vote, not by carrying states with twenty-two per cent of the population. And how could that happen? If a candidate were to win each of the thirty smallest states by exactly one vote and not receive a single vote anywhere else in the country—something that is likely to occur around the time the last monkey finishes typing "Hamlet." It's a meaningless statistic.

Still, Chemerinsky does make, forcefully, valid points. His complaint about the Electoral College is hardly a new one—the loser of the popular vote was also elected President twice in the nineteenth century—but he's probably

right that, in a highly polarized electorate like ours, we are apt to see this happen fairly regularly. The problem is not so much that the wrong person wins as that the public loses faith in the process. Trump has already had some success at delegitimizing an election in which he lost the popular vote by a little more than seven million, historically a pretty large margin. Imagine if he had won the popular vote and lost the election.

Chemerinsky cites a statistic often produced to illustrate the anti-democratic effect of the formula the Constitution uses to assign Electoral College votes —one for each of a state's congressional seats plus one for each of its two senators. He points out that, as a consequence, California has one electoral vote for every 709,624 residents and Wyoming has one for every 193,793 residents. (You don't see it remarked quite as often that Texas has one electoral vote for every 790,251 residents and Vermont has one for every 215,821 residents. Nobody feels sorry for Texas.)



On the other hand, the District of Columbia had no electoral votes at all until 1961 and still has no senators, despite the fact that more people live there than in Wyoming or Vermont. D.C. does get an honorary three electoral votes, hardly just compensation for the lack of representation in the Senate.

The composition of this chamber is another anti-majoritarian feature of our system. The deliberation at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 over the makeup of the Senate put the Framers’ “man on the street” anxiety on full display. The undemocratic elements of the Constitution can seem shocking by current standards, but the Framers grew up as Colonial subjects of a hereditary monarchy, most European nations in 1787 were hereditary monarchies, and heredity had been the principle of succession, *de jure* and *de facto*, in many societies for much of human history. Governments “deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed” was a fairly novel idea. It is not terribly surprising that the Convention looked for ways, consistent with the proposition that “all men are created equal,” to establish a governing class.

The Constitution therefore gave state legislatures the power to appoint senators (which is why, in Illinois, Stephen A. Douglas defeated Abraham Lincoln in the Senate race in 1858). This was partly a way of creating a legislative body less dependent on the popular will. Making the Senate a popularly elected body did not happen until 1913 and required a constitutional amendment (the Seventeenth).

The two-per-state rule was also believed to be necessary to get the smaller states to sign on to the finished product—though Madison did not see this rule as a benefit to the slave states, which is how it is sometimes interpreted. As he pointed out at the Convention, Northern states would do better on the two-per-state system because they outnumbered Southern states, eight to five.

And the rule looks more like a giveaway now than it did then. As Chemerinsky says, “smaller” is a relative term. At the time the Constitution was written, Virginia, the most populous state, had twelve times the population of Delaware, the least. According to the 2020 census, California’s population is now sixty-eight times as large as Wyoming’s. Yet they have equal representation in the Senate. Since 1998, Republican senators have never represented half the population, but they have been the Senate majority half that time. The stupidest part of the whole thing is that states are complete fictions. Their borders have changed many times, both before and after their admission to the Union. One day you’re a citizen of

Massachusetts, and the next day you're a citizen of Maine. Why should the system of representation honor that?

Chemerinsky's other reform proposals include abolishing the filibuster, under whose "Alice in Wonderland" rules forty-one senators representing fifteen per cent of the American people can block most legislation; ending partisan gerrymandering, a computer-aided practice that the Supreme Court has recently washed its hands of, not for the first time; increasing the size of the House of Representatives; and eliminating life tenure for federal judges and Supreme Court Justices, something no other democracy grants.

Life tenure, which is guaranteed by the Constitution, has emerged as a hot-button issue because, although Republicans have won the popular vote in only one of the last eight Presidential elections, six of the nine sitting Justices have been appointed by Republican Presidents and are unremovable. The Framers were possibly less concerned about this particular dead-hand problem because life expectancies were so much shorter in the eighteenth century. Clarence Thomas was appointed to the Court in 1991, and he could easily serve forty years, as I'm sure he has every intention of doing.

Chemerinsky also thinks that the Internet, and especially social media, must be policed. "Future elections will be decided because of false speech circulated over social media," he predicts, although, as something of a First Amendment absolutist himself, he has trouble coming up with concrete suggestions for prohibiting the circulation of misinformation.

Among the various reforms he proposes, changing the two-senator rule is probably the steepest hill to climb. The Constitution expressly forbids changing it, which means that, to make representation in the Senate proportional, the Constitution would have to be amended twice—first to repeal the section of Article V providing that "no state, without its consent, shall be deprived of its equal suffrage in the Senate," and then to deprive the states of equal suffrage in the Senate.

It might be possible to pass those amendments by popular vote, but that is not how ratification works. It requires the approval of three-quarters of the states, not three-quarters of the voters, and states cannot be expected to

voluntarily reduce their representation in Congress. So we would need another amendment to suspend the three-quarters rule. . . . The Framers really have us in a box.

Apart from abolishing life tenure for federal judges, most of the other items on Chemerinsky's must-do list—eliminating the filibuster, and so on—are not prohibited by the Constitution and therefore do not require amendments. They can all be achieved, in principle, by passing a law. But the status quo blocks such reforms in other ways. The anti-majoritarian elements of the Constitution, plus the filibuster and partisan gerrymandering, allow a minority to control the political process, and that minority can keep reforms from ever getting voted on. Hence Chemerinsky's call for a new constitutional convention. Let's start the whole thing over from the top.

Is it really that bad? Is our political system in such a uniquely terrible place? Paul Pierson and Eric Schickler think that it is, and they spell out their reasons in "[Partisan Nation: The Dangerous New Logic of American Politics in a Nationalized Era](#)" (Chicago). To be fair, not a lot of style points here, either. The book is a kind of verbal thicket you have to fight your way through.

Pierson and Schickler, too, blame the Constitution, not so much because it was misconceived from the start as because it is now past its sell-by date. For most of American history, although there were some rough patches, the Constitution worked O.K., they think, but it "was simply not designed to meet the challenges we now face." They compare the system of government the Framers built to "aging and rickety software."

What Pierson and Schickler are concerned with is not political strife, of which there has been plenty and which democracies are designed to accommodate. It's polarization, the emergence of two ideologically rigid political parties intolerant of compromise. Compromise is crucial to the system the Constitution designed. That system provides many veto points—"checks and balances"—that are intended to force competing interests to make compromises. "Ambition must be made to counteract ambition," as Madison put it in Federalist No. 51.

The Constitution itself is the product of compromise. Thomas Jefferson (who was not present at the Convention; he was in Paris, not Philadelphia, normally a good trade-off, but in this case not) was an ideologue. But Madison was a pragmatist. He was trying to design a system that worked, and working systems require buy-in, and buy-in must be bought by giving something up.

Still, Madison could see that the Constitution left the door open for the rise of what he called a “faction,” which he defined as “a number of citizens, whether amounting to a minority or majority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community.” In other words, either a movement led by a man on a white horse or a tyranny-of-the-majority regime.

What prevents groups like those from taking power, Madison explained in Federalist No. 10, is not law. It’s geography. Building a majority requires compromise among different groups, all of which want their rights and interests protected in exchange for their coöperation, and the United States is so geographically large and dispersed, with so many local and regional issues at play, that a single-issue faction isn’t going to be able to accrue enough national power to take over the government. “The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within their particular States,” Madison wrote, “but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.”

Pierson and Schickler’s argument is that Madison’s solution no longer works. This is not just because the Internet has made the notion of “geographic dispersion” obsolete. It’s also because the nature of politics has changed.

“All politics is local” is a slogan commonly attributed to Tip O’Neill, the Massachusetts congressman and House Speaker, although people used it before his time. Pierson and Schickler think that this was once true, and that mediating institutions, like state political parties and even political bosses, could demand compromises in exchange for support of the national ticket. They add to this category labor unions, local media, lobbies, and regionally based interest groups—small-constituency entities that all used to operate as

countervailing forces to the national parties. But today, Pierson and Schickler say (and they are not the first to say it), all politics is national, and all national politics is partisan. Even the media occupy two distinct political ecosystems.

The phrase they use for this phenomenon is the “stacking of cleavages.” There were always two sides, “cleavages,” on any political issue, but the cleavages were distributed across the ideological spectrum. There were Republicans who were liberal on, for example, the environment, and Democrats who were hawkish on foreign policy. Those intraparty fissures could be damaging. Vietnam split the Democrats in 1968. Culture-war extremism hurt the Republicans in 1992. But Pierson and Schickler think all that was good. Cleavages are what prevent ideological monoliths from forming.

Unless they stack. Unless being a Republican means automatically adopting a certain position on every issue, being a Democrat means adopting the opposite position on every issue, and being either a Republican or a Democrat means regarding the other party as an existential threat to democracy. The parties today are dominated by the extremists. Bipartisanship is treason.

Pierson and Schickler are in favor of constitutional reform, but they worry that the existing system gives small states disproportionate power to foil amendment efforts and that proposed amendments would probably just add more cleavages to each party’s stack. Their own reform proposals are mainly about re-democratizing the electoral process: automatic voter registration, a ban on partisan gerrymandering, the admission of Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia as states, and the adoption of nonpartisan primaries and ranked-choice voting, practices that are already in place in a few states.

But what about a new constitutional convention? If we convened one, would we get a better set of rules? In fact, writing a new Constitution has been suggested many times before, and the Constitution even makes provision for a constitutional convention. One notable writer supporting the idea is Sanford Levinson, of the University of Texas School of Law, who made the case in “Our Undemocratic Constitution,” published in 2006. He’s a liberal, and holding a constitutional convention may seem like a liberal idea, a

response to the politicization of the federal judiciary under Trump and Mitch McConnell. But conservatives have made their own plans for such an undertaking: an outfit called the Convention of States calls for a constitutional convention to propose amendments “that will impose fiscal restraints on the federal government, limit its power and jurisdiction, and impose term limits on its officials and members of Congress.” Its supporters include characters like Trump’s Fox alter ego Sean Hannity and Mark Meadows, Trump’s former chief of staff, who is under indictment in Georgia and Arizona. It’s also backed by a number of current and former Republican lawmakers, including Jeb Bush. Under the terms of Article V of the Constitution, three-quarters of the states may call a convention, and the Convention of States claims that nineteen states have already endorsed its petition.

One of the Founders, at least, worried about the dead-hand problem. “The earth belongs in usufruct to the living,” Jefferson wrote to Madison in 1789, the year the Constitution was ratified. “The dead have neither powers nor rights over it.” Jefferson thought that there ought to be a new Constitution every nineteen years. Now that would have been interesting!

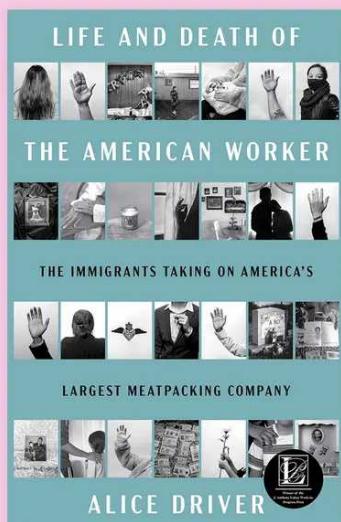
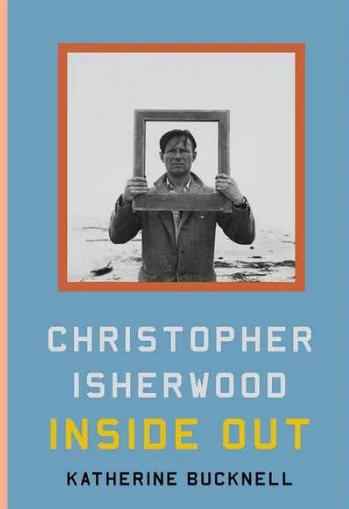
The question is whether changing the software would actually make for a healthier politics. Lack of trust in government seems to be one of the main factors behind American political polarization, but trust levels here are not much different from trust levels in comparable countries. Voters in Japan, France, Korea, Australia, Israel, and the United Kingdom all report low levels of trust in government. Clearly, something besides the U.S. Constitution is responsible. If there was anything the Framers all desired, it was a government that voters could trust. Is it their fault if they failed, or is it ours? ♦

Books

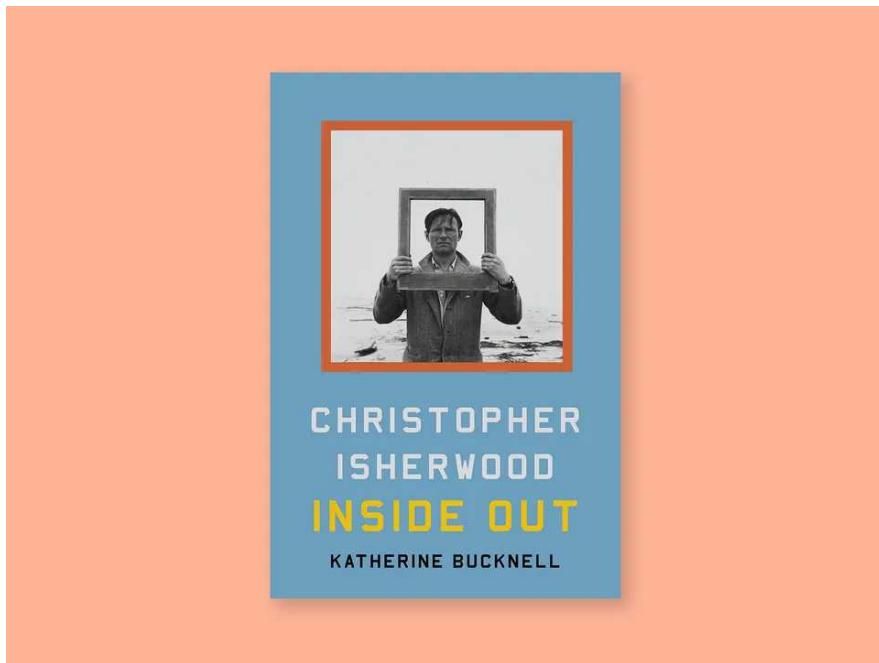
Briefly Noted

“Life and Death of the American Worker,” “Christopher Isherwood Inside Out,” “Mina’s Matchbox,” and “The Sons of El Rey.”

September 23, 2024



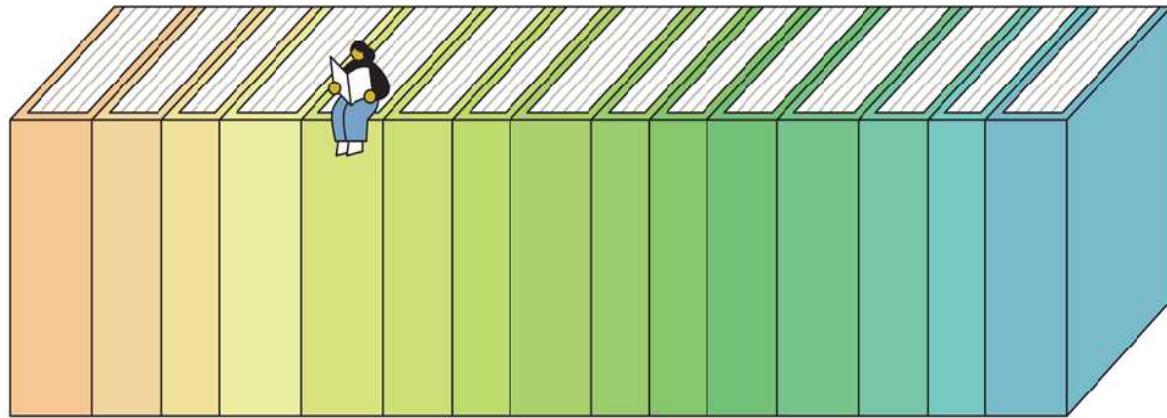
Life and Death of the American Worker, by Alice Driver (*One Signal*). This intimately reported chronicle focusses on the migrant workers who staff Tyson Foods chicken plants in Arkansas. Their jobs, Driver reports, come with significant physical risks: they suffer from carpal-tunnel syndrome, chemical poisoning, and U.T.I.s (thanks to limited bathroom breaks). Because many workers process more than a hundred birds per minute, accidents are common: an average of twenty-seven workers a day are hospitalized, and some undergo amputations. According to Driver, Tyson intimidates workers who speak up, and the conditions at their plants devolved further during the pandemic. (Tyson representatives denied many of the claims in the book.)



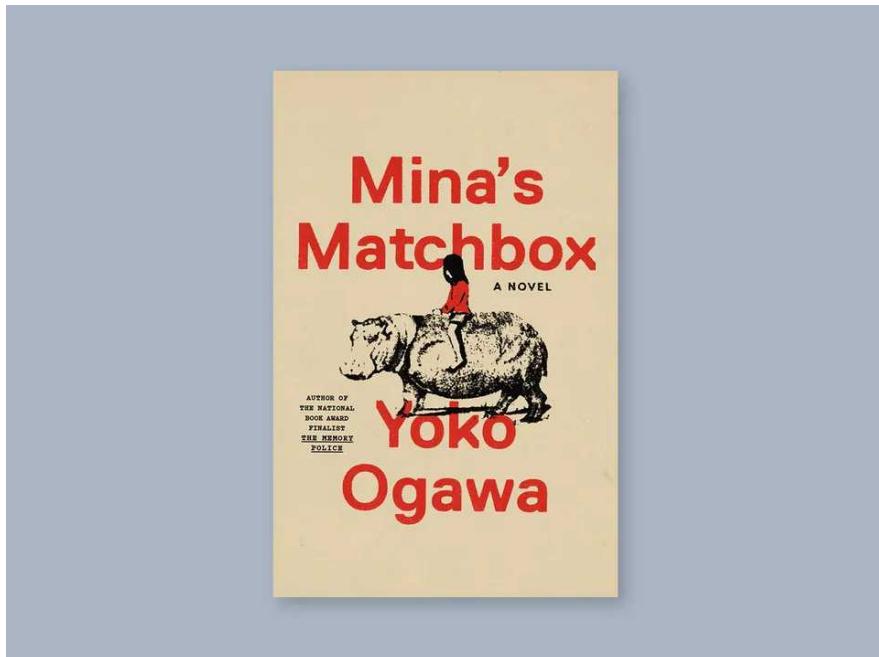
Christopher Isherwood Inside Out, by Katherine Bucknell (*Farrar, Straus & Giroux*). A masterly biography of the author of “Goodbye to Berlin” and “A Single Man,” this book captures the intricacies of a fascinating, often contradictory character. Isherwood was an upper-class Englishman (he gained American citizenship in his forties) who genuinely loved people from all walks of life; a libertine turned Vedanta monk; a gay literary icon who didn’t come out publicly until his sixties. But, above all, as Bucknell shows, he was a tireless observer and recorder of people, places, and historical moments. When Isherwood died, in 1986, he left behind a vast personal archive—material that Bucknell uses to gently tease out themes that connect

the author's life to his art. Isherwood, she writes, "imagined a world in which he might be able to live differently"; through his work, he helped usher that world into being.

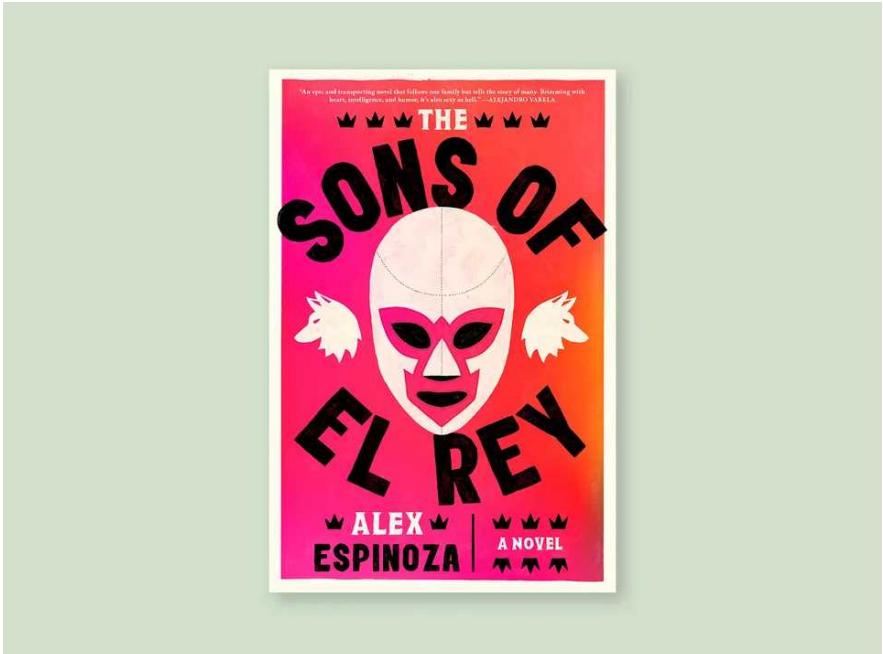
What We're Reading



Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



[**Mina's Matchbox**](#), by Yoko Ogawa, translated from the Japanese by Stephen B. Snyder (Pantheon). This beguiling coming-of-age novel, set in 1972, follows a twelve-year-old girl who goes to live for a year with her eccentric half-German uncle. The head of a beverage company, he resides with his family in coastal Japan, in a large house with grounds that once contained a zoo. The youngster bonds with her cousin, Mina, a beautiful but frail asthmatic girl who collects matchboxes and rides to school on her pet pygmy hippopotamus. The book is suffused with the transplant's growing awareness of the ephemerality of her own innocence: "Even if you were born in a wonderful house like this," she thinks, "you couldn't just stay there, warm and cozy, for the rest of your life."



[The Sons of El Rey](#), by Alex Espinoza (Simon & Schuster). Encompassing three generations and two countries, this novel traces the lives of the men of the Vega family. As the patriarch, a former professional-wrestling star from Mexico, lies in hospice, the ghosts of his wife and his *lucha libre* persona force him to untangle his life's defining relationships and failures. His son struggles to keep the Vegas' gym, in Los Angeles, afloat amid the pandemic; his grandson, who is gay, totters between academic ambition and self-exploitation. The result is an affecting exploration of masculinity, familial and cultural inheritance, and the ways that love can be hidden and revealed.

Books

Color, Class, and Carnality Collide in Alan Hollinghurst's New Novel

In his previous novels about gay life, Hollinghurst has eroticized racial difference; in “Our Evenings,” he politicizes it.

By Giles Harvey

September 23, 2024



When Alan Hollinghurst published his scandalizing début, [“The Swimming-Pool Library,”](#) in 1988, the lives of gay men were hardly virgin territory for the English novel. Some years earlier, as a graduate student at Oxford, Hollinghurst had written a master’s thesis on “the creative uses of homosexuality” in three of his more guarded forebears—E. M. Forster, Ronald Firbank, and L. P. Hartley—though there the emphasis, naturally enough, fell on “the stimulating effects of constraint.” “The Swimming-Pool Library,” by contrast, was a work of revolutionary candor that laid bare, in exquisite prose, the cut and thrust of queer existence in early-eighties London. Its attitude toward the euphemistic delicacy of a previous era is nicely encapsulated in a moment from a novel that Hollinghurst came out

with three decades later, “[The Sparsholt Affair](#),” when a character spots on an acquaintance’s wall “a red chalk drawing of a naked man, with a body-builder’s chest and ridged stomach, artily cut off at the knee and the neck, and with a high-minded blur where the cock and balls should be.” A high-minded blur will never do for Hollinghurst, the great depixelator of carnal truths.

In the wryly sex-positive lyric “The Collar-Bone of a Hare,” W. B. Yeats imagines setting sail for a distant land where merrymaking natives will teach him that the highest good is “To change my loves while dancing / And pay but a kiss for a kiss.” From the shores of this liberated realm, he would then look back, laughing with a sort of relieved disbelief, “At the old bitter world where they marry in churches.” Yeats’s erotic utopia sounds a lot like the gay subculture revealed by Hollinghurst’s novels, in which the spontaneity and freedom of male lovers, who trade but a kiss for a kiss (and often rather more), stand in withering contrast to the dreary conformity of heterosexual monogamy. Hollinghurst is no utopian, but he does present gay eros as a cross-cutting force, uniting people across differences of age and class and race, even if the people so united are seldom on an entirely equal footing.

For many of his protagonists, including Will Beckwith, the maraudingly promiscuous upper-class narrator of “The Swimming-Pool Library,” these differences, and racial difference in particular, are a potent aphrodisiac. “I was eight years older than Arthur, and our affair had started as a crazy fling with all the beauty for me of his youngness and blackness,” Will says of a new West Indian lover. “I saw him becoming more and more my slave and my toy, in a barely conscious abasement which excited me even as it pulled me down.” The transgressive tingle of such sentences has dulled a little over time; the contemporary reader may find their strident fetishism more than a touch distasteful. Though Hollinghurst puts clear moral daylight between himself and his narrator, a monster of privilege who boasts of belonging to “that tiny proportion of the populace that indeed owns almost everything,” he follows Will in treating Arthur largely as a sexual prop. Like most of the Black and brown characters in Hollinghurst’s novels, he is there to be seen (and touched and lavishly described), not heard. One afternoon, as Will is having his brutal way with him, Arthur lets out “little compacted shouts of pain, but I snarled at him to shut up and with fine submission he bit them back.”

This habit of objectification has been a blemish on what is probably the finest body of work by a living writer of English prose, so it's intriguing to see Hollinghurst break it in his latest novel, in which, for the first time, he gives the floor to a narrator of color. "[Our Evenings](#)" (Random House) is the story of Dave Win, the son of a white British woman who, in the late nineteen-forties, while working as a secretary for the British colonial administration in Rangoon, had a brief affair with a Burmese man. Dave never meets his father or shows much interest in his Burmese heritage, but his foreign looks make him a striking presence in the rural town where he grows up, and where his mother runs a dressmaking business. His childhood—indeed, his whole life—is a thick anthology of what we'd now call microaggressions. Out for a walk one evening with his mother, Dave smiles politely at a passerby: "The woman herself looked astonished by my smile as I stood aside for her—it was as if I'd made a joke at her expense, and when Mum said, 'Good evening,' she gasped, very quietly, took two or three steps herself off the path as she skirted us, with a frosty nod that acknowledged and dismissed the courtesy at the same time."

When Dave wins a scholarship to a local boarding school, called Bampton, he's exposed to the far less subtle racism of the British upper classes. The scholarship is funded by the wealthy Hadlow family, whose son, Giles, another brutish toff, is also at Bampton. On a formative visit to Woolpeck, the Hadlows' country house, Dave is sadistically bullied by his schoolmate, who calls him a "dirty mongrel" and generally treats him like a slave and a toy. Giles's parents, Mark and Cara, a pair of socially progressive philanthropists, are more benign. Mark, in particular, takes a genuine interest in Dave, becoming a kindly patron.

At Bampton, an all-boys school, Dave makes two important discoveries: his gift for acting and his attraction to his classmates. It's the nineteen-sixties, the legalization of gay sex is being hotly debated, and liberation is in the air. But Dave, feeling that he has his hands full with just the one kind of prejudice, chooses to conceal his sexuality with "the clever but involuntary disguise of being already conspicuous for something else." It's not until he gets to Oxford, on another scholarship, that he begins openly pursuing men. His infatuation with a fellow gay student is tenderly evoked, but it comes to nothing. In a humiliating twist, his academic promise, too, goes unconsummated. Riding high on confidence in his intellectual powers

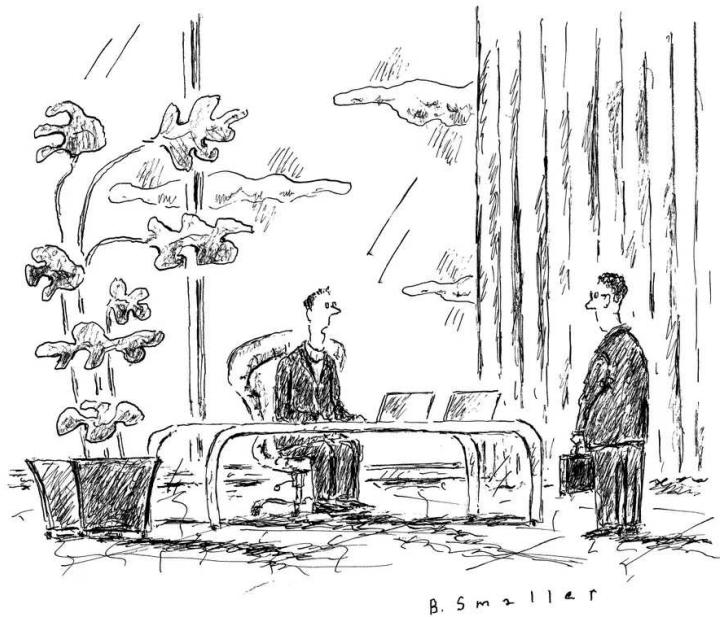
(everyone assumes he'll get a first), Dave neglects to study for his terminal exams, instead devoting his final months at Oxford to a production of Ben Jonson's "Volpone." His stage performance is a triumph; the exams are a fiasco.

This is the end of Part 1, the book's midpoint. Two hundred and sixty pages have been devoted to recounting Dave's life from boarding school through university. In "[The Stranger's Child](#)" (2011), Hollinghurst bounded over great swaths of English history in a series of temporally discrete episodes narrated in the third person; a segment set on the eve of the First World War was followed by one that took place in the twenties, before we skipped again to the late sixties, and so on. "The Sparsholt Affair," his next novel, proceeded in much the same fashion, and, reading "Our Evenings," one might have expected a bracing jump cut from Dave's disastrous exams to, say, a West End opening in the middle of the Thatcher era. Instead, the book just keeps going, trundling through the years.

And so we learn, in some detail, about Dave's career in avant-garde theatre, his deepening emotional ties to his mother, and his relationships with various men. Meanwhile, the Hadlows wander on and off the stage, Mark and Cara performing their good works while Giles rises through the ranks of the Conservative Party. Though there are one or two abrupt discontinuities, the first person softens the transitions: it is the same Dave talking to us, in his stately, keen-eyed prose.

The book contains moments of extraordinary beauty and set pieces as powerful as anything Hollinghurst has written. One of them involves a visit that Dave, in his mid-twenties, pays to the aged Derry Blundell, a legendary gay theatre director—"legendary" in the sense of being essentially unknown to all but a circle of insiders. In a moment of high comedy, Dave zones out during one of his host's nostalgic speeches only to realize, when his focus returns, that he has passively consented to a blow job. A less subtle writer might have played the scene as sexual farce, but Hollinghurst, though very funny, is also poignantly attuned to the gulf in significance the encounter holds for each man. "I was so hard he had a struggle to get it out through the fly," Dave tells us, his thoughts having strayed, during Blundell's monologue, to a new lover awaiting his return home: "'Goodness . . .' he said then, reassessing the task. He was like an old man praying in stoical

discomfort, and also, as he flexed his jaws and brought saliva to his mouth, a workman who could deal with most emergencies.” Too often sex writing is judged merely by how sexy it is. In “Our Evenings,” Hollinghurst shows how much else it can convey: distraction, estrangement, a fond attentiveness.



Hollinghurst writes movingly about Dave’s experience of British racism, evoking the humanity and inner life of someone frequently presumed to have neither. The snubs and taunts and unconsidered inquiries (“Been in England long?”) seem to occur on every other page, and yet the tedium is mimetic; for Dave, there is no reprieve. The qualified and provisional sense of belonging that haunted him during childhood remains fully intact near the end of his life. This reality comes bleakly into focus when he returns to his home town after the death of his mother:

All my past in the town was present on these walks, as if glowing and fainting on gauze beyond gauze. Sometimes it was no more than a mild awareness of a lost impression, the barely registered pulse of recollection, a face at a corner, a school morning in the rain. “Are you lost?” said a helpful old man, seeing a tourist staring at nothing.

But not quite belonging to a place, as Hollinghurst has shown throughout his work, often allows you to see that place more clearly. One of the ironies of prejudice, so nimbly captured in “Our Evenings,” is that, while the racist thinks he knows the truth about people based on their appearance, it’s the person subjected to his abuse who gets to know the truth about the racist.

For all these strengths, however, the book is oddly lacking in cumulative force; in place of direction and momentum, there is simply an exquisite drift. Exactly what we are reading “for,” beyond the crystalline impressions of a sensitive, intelligent man, is never really clear. One recalls Henry James’s line about “the terrible *fluidity* of self-revelation,” which he warned was a pitfall for extended first-person narratives. Late in “Our Evenings,” Dave tells some friends that he’s been writing his memoirs, explaining, “I remember places, and experiences, very clearly, but they’re stills, you know, rather than clips. Or *GIFs* perhaps, sometimes—a head turns, a hand comes down, but you never see what comes next, it just does it again.” Evidently he’s describing the book we’ve been reading and its somewhat halting narrative effect, but Dave’s comments sound more like an ex-post-facto rationale than the revelation of a grand design.

Perhaps a strategic loosening of novelistic form was what Hollinghurst was going for, in an effort to capture the enigma of the recollected past. The consequence, all the same, is to point up another of the book’s shortcomings. “Our Evenings” belongs to Dave Win in a way that none of Hollinghurst’s previous novels belong to their main characters. Often overlooked in his acting life, playing Jaques and Fabian, never Hamlet or Lear, Dave is center stage here for almost five hundred pages. His various relationships arrest our attention but then tend to fall by the narrative wayside, so that what we’re left with is a man talking to himself, a soliloquy with cameos. It’s a role that calls for someone richly dimensional. Is Dave up to the task?

If the lordly Will Beckwith was something of a fantasy figure, as Hollinghurst has conceded, later protagonists have tended to be closer to their creator in background. Edward Manners, from [“The Folding Star”](#) (1994), and Nick Guest, from [“The Line of Beauty”](#) (2004), are middle-class strivers from the provinces. Both men believe that their intelligence and refinement are a license for antinomian excess. Given the prerogatives of intimacy, Hollinghurst could fearlessly bring out what was monstrous or

absurd about them. In “Our Evenings,” political decorum may have tied his hands. Dave Win has plenty of sex and even commits the odd infidelity, but compared with his predecessors he is notably well behaved. The qualities that make him so admirable—his sanity and compassion and resilience—also render him, and the book he dominates, a little bland. Edward and Nick are allowed to be by turns predatory and romantic, brutal and endearing; Dave is denied such vivifying freedoms. There are issues of social verisimilitude at play in this imbalance (a biracial man might not get away with behaving the way Edward or Nick do), but they have artistic side effects.

The problem is compounded by Giles, who, despite his appealing name, is a lifeless caricature of upper-class philistinism. In a brief prelude, we learn that he was one of the architects of the Brexit referendum and may be destined for Downing Street. Almost every appearance he makes in the subsequent pages contains some winking acknowledgment of the future that awaits him, whether he’s disparaging his father’s Citroën (“an ugly foreign object”) as a teen-ager or laying into the Common Market during a visit to Bampton as a Tory grandee. His ambition and synthetic public persona are the butt of countless withering drolleries. “He was looking very pleased with himself,” a friend tells Dave after seeing Giles on “Question Time,” a BBC current-affairs program. “Not an absolutely new experience for him,” Dave replies.

Clearly, the two men are supposed to represent competing visions of Britishness: the one tolerant and outward-looking, drawing on the country’s rich heritage as a way to move the culture forward, the other entitled and small-minded, invested in the past only as a tool of propaganda. Dave acts onstage, in service of artistic truth; Giles, on the stage of public life, peddles demagogic fictions. With the latter vision ascendant, Dave finds himself increasingly unwelcome in the only home he has. Hollinghurst wrings tremendous pathos from this development, but it doesn’t save the book from feeling morally schematic. In “Our Evenings,” the righteous and the wicked are emphatically distinct. It’s a frustrating outcome, especially from a writer who once set his work in that uncertain territory beyond good and evil. ♦

Pop Music

Sophie Is Gone. Her Music Lives On

The artist's posthumous album is less an expression of her journey than a guide for the rest of us—a last gift.

By Jia Tolentino

September 23, 2024



In 2013, a mysterious producer named Sophie released “Bipp,” a minimalist club track that sounded like it had been formed on another planet and squeezed through hyperdrive before arriving on ours. “Bipp” was black space latticed with radically strange objects: a rubbery squelch of a bass beat, a melodic line like a laser coated in latex, percussive punctuation marks that seemed to morph from plasma into steel. Sophie continued releasing singles, each one accompanied by a 3-D rendering of a ladderless slide. The objects looked the way the songs sounded, like uncanny candy—slick, chemical, jaw-breakingly hard.

At the time, not much was known about Sophie. She was associated with the collective PC Music, which specialized in the aggressively, gleefully synthetic. With the producer A. G. Cook, Sophie put out a catchy PC Music

single called “Hey QT,” a promotional jingle for a fake energy drink, QT, which, in 2015, was distributed to concert attendees in a stunt at SXSW. This micro-era was a peak of absurd corporate branding in music—for the past few years, SXSW artists had performed inside a giant vending machine sponsored by Doritos. On the rare occasions when Sophie gave interviews, her answers played into the perception that the subversive intent of the PC Music project revolved around commerciality. She’d picked the name Sophie, she said, because it “tastes good and it’s like moisturizer.” Her influences were “shopping, mainly.” She wondered if music could work like a theme-park roller coaster, leaving you nauseated and laughing, then leading you to purchase a key ring. “Lemonade,” another brain-scrambling single, collected on a 2015 Sophie compilation called “Product,” appeared in a McDonald’s commercial for lemonade.

Critics, perceiving cynicism, responded cynically. And, though Sophie shielded her voice and face from journalists, she was, as far as anyone knew, a male producer from Scotland. This was interpreted, in the argot of the time, as problematic and appropriative; the musician Grimes, talking about Sophie to the *Guardian*, in 2015, called her use of a female stage name “really fucked up.” Still, Sophie’s work sliced through the discursive sideshow and the ad-agency theatrics—if you heard it on a dance floor in the liminal hours, it felt like a battleship had plowed through the walls. Nothing else sounded like Sophie, because she made her sounds from scratch. She didn’t sample; she built each hiss and smack and boom by manipulating raw waveforms. She wanted to get to the “molecular level of a particular sound,” to understand why that sound “behaves a certain way when processed or cooked.” The music was Dippin’ Dots; it was Vantablack. It was funny, too, and amazingly direct, often communicating a sweetness that crossed the valley of the saccharine to emerge on the mountaintop of the pure. On “Bipp,” the hook has a ballad’s simple yearning: “I could make you feel better, if you let me / I could make you feel better, if you want to.”

The conditional formulation suffused Sophie’s music, both foundationally—if she altered X sound in Y new way, then Z would be the result—and in the themes of many of her songs. There was a sense that transformation was the point and the teleology; Sophie’s sonic plasticity pointed to interrelational reinvention, toward a truth that had to be formed in the primordial tide pool of a dark, pulsing room. Sophie released her début album, “Oil of Every

Pearl's Un-Insides," whose lead single, "It's Okay to Cry," featured her own vocals—the first time she sang on her own track. The video, released in 2017, showed her in closeup, glamorous and bare-breasted, with glossy lipstick and a wedge of sunset-red hair, in front of a changing daydream of a sky. It functioned as a coming-out statement: Sophie was a woman.

In the publicity for "O.E.P.U.I.," more about Sophie's life emerged. She'd grown up in Glasgow; her dad had taken her to raves when she was little; she'd worked as a wedding d.j. She was trans, and selective in the way she spoke about her identity. "I try to talk about it through my music," she said. The album, for its part, told the story of an artist stretching toward deliverance. Amorphous experimental tracks conjured Romantic visions of the sublime—raging seas, scintillating light—as deftly as the songs on "Product" had conjured bubbles and rubber and mutating plastic. A pop song, "Immaterial," featuring Cecile Believe, referenced Madonna and burst with wild, wheeling joy; its lyrics reached past transformation into the realm of transubstantiation. "You could be me and I could be you / Always the same and never the same / Day by day, life after life," Believe sang. She asked, "Without my legs or my hair, without my genes or my blood / With no name and with no type of story / Where do I live? / Tell me, where do I exist?" The answer: in the song. A few years before, Sophie had been asked about Richard Dawkins's idea that genes are just digital information—that, thus, life itself was digital. "Yeah QT," she'd replied. She had translated her life and her questions into these new sounds, evincing some personal ethic of the transhuman and the trans human, in which states of flux could be captured in digital permanence, in which alteration was how you approached the divine.

During the pandemic, unreleased Sophie tracks spilled onto the Internet, the result of hacks and leaks and rips from live sets. She'd reached, more or less, the mainstream—she'd produced songs for Madonna and Vince Staples, and, working on Charli XCX's "Vroom Vroom" EP, she'd instantiated the aural style that would result in "brat" entering the narrative of the 2024 Presidential election. She was working on a new album. Then, at the beginning of 2021, Sophie fell to her death from a balcony in Athens. Her representatives said she'd gone out to look at the moon. She was mourned publicly by Nile Rodgers and Rihanna. "If you make contemporary music u

have been inspired by sophie whether u know it or not,” the producer Benny Blanco wrote. She was just thirty-four.

Sophie’s self-titled posthumous album comes out this week, on Transgressive and Future Classic. According to her labels, the album was nearly finished at the time of her death; it was completed by the people closest to her, including her brother, the producer Benny Long. In 2021, Long said that the two of them had discussed working on a simple cycle: releasing an experimental record, then a pop record, and then back and forth for many years. This is Sophie’s final album—there are no plans to complete and release more of the hundreds of tracks Long has said she had in the vault—and, abiding by her plan, it’s a pop record, a long and capacious and digressive one, with sixteen tracks, almost double the number on “O.E.P.U.I.”

Superfans have speculated about the album’s track list for months, correctly suspecting that many of the songs are already floating around the Internet. A group that tends to be drawn toward Sophie at her most aggressive, they’ll notice the absence of some high-octane old favorites. (Those of us who long to hear a final mix of the bank-robery joyride “Burn Rubber” will have to keep dreaming.) Some will quibble with the album’s relative gentleness. A posthumous album is inevitably pressed into service as a grief repository, particularly in the case of Sophie, an artist who frequently pulled off the inexplicable—who gave off a limitlessness and a singular intensity that seemed capable even of circumventing death.

“Sophie” begins with a queasy, beautiful bit of ambient, then drops into a pristine rap track featuring Jozzy and a plunging, rumbling, weapons-grade bass. The next two songs conjure journeys through outer space, one jarring and one wondrous. From then on, the album opens up into a dance-floor odyssey, a fluid blend of trance, pop, and techno. Sophie’s hallmarks are here: the album is funny, most notably on a track called “Do You Wanna Be Alive,” and her ability to instantly conjure an obscure physical analogue for a sound is on full display. On “Live in My Truth,” there’s a sound that feels exactly like the side-to-side skitter that one’s vision does under a certain tipping point of chemical derangement. “Gallop” feels like you’re being knitted into a spiderweb of hard filaments, a million strands in every direction, each of them vibrating to the beat. But the album is welcoming;

newcomers won't be turned away at the door. "Sophie" isn't an expression of Sophie's journey as much as it is a guide for everyone else's—a last gift.

The album also serves as a reminder of what Sophie had already changed. Her career began at a time when underground-adjacent dance music leaned masculine. Today, the dance floor has been thoroughly feminized and requeered, leaving this album with nothing to demonstrate or explain. On "Why Lies," BC Kingdom sings, "I just wanna party with my friends / To the end of the world, immaterial boys and girls / So please save that drama for your mama and daddy and your granny." The commercial flirtations of Sophie's work a decade ago led, eventually, to hyperpop—a genre that was effectively named and commercialized by Spotify, and which has nonetheless given rise to a diverse crop of independent artists. "Sophie" pulls back from this world of candy-and-gasoline excesses with a self-assurance that feels lavish in itself.

A message coalesces in the album's final run of tracks—four songs keyed toward love, devotion, presence, transcendence. The soaring "Exhilarate," featuring Bibi Bourelly, best known for writing "Bitch Better Have My Money" for Rihanna, sounds like joy and grief cresting simultaneously in the back of your throat. On the last song, a thumper called "Love Me off Earth," the vocal line, sung by Doss, is transposed higher, sideways, higher, echoing, dematerializing. There was a time when everyone said that Sophie sounded like the future; to me, this album sounds like the present continuous. It sounds like Sophie's behind the table, in the club, like she's turning up the voltage toward euphoria, like the crowd is moving still. ♦

The Theatre

Even Mia Farrow and Patti LuPone Can't Power "The Roommate"

A Midwestern empty nester opens her home to a tough-talking New Yorker in Jen Silverman's sputtering star vehicle.

By Helen Shaw

September 19, 2024



The first thing that strikes you about Mia Farrow in Jen Silverman's "The Roommate," now at the Booth, is her voice. Farrow is playing a naïve, rather unfulfilled empty nester named Sharon, who lives in a huge house in Iowa and spends her days dreamily phoning a faraway son. Speech tends to drift out of her, as airy and capricious as dandelion fluff. When Sharon is surprised, Farrow squeezes her voice into an adorable whistling squeak. Every time she says "Oh?" in ditzy confusion—if, say, she's just found her new tenant rolling a joint in the kitchen—it sounds like someone sat on a rubber duck.

The central joke in Silverman's odd-couple bauble, originally from 2015 and directed here by Jack O'Brien, is that Sharon's new roommate is Patti LuPone. Technically, LuPone, a grande dame of the American musical theatre, is playing Robyn, a mysterious New Yorker who is moving into Sharon's spare bedroom. (Bob Crowley's schematic set shows us a modern farmhouse with zero personal touches, lonely in a flat field.) When Robyn swaggered in, carrying various arbitrarily packed boxes of vegetables and black leather coats, she's meant to be a breath of Bronx air. But LuPone, even in a Joan Jett wig, is not the type of diva who surrenders her own redoubtable persona. Why would she? Her audience laughs anytime she rolls her eyes.

The promise of "The Roommate" is that we'll see a new double act—a Martin and Lewis, say, or a Lansbury and Arthur—in which one partner is a flibbertigibbet and the other is a volcano. But although the play's scenario certainly sets them up for banter, the dialogue itself is bizarrely unambitious and often illogical. A typical comic beat: Sharon tells Robyn that she has a son living in New York, and asks if she's heard of Park Slope. "Oh yeah, that's great," LuPone drawls, letting her mouth slide into a parallelogram. Even when LuPone is mugging through a non-joke, her vocal finesse gives her lines endless micro-nuances of contempt. For the first half of Silverman's hundred-minute play, the two actors (friends in real life) use their instruments—Farrow twittering like a jazz piccolo, LuPone as the wry trombone—to flirt in a city-mouse, country-mouse key.

Sharon: Today is my reading group. If you want to come with me.

Robyn: Your "reading group"?

Sharon: You know, a book club. Only Tanya calls it a reading group . . . she says everything just a little bit wrong, it's because she's from Idaho and there wasn't any culture there, so she didn't get exposed to things until much later in life.

So, look—the term "reading group" would hardly baffle anyone. And Sharon's insult to Idaho culture makes no sense; she herself seems to be just finding out that vegans exist. Silverman is trying to depict a Midwestern vanity of small differences, yet the dialogue captures only the rhythm of

conversation, as if the real content were going to be added in later. The roomies bond over getting stoned, but I started to feel a little high myself. *What are words for, really?* This don't-worry-about-it approach to meaning certainly prepares us for the goofy plot pivot, when we learn that Robyn is a con woman, having fled to Iowa to detox from a life of crime.

Not since “Reefer Madness” has an innocent been so quickly debauched. The day after her first toke, Sharon begs Robyn to teach her how to rip off the elderly on the phone. (I know I wasn’t supposed to be taking the plot literally, but LuPone, seventy-five, and Farrow, seventy-nine, giggling about how to prey on senior citizens hit a bum note.) The basic equation here is a Nancy Meyers movie—ladies of a certain age begin a romantic second act—plus the mom-boss machinations of the TV show “Weeds,” yet it all feels as haphazardly thrown together as the contents of one of Robyn’s boxes. O’Brien’s production, which lacks much in the way of behavioral detail, barely creates a sense of the real, and when LuPone, jutting her chin out, claims that, should it come to stealing cars, she’s good at “jacking them and stripping them down,” we drop fully into camp.

But camp is what many folks are going to Broadway for. The star vehicle is its own kind of sly artificiality, a way to flout concerns of “good” and “bad” and to simply revel in exaggerated presence. (The night I saw the show, anytime a cell phone went off the room shivered with anticipatory tension—LuPone has a reputation for berating those who violate theatrical etiquette.) In “The Roommate,” we’re being allowed to move in, temporarily, with two legends, both of whom are larking about in a play that’s really just a pretext. No harm, right? Yet I kept thinking that Farrow, who hasn’t been onstage in New York for a decade, isn’t just larking about. She’s actually rising above the material, first by showing us a kind of virtuosic screwball dizziness, then by shading it with lower notes of loneliness and discovery. It seems such a waste to have an actor like Farrow give herself over to a star vehicle that has so little gas in the tank.

Presence—having it, making it felt—is the crucial ineffability of live performance. In a difficult moment for nonprofit theatre, some Off Off productions are therefore being staged in apartments, in living rooms or lofts, where a few dozen audience members can get up close and personal.

The performers in these shows aren't necessarily stars, but an unknown can give you the same zing as LuPone, as long as he's falling over your feet.

A strong argument for this strategy is "Family," a deliberately repulsive haunted-house fever dream written by Celine Song, the writer and director of the film "Past Lives." The director Alec Duffy installed the thriller on the ground floor of a Clinton Hill brownstone, which seats thirty (if you include the couch and barstools), and where an audience member could, if she were unforgivably nosy, read the titles of all the books on the shelves.

Three eerie half siblings, dressed in oversized black mourning clothes, enter the living room, praising—and then, sort of, psychically becoming—their just buried father. Hissing like snakes, wriggling around like alligators, they reenact psychosexual games they used to play, and search the house for their three vanished mothers. David (Luis Feliciano) enjoys being bullied; his half brother Linus (Jonah O'Hara-David) indulges him, possibly homicidally. Linus also smells something dead under the floorboards, a sensation that seeps into a theatregoer's own suggestible mind. Each sibling is monstrous in his or her own way: Alice (Izabel Mar), for instance, was born with an extra face on the back of her head.

"Past Lives," Song's delicate, realistic film, will in no way prepare audiences for how deranged this show is, a kind of cross between "Flowers in the Attic" and a much darker "What We Do in the Shadows." On the show's Web site, Duffy's company, Hoi Polloi, states that "Family" is an early play of Song's, which is sometimes apparent. Despite some startling imagery—we can hear flies in the crawl space below, which Izabel swears are murmuring specifically to her—the play isn't quite sure what to do with its accelerating energies. (The end, unfortunately, is mostly yelling.) Still, I had one of my own IRL thrills: the night I was there, Song herself was on the couch in front of me. She was so close! I stared at the back of her head, trying to work out if she was laughing at her own jokes. Was she? I'll never tell. ♦

On Television

“La Maison” Is a Frothy Portrait of the Rich and Fashionable

Apple TV+’s soi-disant succession drama may gesture at weighty themes, but it’s soapier—and often more fun—than its prestige counterparts.

By Inkoo Kang

September 20, 2024



The opening minutes of “La Maison,” a new succession drama on Apple TV+, offer up an irresistible depiction of the pride that goeth before a fall. Vincent Ledu (Lambert Wilson), the graying head of a Parisian fashion house that bears his name, is about to receive France’s highest civilian honor, but his grasp of his craft is slipping: a wealthy Korean bride whose patronage he urgently needs is proving resistant to his usual charms. After storming out of their meeting, he runs into his younger brother, Victor (Pierre Deladonchamps), whom he exiled from the firm years ago. “Vincent Ledu descends from Olympus to play salesman,” Victor says coolly. “Precisely,” Vincent replies. “And now I’m heading back up.” A day later, when a video goes viral of Vincent calling his difficult client and her

entourage “dog-eating plebes,” he’s dragged back down to earth. Though Vincent wishes to envelop himself in “decorous silence,” he’s afforded no such luxury, least of all by his family, who treasure the century-old Ledu brand as their ancestral birthright and their cash cow. A stilted apology, scripted by his P.R. team, does little to ameliorate the crisis. The fashion industry is no stranger to scandal or to racism—as one onlooker puts it, “Ledu just pulled a Galliano”—but Vincent’s offense is immediately deemed fatal. The company’s continuation depends on whether the dynasty can expand its idea of family quickly enough to survive.

“*La Maison*” is more diversion than art, but what diversion. The ensemble soap is as bitchy and as backstabby as you could hope for, replete with bons mots and campy self-importance: Vincent’s spoiled thirtysomething nephew, Robinson (Antoine Reinartz), a runt within the family but a princeling at the atelier, refers to a subordinate called Céline by another moniker because he refuses to speak the name of the rival brand. Perhaps even more pertinent to its appeal, the series is ravishing to behold—the first of Apple’s fashion-related projects to merit the extravagant budget. And yet for all the Ledus’ jaunts to the Swiss mountainside or to their private island (where, naturally, Vincent and his siblings mope around in their childhood castle), they are the underdogs of this story. Their independence as a maison is threatened by Diane Rovel (Carole Bouquet), a luxury tycoon who prides herself on being the wealthiest woman in Europe but still dwells on what she doesn’t have. The owner of an Arnault-like constellation of labels, she has schemed for decades to add Ledu to her collection, and she senses that this may be her chance.

Don’t mistake “*La Maison*” for a beau-monde “*Succession*. ” The French series, rather than insisting on the stakes of its inheritance drama, treats the conceit as a wicked game of musical chairs. It mattered who ran the Roys’ conservative media conglomerate; “*La Maison*,” to its credit, never makes such a case about the fate of a fashion house. Robinson compares his plight to that of “Diana, Fergie, and Meghan”—whom he calls “my girls”—and the show’s pleasures lie in royal-gawking of a sort, hewing more to the restrained elegance of “*The Crown*” than to the gaudy fantasy of “*Emily in Paris*. ” It’s something of a relief, too, that “*La Maison*” is twisty without being cynical, free of the bleakness of its HBO predecessor. With the latter, one always got the feeling that, in any of the Roy children’s hands, the

family's empire would instantly collapse; their father was right to withhold the keys to the kingdom. In contrast, there are probably multiple paths to the reinvention of Ledu.

Enter Paloma Castel (Zita Hanrot), an upstart designer who joins the company as a way to learn about her father—the love of Vincent’s life—who died when she was two. (Satisfyingly, her origins are more complicated than they first appear.) The closest thing Vincent has to a scion of his own, the orphaned Paloma can be written into the family mythology (i.e., its rebrand campaign) with some careful finessing. And, as Vincent’s second-in-command, Perle (Amira Casar), points out matter-of-factly, in addition to being a generational talent, Paloma is “a biracial activist woman . . . the essence of everything we need now.” Vincent bristles at her invocation of *le wokisme*. His preferred candidate is Robinson, precisely because he’s less of a threat in the long term. Wait out the outrage cycle, Vincent believes, and he can retake the throne after the current occupant embarrasses himself. Never mind that Vincent has been repeating ideas for years—that the black gowns that have become Ledu’s signature may as well be funeral shrouds.

Paloma is at once Ledu’s surest bet and its riskiest gamble; when she débuts her first handbag for the house, she finds that her exacting ethical standards actually invite harsher scrutiny. Anyway, she’s more a conduit for debates roiling the industry—over diversity, sustainability, cancel culture—than a believable character in her own right. Previously the head of a Berlin-based label that traffics in unpolished designs and even less polished lefty messaging, Paloma is, frankly, a preposterous choice to run the high-end Ledu: her pants are sewn together from scraps of other pants, her shirts from those of other shirts, and her ideals are no more original. She rails against luxury firms stoking and exploiting “the frustration of people who don’t have money”—then expresses, in the next breath, a near-exclusive interest in haute couture.

Such a disconnect is revealing of larger issues: for every knowing wink at a Dolce & Gabbana stumble or the fabled genesis of the Birkin bag, there’s a detail that feels off, especially when it comes to the characters of color. The Korean client whom Vincent rages against, for example, likely wouldn’t need a translator to converse with the English-fluent designer; nor would an

insider like Paloma be surprised that the Ledu enterprise is propped up—like almost all major luxury houses—by the sale of purses and perfume.

But, if “La Maison” occasionally falters on the runway, it is sure-footed as a study of the rich cannibalizing their own. That two fiefdoms are in play—Rovel and Ledu—adds to the sense of glamorous disarray. The wavy-maned, aristocratic Vincent, who looks like an even more dashing Yves Saint Laurent, is a howling lion done in by what he considers a mere thorn in his paw; the nouveau-riche Diane, who’s rarely seen without her achingly heavy gold jewelry, is a tigress slow to realize that the daughter she bats around for sport is growing into a predator to be reckoned with. The dysfunctional dynasties make a fascinating contrast; every unhappy fashion house, it seems, is unhappy in its own way. While Vincent has pointedly refused to cultivate a successor—and stunted once promising candidates like Robinson—Diane veers to the opposite extreme, pitting several potential heirs against one another so that only the most cold-blooded will emerge triumphant. The Rovel mogul’s baroque backstory epitomizes the series’ penchant for corny melodrama, but the character emerges, thanks in part to Bouquet’s grounded performance, as a woman who broke the mold for herself and simply can’t respect anyone incapable of doing the same. Thus Diane joins the pantheon of abysmal parents in prestige (and prestige-aspirant) dramas, expressing perennial disappointment in her daughter even as she forces her to compete against both her husband and her own child. Robinson’s self-sacrificing mother, meanwhile, is dismissed as “a woman who builds her own cage.”

Robinson himself reflects that his proximity to his famous uncle means that he’s seldom seen as anything more than an “opportunity” by the people around him—and yet he can’t help replicating the cutting hauteur with which his older relatives have whittled him down all his life. His ambition of becoming a designer was snuffed out early, such that the Ledu name is all he has to offer. Without the temerity to stand on his own, his pedigree is unlikely to be worth much. But a family pathology is a kind of inheritance, too. ♦

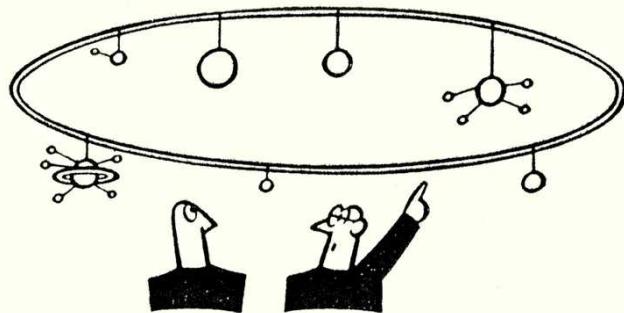
Poems

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I Nearly Died from the Socratic Method

By Diane Seuss

September 23, 2024



of dying, from hemlock unbeknownst
to me in my garden.
Unbeknownst, I picked a pretty
hemlock bouquet,
mistaking it for wild
carrot, inhaling
enough of its noxious powders
to drop a donkey but not a god,
and not a philosopher,
who must drink it as a potion from a cup.

A poet? Who knows.
Who can claim to be a poet?

My Socrates told me to never
make that claim, it paints you as a hot
dog, a pea
brain. Nonetheless,
I sickened from the bouquet,
my legs heavy, my lungs flimsy and sad.
On the third day I rose and returned
to the garden, where I snipped a rose.

Unbeknownst, a thorn
snagged me, and another, and another.

Old Movies

By Robert Pinsky

September 23, 2024



In pearly grays the stars of my parents' day
Climb pixels of *noir* stairwells, in my haven.
Or, shades of my own time: luminous Mastroianni
The gay broadcaster fired by *Fascisti*, radiant
Loren the betrayed and worn-down mother of six.
It's the day Hitler arrives by train to Rome.
The movie shows real newsreels. Evil characters
Never scared me—desirous Joan Fontaine
A sly killer in "Ivy," Charles Laughton breeding
Human-animals in "The Island of Lost Souls,"
Monsters, velociraptors. It's the joyful faces
In certain crowd scenes that can make me hide
Or hide my eyes at something deeper than art.
The right-wing hip-hop star makes me remember
My mother teaching us kids about the bad

Or good politics of actors. Adolphe Menjou
Was bad, Edward G. Robinson was good.
Did it ever matter? Did Maurice Chevalier
Collaborate with Nazis, or not? For her,
His haircut settled the question. In “A Special Day”
The gay announcer is about to kill himself
When he meets the *donna-madre*. They make love
While her whole family and their *casa popolare*
Neighbors are at the station with balloons and flags
To welcome Hitler embracing Mussolini.
And were the actors too beautiful for the story
To hurt enough? They even dance a tentative,
Halting rumba, awkward in a doomed refuge.

Puzzles & Games

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Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, September 23, 2024

A challenging puzzle.

By Brooke Husic

September 23, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

Letters from Our Readers

Readers respond to Kathryn Schulz's review of an autobiography by the geologist Marcia Bjornerud and Amanda Petrusich's piece about MJ Lenderman's new album.

September 23, 2024

Geology Rocks

I enjoyed Kathryn Schulz's review of the geologist Marcia Bjornerud's autobiography, "Turning to Stone" (Books, September 2nd). As a retired geologist, I can personally attest to the value of thinking about deep time when assaulted by daily annoyances. It is perhaps inconsistent with this perspective that I take issue with a small detail in Schulz's otherwise lucid article: in the penultimate paragraph, in reference to the human mind's ability to "represent scales of existence wildly different from its own," she lists, as an example, "the dark side of the moon." I understand the idiomatic appeal, but, in literal terms, the moon does not have a dark side. We only ever see one side of the moon—it is tidally locked to the Earth—but both sides receive roughly equal amounts of light. "Far side" would be more accurate.

*Robert Baumgardner
Austin, Texas*

I congratulate Bjornerud for explaining geology in a way that lay readers can understand. In this regard, we geologists have been mostly remiss. We have spent much of our careers talking exclusively to one another, with the result, as Schulz writes, that the field is regarded as being "almost irrelevant."

The long time frame and slow pace of geological events might not seem all that relatable to most people. But there is a definite human scale. My neighbors in rural New England understand, in an abstract sense, that Africa and North America collided, metamorphosing the rocks and raising up the mountains, but what they are more immediately curious about is, What is

that rock—the one that looks like the back of a whale—sticking up in my field? They understand that all of New England was once covered by massive glaciers, but a more pressing concern is, Why do I dig up sand in some places and clay in others—and is there a way to predict what I will find in the next hole? When profuse rain triggers a landslide in a nearby town and wipes out a property, people want to know if it could happen to their house, too. These geologic questions are interesting and, at times, vital to the daily lives of regular people. As geologists, we should all strive, whenever possible, to remain connected to the human world.

*John S. Warren
East Dummerston, Vt.*

It was refreshing to read Schulz's piece, since we hear so little of geologists. But I was baffled by her description of geology as suffering from a reputation as "irredeemably stodgy." I took several geology courses in college, in the nineteen-seventies, and I had a geologist boyfriend. The geologists I knew had long hair and beards, took students on extended field trips throughout California, and smoked pot with us at the campfire. We were outdoors, hiking high in the rocks, touching science, and looking at stars all night. The geologists were smart, funny, interesting storytellers who drove beat-up Scouts and VW buses. Hardly stodgy.

*Denise A. Hamilton
Altadena, Calif.*

Musical Note

In her thoughtful profile of the songwriter, singer, and guitarist MJ Lenderman, Amanda Petrusich referred to the refrain from the song "Me and Bobby McGee": "'Freedom's just another word for nothing left to lose,' as Janis Joplin famously sang" (Pop Music, September 9th). In doing so, she inadvertently neglected to credit another songwriter, singer, and guitarist, Kris Kristofferson, who penned the song. Tom Petty once said, of songwriting, "It's the only true magic I know. . . . It's your soul floating out to theirs." Janis Joplin added her soul to the song, but let us not forget the original magician.

*Sherri Goodman Reveal
St. Albans, W.Va.*

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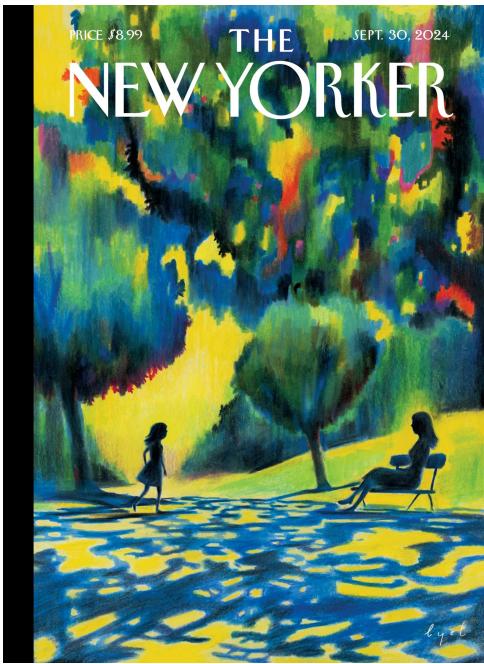


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