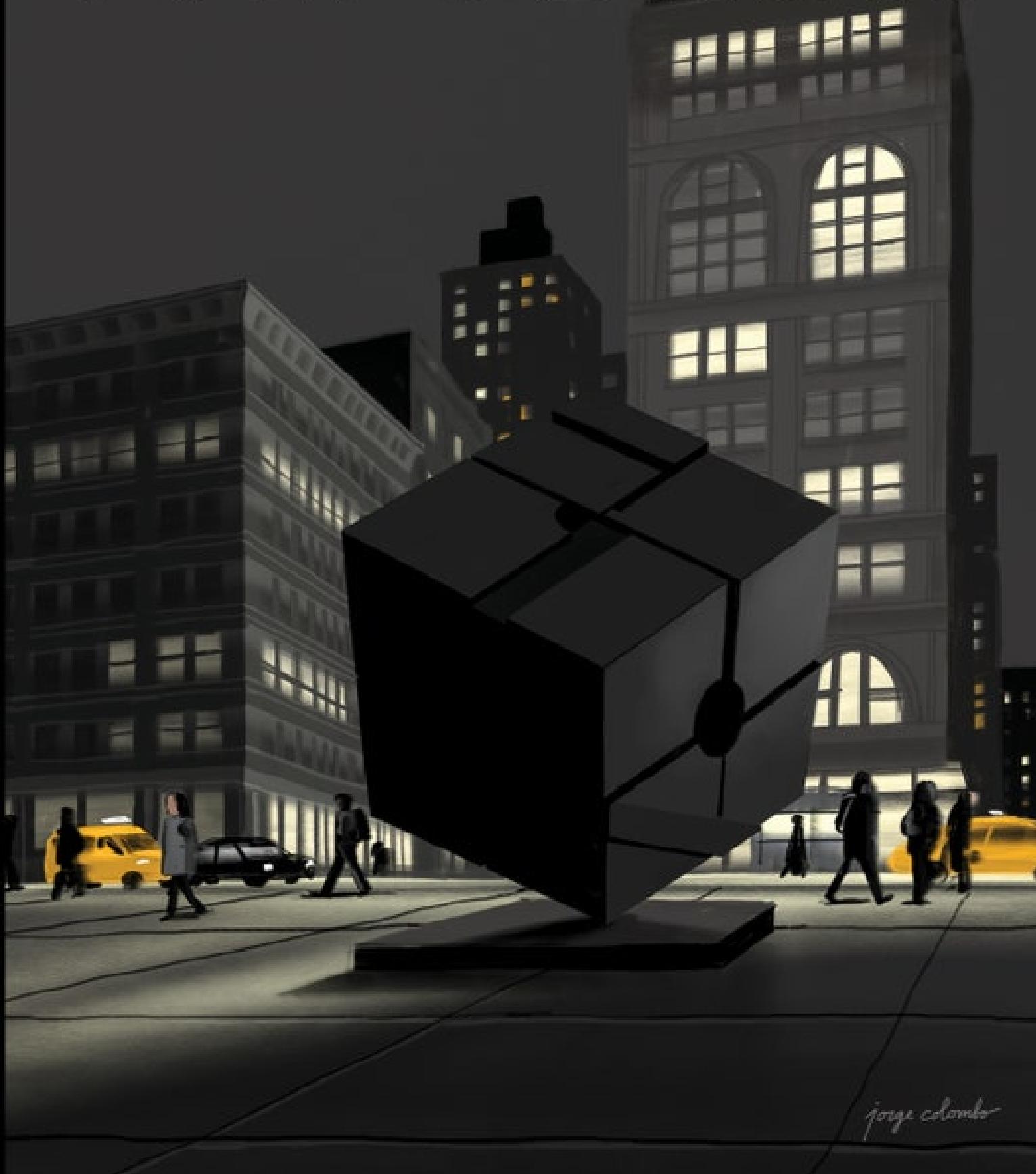


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Why Maui Burned

Lahaina's wildfire was the deadliest in the U.S. in more than a century. Now the community is grappling with the botched response as it tries to rebuild.

By [Carolyn Kormann](#)



The Lahaina fire reached temperatures more than a thousand degrees hotter than the temperature on Venus. Photographs by Bryan Anselm / Redux for The New Yorker

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At 4 P.M. on August 8th, Shaun Saribay's family begged him to get in their car and leave the town of Lahaina, on the Hawaiian island of Maui. The wind was howling, and large clouds of smoke were approaching from the dry hills above the neighborhood. But Saribay—a tattooist, a contractor, and a landlord, who goes by the nickname Buge—told his family that he was staying to guard their house, which had been in the family for generations. “This thing just gonna pass that way, downwind,” Saribay said. At 4:05 P.M., one of his daughters texted from the car, “Daddy please be safe.”

Within ten minutes, it became clear that the fire had not passed downwind. Instead, towering flames were galloping toward Saribay’s house. He got in his truck and drove to Front Street—Lahaina’s historic waterfront drag—and

found gridlock traffic. Saribay, a stocky forty-two-year-old man with a tattoo covering the left side of his face, texted his daughters. “Don’t worry. Dad’s coming,” he wrote. Then he lost cell service. At 4:41 P.M., he pulled into the one large open space he could find, a parking lot behind the Lahaina United Methodist Church, which had just started to burn.

Saribay had recently built a closet at the church, so he knew where all the water spigots were. He filled buckets and water bottles and scrambled to find neighbors’ garden hoses. With the help of three other men who had retreated to the lot, he soaked the church, again and again, fighting a three-story ball of fire with the equivalent of a water gun. At times, the men were stomping, even peeing, on sparking debris. Saribay recorded a video for his kids: “It’s bad. All around—crazy,” he said, panning the hellscape behind him. “Remember what Dad said, eh? I’ll come back.” Almost as if to reassure himself, he added, softly, “I know you guys safe.”



Shaun (Buge) Saribay; a tattooist and landlord, lost three houses, his tattoo parlor, and his boat in the fire. He has become a hero in the community, after he helped keep the neighborhood of Leiali'i from burning down.

Saribay recorded videos throughout the night as he fought the fire. Despite his efforts, flames consumed the church. Well after midnight, the men tried to save a neighboring preschool, but that caught fire, too. When the sun rose and the wind began to ebb, Saribay got on an old bike and rode around town looking for other survivors. “I’m seeing fucking bodies every fucking way,” he recalled. “I’m pedalling through charcoal bodies and bodies that didn’t

have one speck of burn—they just died from inhalation of black smoke. I felt like I was the only fucking human on earth.”

The wildfire in Lahaina was the deadliest in the United States in more than a century. Ninety-nine people have been confirmed deceased, although for weeks the death toll was thought to be even higher, with police reporting that more than a hundred bodies had been recovered. In a town of nearly thirteen thousand people, at least seventy-two hundred were displaced. Twenty-two hundred structures were damaged or destroyed, and the estimated cost to rebuild is five and a half billion dollars. “I have been to most major disasters in the United States in the past decade. This is unprecedented,” Brad Kieserman, a senior official with the American Red Cross, said. “The speed of the fire, the level of fatality and physical destruction, the level of trauma to those who survived—it’s unspeakable.”

The destruction may have been unprecedented, but the fire itself was not. Public-safety officials, scientists, and activists had warned for years of the wildfire risks in Maui, owing to the growing population and the dryness of the island. “It was a ticking time bomb,” Willy Carter, a conservationist who studies native Hawaiian ecosystems, said. “The bomb went off.” Weeks before the disaster, conditions in parts of the state had been categorized as “severe drought,” and on August 4th the National Weather Service warned of hazardous fire conditions in the coming days. With a high-pressure system north of Hawaii and Hurricane Dora spinning hundreds of miles to the south, forecasters predicted that strong winds would be blowing, allowing flames to spread fast.

At 12:22 *A.M.* on August 8th, a brush fire ignited in Olinda, in the mountains of Central Maui, prompting evacuations. At 6:37 *A.M.*, thirty-six miles away, another brush fire ignited, in a bone-dry field bordering Lahaina Intermediate School. Hard winds had toppled utility poles, and flying sparks from downed power lines likely started the blaze. (The official cause is still under investigation, according to the Maui Fire Department.) Nearby residents were ordered to evacuate within three minutes. By 10 *A.M.*, the county announced, via Facebook, that the Lahaina fire was “100% contained,” but that a main road was closed.

A MUG'S LIFE FLASHES BEFORE ITS EYES



Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

Around 3 P.M., people noticed smoke clouding the sky near the school. With the wind gusting more than seventy miles per hour, the fire had flared up again in the same area. During the next hour, the fire hit “crossover”—a term used to describe a moment when the relative humidity drops below the temperature in Celsius. This allowed the blaze to tumble freely and grow exponentially faster, exceeding firefighters’ capabilities. All they could do was try to save lives.

It would be difficult to overstate the horror of these hours, the disorientation of the hazy twilight caused by toxic smoke, the searing wind and glowing ash, the stark terror of being surrounded by tall flames, the suffocation. At various times, Maui police, in coördination with the power company, closed most of the roads out of town, because of tangles of downed lines and branches, but also because of a fear that some of those roads would direct people into the fire. Evacuees were herded onto Front Street, where traffic was at a standstill. Some people abandoned their vehicles and hurled themselves into the ocean. The water’s surface itself seemed to be smoking, making it hard to breathe. One group held on to wreckage that had fallen in the water; others waded for hours, trying to dodge or douse the embers falling on their heads.

By 7 P.M., the docks and boats in the harbor were lit up as if in a coal-fired oven, the roar of the flames broken by a staccato of exploding propane tanks. In the ocean, the current was pulling weaker swimmers out to sea. Coast Guard boats were crisscrossing the water, barely able to see through the smoke. They ultimately rescued seventeen people from the water and forty from the shore, and recovered one body the next day.

During the fire, the county's command-and-communication system fell apart. The county sent one emergency cell-phone evacuation alert at 4:16 P.M., after the fire was already moving through town, but the order was just for a single neighborhood. At 6:03 P.M., while the fire was incinerating Front Street, and while people were struggling in the sea, Maui County's mayor, Richard Bissen, appeared on a local news broadcast, calmly sitting in his office on the other side of the island. "I'm happy to report that the road is open to and from Lahaina," he said, seemingly unaware of the inferno under way. The county did not issue online evacuation orders for other parts of town until 9:45 P.M. The winds finally subsided at dawn.

Maui was formed by two shield volcanoes about two million years ago, becoming the second-largest island in the Hawaiian archipelago, the most remote chain of inhabited islands on earth. Lahaina, which means "cruel sun," sits on the leeward side of Maui, below the western mountains, Mauna Kahālāwai, which roughly translates to "house of water." The highest peak is one of the wettest places in the world, historically receiving about three hundred and sixty-six inches of rain per year.

Hawaiians built their communities around the watershed. Their word for water, *wai*, has many meanings: blood, passion, life. Lahaina—even though it was relatively hot and dry—became, because of its water supply, a cornucopia, replete with irrigated breadfruit, banana, and sugarcane crops, terraced taro patches, and fishponds. In the early nineteenth century, Lahaina was the capital of the Hawaiian Kingdom. The king lived in a coral-block palace on an island in the middle of a pond. Residents could paddle around town.

During the American Civil War, the agricultural economy that sustained Southern farmers collapsed, and Hawaii became a primary source of sugar. But sugarcane is a thirsty crop. One ton of sugar requires a million gallons

of water. To meet that demand, private companies producing sugar (and, later, pineapples) rerouted the flow from Maui's watersheds, building concrete ditches, tunnels, pipes, flumes, siphons, and trestles across the island. European ranchers introduced non-native, drought-resistant African grasses—guinea, molasses, and buffel—for grazing livestock. In less than five decades, the island's landscape and ecology were dramatically altered.

Agriculture declined in the late twentieth century, and plantation owners abandoned vast swaths of farmland, allowing the non-native grasses to proliferate. Instead of restoring the steep mountain streams, they left their diversions in place—in some cases, dumping water into dry gulches, or directly into the ocean—or used them to develop beachfront resorts, with lush gardens, swimming pools, and golf courses. By 1996, as Carol Wilcox writes in her chronicle “Sugar Water,” “competition for water had met the limits of the resource in Lahaina.” That same year, the newly formed West Maui Land Company started buying abandoned plantations (and their valuable irrigation systems) and creating new subdivisions.

Natural wildfire on Maui used to be rare. The high-elevation endemic forest acted like a sponge—capturing fog and rain, recharging aquifers, and releasing water downstream. But land development and the encroachment of invasive species are shrinking this ecosystem. “Towns are now, instead, surrounded by tinder-dry invasive grasses that just go up in an instant,” Carter told me.

In the past decade, Maui has faced periods of severe drought, exacerbated by climate change. Parts of the island got so dry during the past two years that the county limited residential water use. Hotels did not face restrictions. Fodor’s Travel included Maui on its 2023 “No List,” which warns against visiting regions that are suffering from environmental threats. And yet tourism in Maui remained steady.

Native-Hawaiian-sovereignty groups have long been fighting for stream restoration and more water control. According to the state constitution and a series of landmark court cases, Hawaii’s water must be held in a public trust for the people’s benefit, which includes the use of water for traditional and customary practices, such as taro farming. Private developers are required to follow streamflow standards, and must get approvals from the state’s

Commission on Water Resource Management if they want to divert more water than their usual allotment.

On August 10th, as fires in Olinda continued to burn, the governor, Josh Green, suspended the water code. The same day, Glenn Tremble, a partner at the West Maui Land Company, wrote a letter to the water commission stating that on August 8th he had asked to divert stream water to the company's reservoirs, south of Lahaina, to help put out the flames. A water commission deputy director named M. Kaleo Manuel delayed the diversion until that evening, explaining that Tremble first needed to check with a downstream taro farmer who relied on the stream to fight fire on his property.



Three children died in the Lahaina fire. Josue Garcia Vargas, pictured above, lost his brother, fourteen-year-old Keyiro Fuentes, who was at home, asleep with the family dog, when the blaze swept onto the street.

That stream is not connected to the county's water network, which supplies Lahaina's fire-hydrant system. Moreover, the day's heavy winds meant that helicopters could not use those reservoirs to fill water bombs (known as Bambi Buckets)—they could not fly at all. Still, many were eager to blame the Native Hawaiian water deputy and, by extension, the water code. (A headline in the *New York Post* read, “Hawaii official concerned with ‘equity’ delayed releasing water for more than 5 hours as wildfires raged.”) Manuel was reassigned to another department.

Peter Martin, West Maui Land's co-founder and C.E.O., told me that protecting water for Native Hawaiian cultural practices was "a crock of shit," and that invasive grasses and "this stupid climate-change thing" had "nothing to do with the fire." He felt unfairly demonized by activists: "They're trying to paint this picture that I'm a colonialist." The real problem, he said, was the water commission and its code, which was so overbearing that it prevented him from replacing dry grassland with irrigated, landscaped parcels, or even small hobby farms. Maui's lands, he added, "weren't being used as God intended."

Sixteen days after the fire, Maui County, with help from the F.B.I., released a list of three hundred and eighty-eight missing people. This was a distillation of a larger list, with more than a thousand names, that had been assembled from potentially unreliable sources—online groups, anonymous calls—and contained redundancies and errors. (Many individuals had the strange experience of seeing the list and learning that the F.B.I. thought they were missing.) The estimated death toll had remained the same since August 21st, when the police announced that they had recovered a hundred and fifteen bodies.

Two blocks from Saribay's house, Alfredo Galinato, a seventy-nine-year-old Filipino immigrant, had lived with his wife, Virginia, and their son James, who is mentally disabled. When the fire approached, Galinato told James to run to Safeway, where Virginia worked. Then Galinato climbed onto his roof with a hose to soak the house, just as he had done during previous fires. Virginia and James survived, but Galinato was now among the missing. His two other sons, Joshua and John, who were not in Lahaina on August 8th, went to the burn zone to look for their father. "Everything was burned to dust," Joshua told me. After searching for seventy-two hours, they heard that authorities were collecting DNA samples from people with missing relatives, and they went to a community center to get their cheeks swabbed.

Following the fire, forensic anthropologists, dentists, pathologists, and fingerprint and X-ray technicians flew to Maui, to aid the overwhelmed coroner's office. Urban search-and-rescue teams, deployed by *FEMA*, started working with cadaver dogs across the five and a half square miles that had burned.

The Lahaina fire reached temperatures more than a thousand degrees hotter than the temperature on Venus. Four thousand vehicles were caught in the flames, and almost none of them were left with tire rims. “There were rivers of melted aluminum down the streets,” Stephen Bjune, the spokesperson for *FEMA*’s Urban Search and Rescue Team, told me. But the fire also moved in mysterious ways. A truck on Front Street had been full of glass bottles for recycling, all of which melted. Five feet away, a single silver minivan was unmarred, as if it were still sitting in traffic.

It was so hot in the burn zone that the dogs could work only in quarter-hour shifts. About fifteen per cent of the discovered remains were intact enough to obtain fingerprints from—that is generally the quickest route to identification. In another thirteen per cent, forensic dentists were able to identify people from their teeth. In two per cent, medical hardware—such as a pacemaker—was used to make identifications. But, for about seventy per cent of the victims, the experts needed DNA. In the majority of those cases, there were still significant amounts of tissue. In a few cases—the most difficult ones—there were only ashes and small fragments of bone.

The DNA analysis was conducted with the help of *ANDE* Rapid DNA, a biotech and public-safety company. *ANDE* manufactures a hundred-pound printer-size instrument that can generate a DNA profile, or “fingerprint,” in two hours. It can analyze five samples at a time—drops of blood, pinhead-size bits of liver, or fragments of bone. Richard Selden, the company’s founder and chief scientific officer, said that he and his team initially developed the instrument for the United States military’s counterterrorism operations in the Middle East, so it was designed to be portable and rugged.

The DNA fingerprints were compared with reference samples that families, like the Galinato brothers, had provided. The problem was that many family members were not submitting samples. Some authorities attributed this to a lack of trust between residents and the government, which went back more than a century, to colonization. Officials launched a publicity campaign emphasizing that the DNA samples would be used only by *ANDE*, and would not be used by the government for tracking people.

Alfredo Galinato was one of the first victims to be identified using the rapid-DNA machine. He had worked as a groundsman at the Westin, near Lahaina,

for twenty-five years, and loved taking care of the hotel's parrots. I met his family across the island, at the house of his son John's fiancée, about a week after they received confirmation of his death. John, a carpenter, looked just like his father—with a gentle, open face and the strong, scrappy build of a former high-school state wrestling champion. He said that he felt blessed to have found out about his dad relatively quickly, compared with all those who were still searching.

Later, as I was driving back to Lahaina, John sent me a text, written as if his father were still alive. "Idk if I mentioned. My dad is a hard working man, dependable," he wrote. "I can count on him."

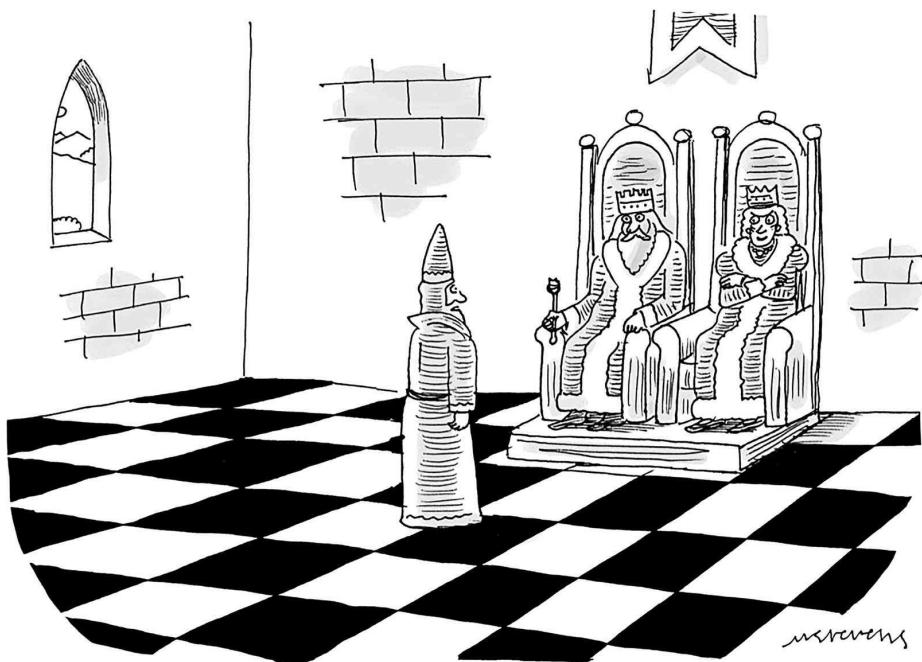
A strange scale of tragedy had developed on Maui. Those who hadn't lost loved ones might still have lost everything they owned. And yet some said they felt lucky. "Just material things," one person told me. A woman named Michele Pigott, who had lived in Lahaina since 2011, said that this was the third house she had lost to a fire. (The first two were in California.) She was almost immune to being displaced again. "Piece of cake," she told me. "There's not a goddam thing you can do."

But anger was pulsing under the surface. As one mother said to me of the disaster response, "How could so many people fail at their job at the same time?" Among the first failures were the warning sirens. Although Maui has eighty of them, none were activated when the fire began. A week after the disaster, Herman Andaya, the administrator of the Maui Emergency Management Agency, defended his decision not to use the sirens, saying that they were primarily for tsunamis—even though the agency's Web site lists brush fires as one of the reasons for the "all-hazard siren system" to go off. Andaya said he had been concerned that the sirens would send people fleeing to higher ground, into the flames. He also said he was afraid that people wouldn't even hear the sirens, because almost all of them are along the coastline, and that he did not regret his decision. The following day he resigned, citing health reasons.

Another problem was the lack of firefighters. The Maui Fire Department has long been short-staffed and underfunded. Despite the vast increase in wildfire country on the island, the last time a new station was built was in 2003. West Maui's population has grown from roughly eighteen thousand to

twenty-eight thousand over that span, and is serviced by two stations and three trucks. No more than sixteen firefighters were initially on duty in Lahaina on the afternoon of August 8th. "They did an extraordinary job," Bobby Lee, the president of the Hawaii Fire Fighters Association, told me—"before they ran out of water." County water levels were already low, and then the fire hydrants lost too much pressure. Some ran dry. The fire's extreme heat had caused water lines to break, something that also happened in a catastrophic urban fire in Fort McMurray, Canada, in 2016.

Many survivors have said that they received no evacuation orders from the police. When Mayor Bissen was later asked why, he said that, in fact, police officers had driven the streets, calling from loudspeakers. But that had happened later in the evening, near where fires were still burning on Lahaina's north end. After a local reporter pressed him on the failure, Bissen said, "You can decide what the reason was, whether it was somebody did something on purpose, or somebody did something out of negligence, or somebody did something out of necessity. There are probably a lot of reasons you can apply to why we do what we do as human beings."



"I'm afraid it's true, sire. You can move only one square at a time, while the Queen may move anywhere she wants, using as many squares as she pleases."
Cartoon by Mick Stevens

I asked the Maui County police chief, John Pelletier, about all the roads out of Lahaina that had been closed. He said, "There was always a way out, if people were willing to go that way. Nobody was barred from going out of

Lahaina town.” He continued, “We were encouraging everybody to get out, but it just depends on the dynamic. It may not have been the way that they maybe wanted to go.”

The nature of the disaster, and the chaos and information void in the aftermath, lent itself to rumor and conspiracy theories. Selden, the *ANDE* scientist, told me that there are two kinds of disasters: open and closed. A plane crash is the latter—there is one site of wreckage and a manifest listing who was on board. Lahaina is open. There is no list of people who were in town that day, and the burn area is large and unfixed. Speculation about the demographics of the victims was rampant. Because school was not starting until August 9th, people thought a lot of children might have been home. As of late August, only two families had reported the loss of a child; the police had not confirmed their deaths or identities.

Keyiro Fuentes, who was fourteen years old, was at home, asleep with the family dog, when the fire swept onto his street. His mother came back from work to get him, but the police blocked her, saying that they had already cleared the area. Days later, the family found Fuentes’s body in the house. His father wrapped the body in a tarp and, with his older son’s help, drove Fuentes to a police station. “The first thing I said was, ‘Mr. Officer, I have a body and it’s that of my little brother,’ ” Josue Garcia Vargas, Fuentes’s twenty-year-old brother, recalled. One officer at the station seemed to be in shock. “His hands were shaking,” Vargas said. “I kept telling him the name, and he kept saying, ‘What? What?’ ”

In mid-September, the police confirmed Fuentes’s death. The identification was delayed because Fuentes was adopted, and the police had to obtain DNA samples from his biological family, in Mexico, to confirm that he was who the Vargas family said he was. But the Vargases had already held a memorial. A week after the fire, when Fuentes would have turned fifteen, his mother threw him a birthday party.

Months earlier, Fuentes had told Vargas about a girl he had a crush on in his class. She hadn’t seemed interested, so Vargas suggested that Fuentes flirt with the girl’s cousin to make her jealous. Both girls had attended the memorial. “They were both crying, man,” Vargas told me when we met, tears rolling down his face, although he was smiling. “He made them cry.

That made me happy.” Fuentes had been a tough, fiery, and sweet little kid, who loved mixed martial arts. “He wanted to be a police officer,” Vargas reminisced. “He saw when my mom got screamed at by one of our neighbors and he got mad and said, ‘I’m going to be an officer so this will never happen to you.’”

When the family had found Fuentes, Vargas added, their dog’s remains were there, too. “We think they were hugging each other,” he said, now hugging himself, struggling to speak. He reminisced, of his brother, “He was always there, making his presence known, saying ‘Wassup, bro!’” He paused. “It’s hard for me to accept the reality of what happened.”

On August 29th, Pelletier announced that recovery crews had completed ninety-nine per cent of their land search in Lahaina. More than three hundred people remained unaccounted for, but the estimated number of deaths had not changed. The Galinatos’ neighbor, a forty-three-year-old E.M.T. named Tony Simpson, was still missing. The day of the fire, Simpson’s parents were at home in Belize, his sister Nichol was in Thailand, his other sister, Nova, was in Connecticut, and his brother was in New York. After a couple of days, none of them had heard from Simpson, and they started to panic. They made dozens of calls—to his employer, to the Red Cross, to the F.B.I., to the police. Nichol posted Simpson’s photo in a Maui-disaster-relief Facebook group. Nova filed a missing-persons report and submitted a DNA sample to an F.B.I. office in Connecticut.

The family had agreed that it made sense to do what they could from a distance, rather than get in the way of the authorities. But, after two weeks, Nichol and her husband, Angel Priest, made the forty-hour journey from Thailand to Maui. Their first stop was the Family Assistance Center, which was housed in a Hyatt Regency hotel. The complex was full of displaced people wandering a maze of courtyards, shuttered shops, and gardens. Nichol sat to give a DNA sample; *ANDE* had an instrument on-site. She asked if her sister Nova’s DNA was already in their system. The workers didn’t know.



Nichol Simpson, holding a missing-persons flyer for her brother Tony, who was unaccounted for in the weeks after the fire.

Nichol soon learned that a large percentage of victims were recovered within a few blocks of Simpson's home. When she told other families on the island where her brother lived, they'd offer condolences. Nichol tried to visit Simpson's house in the burn zone but was stopped by the National Guard and told she needed an official escort. She called the police, and a receptionist suggested that she call the E.O.C. When Nichol asked what the E.O.C. was, the receptionist didn't know. (E.O.C. is the Emergency Operations Center.) Nichol reached a person at the E.O.C., but learned that she could not, in fact, get an official escort into the burn zone. She was also told, by a field worker, that the residential area had been fully searched. That is, except for multistory buildings. This only confused her more. Simpson's house was two stories. Had it been searched? Unclear.

Nichol and Priest talked to unsheltered people in encampments. Simpson had a strong tie to that community; he had moved to Maui with a friend who chose to live outside. "We're literally stopping people on the street and asking them, 'Do you live here? Can you help us find a place to go search?'" Nichol told me. "Tomorrow we're going to find some random cave somebody suggested." I asked if they really believed that Simpson was hiding out somewhere. "Absolutely," Nichol said. Simpson had led an eclectic life. He lived off the grid for two years, "on mangoes, basically, like a friggin' fruitarian." She added, "We could just see him showing up later

with some crazy story.” Like he’d been living in a cave for two weeks. “Maybe he can make a big Hollywood movie about it,” she said, letting out a belly laugh. “Actually, he would hate that.”

After ten days, Nichol and Priest decided to fly to Belize to be with her parents. Before they left, they drove to the Lahaina post office to get Simpson’s mail forwarded to them. “We were really grasping at straws for small things that I could take back to my family,” she told me. “Because we have nothing of his.” This was true of many victims’ families. The Galinatos had lost most of Alfredo’s belongings, although his wedding ring had been recovered by search-and-rescue workers.

On the way to the post office, Nichol received a call from the Maui P.D. The police had matched her DNA with her brother’s remains, which they had found on August 11th—twenty-one days earlier—in a burned structure near his house, along with the remains of several others. As people had sought shelter, they landed in others’ homes, businesses, or cars, and in some cases died together. The location and commingling of remains delayed the processing of samples, and comparisons with the families’ DNA. This situation also resulted in an initial overcount of victims; two different body bags might later have been found to contain one person.

Nichol was not only heartbroken by her brother’s death but frustrated by the lack of clear communication from the authorities. “We’re thinking, They’ve recovered a hundred and fifteen bodies. They’ve recovered no more in several weeks. We don’t match any of those bodies, so Tony must still be missing,” she told me. “It brought us a lot of false hope.”

The morning after the fire, when Saribay was leaving the church parking lot, he saw smoke in the direction of a house belonging to his kids’ grandparents, in a neighborhood called Leiali‘i. He drove there and found his brother, who told him that another house, bordering their friend Archie Kalepa’s property, was smoldering. The fire department had already been there, but the fire had flared back up.

Saribay and his brother ran across neighbors’ gardens, grabbing more hoses. They broke Kalepa’s fence and soaked his yard. Saribay’s shirt had melted the night before, but he’d found a backpack containing women’s clothes that

he had changed into. Saribay has a mischievous streak, which, despite what he had been through, hadn't gone away. "I fucking fought that motherfucker while I was in a red fuckin' blouse," he said.

They extinguished the fire. Leiali'i had been built seventeen years ago, as part of the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act, which allots homesteads to people who have at least fifty per cent Hawaiian blood. And the neighborhood was saved. Of its hundred and four houses, only two burned down. "At 10:30 P.M., when I evacuated, the flames were as high as the trees right behind my house. I thought it'd be gone," Rodney Pa'ahana, the president of the Leiali'i Association, a community group, told me. "We were astounded," he continued. "God put a finger on us, as if to say, The Hawaiian people need to stay and rebuild."

Kalepa had been in California during the fire, but he came home on the first flight he could. When he arrived, Saribay apologized for breaking his fence. "Fuck my fence!" Kalepa told him. "You're the guy who saved my house!" Within forty-eight hours, that house became one of Maui's first community-organized emergency hubs. Kalepa told me that the donations, which ranged from money to food and supplies, had been overwhelming. People were sending poi—a traditional Hawaiian staple consisting of paste made from ground taro—from four islands away. Lahaina residents started calling the house "the local Costco."

I met Kalepa on the cul-de-sac outside his house in late August, under a cluster of pop-up tents. There were more than two dozen coolers, towers of water bottles, Clorox wipes, a bleeping Starlink router (for Internet), and a machine that converted moisture from the air into water. Friends and volunteers were lugging boxes and ice, setting up rooftop solar panels, and peeling bananas to make banana bread.

Kalepa asked if I wanted to see the line where Saribay had held off the fire, gesturing toward the back yard. It all seemed fairly normal. But at the edge—beyond the grass, palm fans, magenta stalks, and yellow frangipani flowers with pink centers—there was a gap where the fence had been. On the other side of that gap, the world was suddenly black-and-white. A foundation of scorched cinder blocks suggested the ghost of a house. Rusted rebar poked the air. There was a shovel, bent like a bow tie. A hollowed

pickup truck was snapped in half. The air was stagnant with the lingering, acrid smell of smoke, rot, and death.

Kalepa, a ninth-generation Hawaiian, recently turned sixty. He is a former lifeguard and big-wave surfer who provides ocean training to Navy *seals*. In the weeks since the fire, he has become one of Maui's most prominent community leaders. "I never wanted to be in this position," he told me. "I was really enjoying my life." He is now serving on Mayor Bissen's five-member Lahaina Advisory Team, which will consult on the town's rebuilding. "We have one chance at fixing this," Kalepa said. "And, if we get it wrong, all of Hawaii's going to fail. Not just Lahaina." One of the community's biggest fears is that the process will favor developers, tourists, and the wealthy. Kalepa, other activists, and water-rights groups have been strenuously advocating for the local community. On September 8th, Governor Green announced that he was reinstating the state's water code. Several weeks later, the water deputy, M. Kaleo Manuel, was returned to his post.

An organization called the Fire Safety Research Institute has been selected to investigate the government's response to the catastrophe. Initial findings are expected by December. But responsibility for the fire falls in many places, on many individuals, across the decades. "For the last hundred and fifty years," Kalepa said, "Hawaii's gone in the wrong direction. This situation we're in right now? It brought that to light."

People often view disaster survivors' stories as they would an apocalypse film—a frightening but faraway and anomalous event, witnessed from a safe place. But these stories are missives from our immediate future—postcards from what, one day, might be your circumstance, in this era that some climate-change experts now call the Pyrocene. Record-breaking wildfires are happening more frequently all over the world, with studies directly linking climate change to the increase in fire duration, size, and severity. Wildfires in the U.S. caused more than eighty billion dollars in damage from 2017 to 2021, a nearly tenfold increase from the previous five years.

Hawaii has made gestures at addressing climate change; in 2015, it was the first state to pledge to convert entirely to renewable energy by 2045. And yet critics have jumped to blame the power company, Hawaiian Electric, for

focussing on renewables, claiming that it was doing so at the expense of maintenance that could have prevented the West Maui fire. Similar debates are playing out all over the country, where the same funds required for infrastructure maintenance and improvements, in this hot new world, are also needed for the green-energy transition.

Hawaiian Electric's C.E.O., Shelee Kimura, testified at a congressional hearing that thousands of aging utility poles had not been tested for termites or rot since 2013, but she also said that power lines had been de-energized for more than six hours before the afternoon fire began, and that the company was therefore not responsible. Her assertion, and the fire's true cause of ignition, are under investigation, and the company now faces more than a dozen lawsuits, including one filed by Maui County.

On October 8th, the two-month anniversary of the fire, Governor Green welcomed tourists back to parts of West Maui. Many community members were outraged; they felt that they weren't near ready. Just a few days later, more human remains were found in Lahaina. Six people are still missing, and there is one body that has not yet been identified. "Imagine what happens when you gotta live in temporary housing, surrounded by ash, and go to work back in those hotels," Nā'ālehu Anthony, a filmmaker and an activist, told me. "People just hit this wall where they're saying, 'We're not going to do that anymore.' "

Even though returning to work was hard to stomach, it was crucial to Maui's economy, which is heavily reliant on tourism, and necessary for residents, who were struggling with bills and insurance. Many residents were worried about their mortgage payments, which are still due even after your house burns down. "For what, a piece of dirt?" Saribay said. His kids were O.K., which was "all that matters," he said, but he had lost three of his houses, his tattoo parlor, and his boat. He was living in his kids' grandparents' house in Leiali'i. Saribay told me that he had taken a forty-hour course to obtain a hazmat certification, so that he could be part of the effort to clear the rubble from Lahaina. But the idea had become a nightmare. "I just don't want to be *in there* right now," he said.

"Fifty to sixty per cent of the people that passed away was from my neighborhood," Saribay told me. He has been dealing with trauma: "My

nights are a fucking question mark,” he said. “I’m so tired. My mind races.” He has thought about leaving Hawaii altogether, and has felt financial pressure to sell his land—a common experience among homeowners, some of whom reported receiving calls from real-estate investors just days after the fire. “I could just be outta here and say, ‘Fuck Hawaii,’ ” Saribay continued. “I’m not gonna, but fuck.”

He has had delays with his *FEMA* relief application—he still doesn’t know how much money or what kind of housing assistance he will get. “Everything will be O.K. if the government really helps us, but they’re not,” he said. “It’s the people of Maui who’s helping each other.”

One Friday evening, I attended a community meeting at Kalepa’s house, which had become a weekly event. People offered advice, consolation, ideas. One man discussed new air purifiers that had been donated by a nonprofit, which residents could take home with them. Pa‘ahana, the Leiali‘i Association president, gave a teary speech arguing that Lahaina should be rebuilt as a giant beach park, with all the shops and homes staying up near the highway. “I know I’m gonna get a lot of flak from the billionaires and businesses,” he said. “But, if we do this right, they will thank us when we’re not here anymore.” As he spoke, fat raindrops started falling. Kalepa told the crowd, “The blessings are pouring out for us.”

Many Hawaiians want to make this moment an opportunity. “It’s very rare to have people plan a new town after hundreds of years of history,” Pa‘ahana told me. “But we get a chance.” The tropical shower stopped as suddenly as it had started. A line of volunteers carried platters of opakapaka, venison, coconut, and poi to folding tables set up in the cul-de-sac. Saribay was bopping around, taking pictures of the food and cracking jokes. “He’s so full of life,” Kalepa said, grinning in his friend’s direction. As it got dark, kids sat on the asphalt playing duck-duck-goose. Anthony, the filmmaker, told me, “The reason Archie Kalepa stood this up is because his community needed help, and because the idea of aloha is not how much you can keep. It’s how much you can give away.”

The first week and a half after the fire, apart from the machinery and the dogs, Lahaina was silent. No birds or bugs were alive. But even among the ashes there is virescence. The oldest banyan tree in Lahaina, planted a

century and a half ago, beaten and blackened by fire, has sprouted green buds. They appear to glow against the surrounding moonscape, like time travellers from our once and future planet. ♦

By Naaman Zhou

By Elizabeth Kolbert

By Hugh Morris

By Triana Muñoz

[American Chronicles](#)

The Last Lighthouse Keeper in America

In a technological age, impassioned devotees renew an ancient maritime tradition.

By [Dorothy Wickenden](#)



Sally Snowman, the keeper of Boston Light, in historical garb worn for tours. Photographs by Jocelyn Lee for The New Yorker

For the greater part of two decades, Sally Snowman has lived and worked contentedly on Little Brewster Island, a craggy patch of bare rock, crabgrass, concrete, and dilapidated buildings in Boston's outer harbor. Under the auspices of the Coast Guard, she serves as the keeper, and the historian, of Boston Light. The lighthouse, opened in September, 1716, was the first in the American colonies, and Snowman is the last official keeper in the United States.

The lighthouse is a white tower, eighty-nine feet tall, whose east windows face across the North Atlantic toward the English coast, some three thousand miles away. Snowman, a plainspoken New Englander with mariner roots that reach back three centuries, maintains a crisp official manner while on

duty. But sometimes, standing in the lantern room, she contemplates what it was like to undergo the voyage to the New World on a merchant's galleon—made by hand from little more than oak, rope, tar, and flax cloth. Along with violent seasickness, passengers suffered from fever, dysentery, boils, scurvy, mouth rot, rat bites, and lice so copious that they could be scraped off the body. When gales raged, one emigrant wrote, people “cry and pray most piteously,” and “everyone believes that the ship will go to the bottom.” A woman on that crossing, incapacitated by a stalled labor, was shoved through a porthole into the sea. “It was a horrible trip,” Snowman said. “Imagine what they felt when they spotted the light.”

We met for an excursion to the lighthouse one morning in August, at a marina in North Weymouth where Snowman keeps a banged-up Maritime skiff. “Bring rain gear,” she’d e-mailed. “40% chance of rain. Seas 2 ft . . . could be a bit bumpy.” A slight woman with a tanned, friendly face, she greeted me on the gangway in Coast Guard blue: ball cap, fleece, and drip-dry cargo pants. The crew—her brother-in-law Jack Richardson and her husband, Jay Thomson—was preparing for departure. Snowman met Thomson in 1993, when he attended an advanced training session that she led for the Coast Guard Auxiliary, the service’s volunteer corps. His T-shirt identified him in white lettering: “*KEEPER’S HUSBAND*.”

As we cut through a sliver of water between Grape Island and Slate Island, the flash of Boston Light pulsed at the horizon. The tower, now a historic landmark, was built after urgent lobbying by Massachusetts merchants, who were alarmed by the loss of ships, goods, and “his majestie’s subjects” on the harbor’s many shoals and islands. The Massachusetts Bay Colony’s economy depended on international trade, so the general assembly swiftly authorized “a wave-swept light,” exposed on each side to wind and open ocean, and a keeper who “shall carefully and diligently attend his duty at all times.”

In Nantasket Roads—the narrow, hazard-strewn historic main route into the harbor—we passed above the sites of scores of early shipwrecks. Gradually, a classic tableau came into view: a tapering stone tower, a white clapboard keeper’s house with green trim, a small boathouse. As we stepped ashore, Snowman cautioned, “Watch out for seagull poop. The gulls have taken over.” Unlike the forested islands along the way, Little Brewster had no trees

—presumably cut down long ago, for building material and fuel. A neon-orange No Trespassing sign was planted on the lawn, and the boathouse was empty; water rats have burrowed underneath. Snowman unlocked the keeper’s house, built in 1884 near the water’s edge. In the vestibule was a wooden sign painted with a beaming lighthouse and the legend “We will leave the light on for you.”

This is not a given. The United States currently has about eight hundred and fifty lighthouses, only half of which serve as active “aids to navigation.” The rest have been made obsolete by G.P.S., or rendered untenably expensive by damage from increasingly rough weather; the active ones use automated electric lamps. In 2018, Boston Light failed a safety inspection, and the Coast Guard had what Snowman described as a “reality check.” The tours of the island that she had led were halted, and her presence there was restricted to maintenance trips, outside of storm season. On December 30th, when she retires, at seventy-two, the station will be “unmanned,” or, as she said, “unwomanned,” and the profession of lighthouse keeper will go the way of the rag-and-bone collector.

Boston Light, and the lighthouses built after it, provided a crucial service to a growing nation. The ninth law passed by the United States Congress, shortly after the Bill of Rights, established an agency to oversee them. As they were increasingly displaced by new technologies, their admirers fought to protect them, as icons of the national spirit. In 1986, Senator Ted Kennedy declared, at a fund-raiser for a lighthouse on Martha’s Vineyard, “When we preserve lighthouses, we’re preserving part of ourselves.” Kennedy, who belonged to a coastal clan of devoted sailors, invoked the words of his older brother John: “All of us have in our veins the exact same percentage of salt in our blood that exists in the ocean.”

Commercial ship pilots tend to be hardheaded, by necessity, but even they say that lighthouses still have a place. Captain Brian Fournier learned his trade as a tugboat operator in Boston Harbor. “Boston Light was my back yard,” he told me. These days, he generally pilots oil tankers in Maine, and like other professional navigators he uses G.P.S. Still, he prefers to rely on the evidence of his eyes and the reassurance of a long tradition. In low visibility, Fournier said, “I’m looking for the flash of a buoy, the flash of the lighthouse.”

North America's romance with lighthouses began with a ghastly accident. In 1718, Boston Light's first keeper, a sheep farmer and ship pilot named George Worthy lake, took his wife and daughter for a brief trip to the city, leaving the lighthouse and two younger children in the care of his slaves Shadwell and Dina. Upon returning, Worthy lake anchored his boat offshore, and Shadwell rowed out to fetch the group. As the younger children watched from the island, the rowboat capsized, and everyone drowned. The tragedy inspired a poem by twelve-year-old Benjamin Franklin and a funeral oration by the scourging Puritan clergyman Cotton Mather. In his sermon, "Providence Asserted and Adored," Mather instructed mourners to ponder the children's "inexpressible horror" as they "beheld the deadly distress of their parents and sister." The next keeper, Robert Saunders, drowned less than two weeks after assuming his position.

Even apart from such misfortunes, the job had little to recommend it: twenty-four-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week vigilance, minimal pay (the annual equivalent of eleven thousand dollars today), and duties that required a watchmaker's precision and brute strength. The lamps had to be scrupulously cared for. According to Snowman, in the early years Boston Light's lamps needed to be kept topped up with whale oil or herring oil, and the wicks trimmed constantly to avoid smoking. In 1852, the newly established United States Lighthouse Board issued twenty persnickety instructions to "wickies," as keepers were called. Reflectors must be wiped clean with exact proportions of spirits of wine and rouge powder. The ventilators of the lantern were to be opened regularly to admit fresh air. But sudden currents were to be avoided; lanterns occasionally blew over, setting towers on fire. When boaters were spotted in trouble, the keeper leaped into the station launch, desperately hoping to save their lives and spare his own.

Men assigned to islands deemed too dangerous for their families spoke of unbearable loneliness, exacerbated by the moan of the foghorn and the ceaseless crashing of the waves. But even companionship didn't always fend off madness. In 1897, a keeper arrived at the lifesaving station in Narragansett Pier, nearly naked and bleeding from a wound in his back. He explained that his assistant had drunkenly attacked him with a butcher knife, then pursued him as he fled by boat, yelling, "Oh, I'll murder you!" The next night, the assistant was found at the lighthouse, dancing wildly and throwing cookware into the ocean.

Snowman concedes that the keeper's life is "not for everyone." But she was entranced from the age of ten, when she first stepped onto Little Brewster Island. On a picnic with her father, a marine engineer and a Coast Guard Auxiliarist, she gazed up at the lighthouse and proclaimed that she would get married there one day. (In 1994, she and Thomson held a small wedding near the tower.) Later, she also discovered an appealing role model: Abbie Burgess, the daughter of a lighthouse keeper in Maine. In 1856, when Abbie was sixteen, her father went to the mainland to pick up supplies, leaving her in charge. A nor'easter struck, and Abbie and her sisters moved their invalid mother into the tower, before waves swept their house away. After a weeks-long ordeal, Abbie wrote to a friend, "Though at times greatly exhausted with my labors, not once did the lights fail."

Over time, a few hundred women became keepers, mostly by inheriting the job from their fathers or husbands. Ida Lewis served at Newport's Lime Rock Light for more than fifty years, saving at least eighteen lives and becoming known in press accounts as "the bravest woman in America."

It never occurred to Snowman that she would be hired to tend Boston Light. She had struggled in school, passing each year only with difficulty. Still, she earned a B.S. at Bridgewater State College and a master's in education at Curry College. She taught toddlers in day care and elders in senior care, learning-disabled students and aspiring educators at Curry. She got a Ph.D. in neurolinguistics from Walden, an online university—"because I wanted to find out why my brain was so scrambled." At thirty-six, she received a diagnosis of dyslexia and attention-deficit disorder.

In 1976, she followed her father into the Coast Guard Auxiliary, and eventually she requested rotations on Little Brewster as an assistant keeper. She and Thomson, a civil engineer for the town of Plymouth, spent their first nights on the island in 1994, an experience that set them off on an exploration of Boston Light's history. Five years later, they self-published a book about it.

As Snowman sees it, the lighthouse was an underappreciated hero of the Revolutionary War—a locus of resistance against British tyranny. The Tories controlled the city and the harbor, and the lighthouse provided them safe passage. On July 20, 1775, Major Joseph Vose and sixty Continental soldiers

landed on Little Brewster in nimble whaleboats. The revolutionaries burned the lantern room and made off with whatever they could carry, including a cannon—the island’s first fog signal.

The British repaired the tower, but Commander George Washington ordered a second attack. On the night of July 30th, a Continental force of some three hundred men easily overwhelmed the guards, many of whom, one British marine noted, were “in liquor and totally unfit for Service.” When the Tories were forced to evacuate Boston, in 1776, some of their men left behind a keg of gunpowder at the tower. After the explosion, only the base remained.

During our visit, Snowman showed me the irregular “rubble stone” of the original base, and the rectangular blocks that marked the portion rebuilt in 1783. Two decades later, she said, iron cables were placed at intervals around the tower’s midsection, to “control the bulge” from water seeping through the outer masonry. Most lighthouses have distinctive features, as familiar as a child’s birthmark to those who know them. The bands on Boston Light still serve as daymarks for ships coming into the harbor.

As more lighthouses were automated and their personnel removed, Boston Light was increasingly an outlier. By 1991, it was the only Coast Guard station that was still manned. But a preservationist movement was coalescing. Senator Kennedy, after a visit to Little Brewster, had sponsored legislation to keep the station staffed. He subsequently worked with the Coast Guard to replace military personnel with a civilian keeper, and to open the island to tourists.



"Well, what did you expect? They were both missing vital organs."
Cartoon by Joe Dator

A national search was conducted, and Snowman, at fifty-two, was named the keeper—the seventieth in Boston Light’s history, and, she points out, the first woman. For fifteen years, she lived largely on the island, joined by an assistant keeper or two and sometimes by Thomson on the weekends. Spared the erstwhile all-night vigils, the wick-trimming, and the rowboat rescues (Coast Guard Sector Boston sends out a team), they were mostly left with what they call “lighthouse-keeping.” While I was there, as Thomson and Richardson grabbed shovels to clear seagull droppings from the walkways, Snowman detailed the roster of chores. The person assigned to morning rounds checked the mechanical equipment and surveyed the shore, in case anything notable had washed up overnight (no human corpses during her tenure; one whale, in 2018). Someone else mowed the lawn and raised the flag. Everyone was responsible for their own meals and dishes.

This kind of life—tedium interrupted by periodic terror—was what Mrs. Ramsay evoked for her children in Virginia Woolf’s novel: “How would you like to be shut up for a whole month at a time, and possibly more in stormy weather, upon a rock the size of a tennis lawn?” And “to see the same dreary waves breaking week after week, and then a dreadful storm coming, and the windows covered with spray, and birds dashed against the lamp, and the

whole place rocking, and not to be able to put your nose out of doors for fear of being swept into the sea?"

Snowman didn't mind the confinement, or the occasional bomb cyclone. In February, 2013, she and her assistant keeper Audrey Tessier got a call from the Coast Guard: a vicious blizzard was approaching, and they could be evacuated in twenty minutes. Snowman wouldn't think of leaving. In sixty-mile-an-hour winds, she and Tessier headed to the boathouse to check provisions, clutching each other in a crablike crouch. Back at the keeper's house, they used a six-by-six post to brace the cellar door against flooding. Through the night, as the house rattled and shook, Snowman felt as if she were in a vibrating bed. "She was like a kid in a candy store," Tessier told me. "I wasn't quite as thrilled." In the morning, Snowman ran from window to window, exclaiming at the seals playing in the surf and the twenty-foot waves crashing ashore. She was unfazed by the possibility that the wind might whip the house off the island: "What a way to go!"

People who travel by sea know the varied taxonomy of lighthouses: octagonal towers, skeletal metal pyramids, squat houses set on screw-pile foundations. All share a basic function, which Snowman describes unsentimentally as "a light on a pole." Ever since the third century B.C.E., when the Ptolemaic dynasty erected a monumental lighthouse on the Alexandrian coast, people have been fiddling with combinations of fire, mirrors, and lenses, in the hope of producing a stronger beacon.

The reflectors used with early oil lamps focussed the light, but didn't do much to help it project. Nor did the Argand lamp, which employed a cylindrical wick and a glass chimney to reduce smoke. Finally, in the eighteen-twenties, the French physicist Augustin-Jean Fresnel launched a revolution in optics: a concentric assemblage of hundreds of prisms that both refracted and reflected light, greatly magnifying its power. Placed over the light source, the Fresnel lens often rested on a clockwork mechanism hung with weights, like those of a gigantic grandfather clock. At stations like Boston Light, after the keeper wound the mechanism, small bronze "chariot wheels" rotated the lens, and a series of thick glass "bull's-eyes" around its center created flashes that could extend dozens of miles out to sea. The improvement in visibility saved countless lives.

Boston Light's Fresnel is one of only fifty fully functioning original lenses in the U.S. Inside the tower, we walked seventy-six steps up an iron spiral staircase and then climbed a ladder to the gear room, where the clockwork mechanism whirred and clicked, turning the lens. Snowman noted that, before the lighthouse was automated, in 1998, the keeper had to wind it every four hours. Now, running constantly, the bronze rollers gradually wear away. She pointed at tiny flakes covering every surface in the room, and reminded herself to remove them on her next trip.



A longtime member of the Coast Guard Auxiliary, Snowman is the seventieth keeper of Boston Light—and, she points out, the first woman.

By the eighteen-nineties, some Fresnel lenses sat in baths of mercury, which eliminated the friction of the chariot wheels. Snowman explained that it may also have encouraged the erratic behavior of some keepers: "If you inhale mercury all the time, it builds in your body and eats your brain away." Coast Guard tests eventually found high levels of the metal in keepers' blood, and the baths were largely discontinued.

Another ladder led to the lantern room, where a thousand-watt halogen lamp made the space uncomfortably hot. Fresnel-lens admirers call them "the jewels of the lighthouse," but that doesn't convey their size or their intricacy. Boston Light's lens—eleven feet tall and fifteen feet around—is made up of three hundred and thirty-six heavy prisms, set in bronze frames, and twelve

bull's-eyes, creating beams that flash every ten seconds. Snowman said, "In clear skies, it projects twenty-seven miles."

The search for a better navigational aid didn't stop with Fresnel. Today's seafarers carry the successors in their pockets: iPhone apps that provide marine charts and wind conditions, water depths and tides. But sailors still turn to the old methods. "Yes, lighthouses are outdated," Frank Blair, who captains his own schooner out of Maine, told me. "But a good navigator doesn't just use one thing to find his or her place. Think of Reagan—'Trust, but verify.' " G.P.S. devices can be slow to load and quick to malfunction. Military units—our own and others'—practice jamming their signals. "There are too many crashes, both in boats and planes, where the navigator 'knows' where they are, until they don't," Blair told me. "Lighthouses don't lie. Electronics sometimes do." He recalled a trip home from the Azores to Maine. As he approached landfall, the coast was enveloped in heavy fog. He could hear the horn of Great Duck Island ahead, but through some alarming trick of fog, wind, and shore it suddenly sounded as if it were all around him. "The electronics told me where I was within thirty feet," he said. "But I was not assured until I saw the light."

Out on the bluff around the tower, Snowman showed me the damage caused by three centuries of pounding surf. As long ago as 1990, a Coast Guard engineering report warned that Boston Light was "nearing a critical point of being lost" to the erosion of the cliff beneath it. It now stands about ten feet from the edge. The Coast Guard placed riprap and dozens of gabions along the ledges to absorb the force of the breakers, but, as ocean levels have risen and nor'easters intensified, a fault line between the tower's foot and the foghorn's generator house has widened.

Lighthouses can be saved from eroding shores. An early test case came in the nineties, when Daniel May—an ocean engineer and a Coast Guard officer, long involved with Boston Light—led an initiative that moved Cape Cod Light four hundred and fifty feet back from the edge. But such operations are complex and expensive, and require coaxing fractious local and governmental groups and private landowners to work together. May, who rose to rear admiral, also contributed to an effort to guarantee the survival of Montauk Point Lighthouse. The shoreline was preserved, and the lighthouse fully restored and opened to the public. The complete endeavor

cost close to fifty million dollars and involved the local historical society, the State of New York, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The National Historic Lighthouse Preservation Act of 2000 codified a process for such efforts. When a lighthouse is transferred from the Coast Guard, it is offered for free to government agencies, and then, if there are no takers, to nonprofits. As a last resort, it is auctioned off to a private buyer. The Coast Guard retains access to the light and the foghorn, and the new custodians are subject to historic-preservation requirements. Since 2000, more than a hundred and fifty lighthouses have been transferred, about half to private citizens.

In September, 2013, Snowman discovered that she had a new neighbor at Graves Light Station, three miles northeast of Little Brewster. Her great-great-granduncle had petitioned Congress in 1875 to authorize a “landfall light” there—the first that transatlantic ships see as they approach Boston. Graves had been bought by Dave Waller, the fifty-year-old co-owner of a special-effects company in Boston, Brickyard VFX, and his wife, Lynn, a graphic designer who runs a neon-sign shop. Snowman ignored the headlines about their winning bid (close to a million dollars, the highest ever paid for a lighthouse), and some muttering about self-indulgent one-percenters. “These beautiful icons need to be constantly maintained, according to strict regulations,” she said. “The Coast Guard doesn’t have the expertise. Its duty is to save lives. More good can be done for the future of lighthouses through nonprofits, and people like Dave Waller.”

Graves Light, an unpainted granite obelisk built on jagged rock, sounded like the kind of desolate place where keepers lost their minds. On Waller’s Web site, he warns boaters and divers, “The ledges are dangerous. Stay away,” adding that the sea swells “can smash a boat on the rocks or crush and sink a boat under the dock.” After Snowman led our tour of Boston Light, we motored out to Graves Ledge. As we gazed up at the tower, Thomson said that more than a hundred years of coal dust and grime had been sandblasted off. He pointed out a storehouse, which Waller calls Shanty No. 2. “The first one washed away,” Thomson said. “On the security camera, you can see—house, then wave, then no house.”



The Fresnel lens, a complex assemblage of hundreds of prisms, can extend flashes of light dozens of miles out to sea.

When the station was automated, in 1975, its Fresnel lens was given to the Smithsonian, where it sits in a warehouse. Unable to find another, Waller set out to Frankenstein one, with help from his sons, a young machinist, and a lighthouse-restoration engineer in Australia. The process was consuming, Snowman said: “Dave’s accumulation of pieces from all over the world took nine years.”

It wouldn’t have been possible without a large cohort of supporters—volunteers and paid locals, descendants of Graves Light keepers, and military authorities. In early September, the Coast Guard helicoptered a new lens base—two eleven-hundred-pound pieces, swinging from a cable—to the foot of the tower. A private pilot hoisted them to the catwalk outside the lantern room, where Waller’s crew snagged them with boat hooks, then guided the pilot by radio to set them in place. When the Fresnel was assembled, Snowman took her boat out to Graves to see it. She told me, “The splendor of the lens touched my heart.”

Soon afterward, I met Waller at a marina in Boston Harbor for a trip to Graves. Snowman and Thomson were to meet us there, but the weather was growing worse—Tropical Storm Ophelia, which had blasted North Carolina with seventy-mile-an-hour winds, was making its way up the coast. Shortly before we were set to depart, Snowman e-mailed, “NO-GO for me & Jay.”

Waller assured me that his decommissioned Coast Guard Response Boat had handled worse: “We go out in all kinds of shitty weather.” After a head-snapping ride, he tied the boat to a buoy several hundred feet from Graves Ledge and winched a rubber dinghy down into the water. We had set off toward the light in the dinghy when Waller abruptly said, “Fuck!” He’d left one of our oars in the response boat, and we were helplessly bobbing out to sea. “This is bad,” he said. “This is really bad.” As I entertained flashbacks of the Worthy lake drownings, Waller tore off his shoes, pants, and glasses, and dove into the water, sidestroking to the boat through choppy waves. Some minutes later, he motored up, dripping wet, a bleeding gash on his leg. The oar retrieved, his glasses broken, he briskly rowed us to the landing.

The Coast Guard hadn’t yet installed the lamp in the Fresnel, so we were able to step inside. It felt like entering a geodesic dome: a three-and-a-half-ton rotating assembly of glass. Waller stood on the supply reservoir for a five-wick oil lamp—an eBay acquisition—as he made some final adjustments. The modern lamp, refracted and reflected through fifteen antique bull’s-eye panes, will be powered by solar panels on the boathouse roof and a small wind turbine outside. “That lens is stunning,” Jeremy D’Entremont, the historian for the U.S. Lighthouse Society, told me, after his own pilgrimage to Graves. “It’s crazy. The old has become new again.”

Snowman, assured by these kinds of preservation efforts, wasn’t overly concerned about the future of Boston Light. Still, she admitted that she’ll miss the work, and the place—its solitude and appalling winter weather even more than its sun-drenched summer days: “I can’t get enough of it.” When she’s on Little Brewster, she likes to climb to the lighthouse gear room and open an Alice in Wonderland-size door that leads onto the catwalk. She sits there, dangling her legs over the edge, struck by how people from earliest antiquity have tended lights, “for the purpose of guiding vessels safely into harbor, or as warnings to stay away from hazards. This, to me, is a kind of miracle.” ♦

By Carolyn Kormann

By Michael Adno

By Mosab Abu Toha

By [David Remnick](#)

The only way to tell this story is to try to tell it truthfully and to know that you will fail.

On the evening of Wednesday, October 18th, with the entire Middle East in a state of mourning and outrage, I took a taxi to the information offices of the Israel Defense Forces, a heavily guarded compound in northwest Tel Aviv. Like many reporters, I'd accepted an invitation to see video evidence of the worst massacre of Jews in generations, certainly in the history of Israel—Hamas's [rampage](#) through Kibbutz Kfar Aza, Kibbutz Be'eri, and other communities near the Gaza Strip, extending to [an outdoor electronic-music festival, Nova](#). At last count, the attack throughout what Israelis call Otef Aza—"the Gaza envelope"—had claimed some fourteen hundred lives; thousands were wounded, and around two hundred and twenty people had been [kidnapped](#) and taken to the Gaza Strip. Hamas gave the operation a name, the Al-Aqsa Flood.

The roads in Israel were nearly as empty as they are on Yom Kippur. The only thing that might slow you down was a siren, a warning that a rocket was headed north out of Gaza toward Tel Aviv and other cities. This happened multiple times a day. The protocol, known to everyone, was that you pull over, get out, lie flat on the road, cover your head, and wait a few minutes before moving on. I hadn't been in the country three hours before I was under an overpass on Highway 20, waiting it out. The usual commercial signage along the highway had been transformed, seemingly overnight. No Coke Zero, no Toyota. Now the billboards blared assertions of unity—"Together We'll Win"—and calls for the return of the hostages. Their photographs were everywhere. Earlier that day, the American President had arrived to meet with the Israeli Prime Minister. And, having delivered a message of ardent support flecked with notes of caution against being consumed with rage and making the kinds of catastrophic mistakes that the United States made in the wake of 9/11, the President was in the air again, headed back to Washington.

The night before, in Tel Aviv at a friend's house for dinner, I received a series of WhatsApp messages from Mosab Abu Toha, a thirty-year-old poet who [lives with his wife and children in Beit Lahia, in northern Gaza](#). Lately, he's been staying with relatives in the Jabalia refugee camp, about a mile

and a half away. Born in the Al-Shati refugee camp, in Gaza City, he left the Strip for the first time four years ago. He ended up studying for a master's of fine arts in poetry, at Syracuse University. Now Mosab, in one-sentence bursts, was saying that the Al-Ahli Arab Hospital, in Zeitoun, a southern district of Gaza City, had been bombed by Israeli warplanes: "God help us." He sent images—first of a burning building and a prostrate man, presumably dead, in the street—and he relayed reports of body counts:

"Between 200 and 300 got killed."

Then: "More than 500 were killed in the hospital."

Then: "More than 800."

Then: "It's now 1,115 people killed in the bombing of the hospital in Gaza."

He was not claiming authority or proximity to the hospital but conveying the alarm on his own social networks. Later, Mosab sent a photograph of a dead baby cradled in the gloved hands of a medical worker. "Sorry to send this," he added as a caption, "but this is one victim in the hospital's massacre."

Soon everyone at the dinner table was getting push alerts—from Israeli media, from the wires, from CNN, the BBC, the *Times*. The conversation went on at a very high pitch. As we ate, there were, as there had been night after night, echoing booms: rockets from Gaza. People paused, listened for a moment, and continued eating. These rockets, they had clearly judged, did not warrant a trip to the *mamad*, the reinforced safe room downstairs. Whether to seek shelter has long been a matter of expertise and routine. Later, some people wandered from the table to flip between Channels 12 and 13 on Israeli television. News anchors were now sharing statements from Israeli government sources denying that Israel had fired a missile or dropped a bomb anywhere near the hospital; in fact, they said, the responsibility for the disaster lay with Palestinian Islamic Jihad, an armed group that is smaller than Hamas but no less militant. It was a failed rocket launch, they said. Hours later, American intelligence agencies declared that their information was in accord with the Israeli assessment.

When I asked Mosab what he thought of the denials, he answered, “No one believes them.” He criticized as “unfair” [President Biden](#)’s statement suggesting that Israel wasn’t responsible, and added, “Well, what if it were?” WhatsApp messages kept my phone vibrating. “It was responsible for past massacres at schools,” Mosab wrote. “What did the American Administration do in response?”

Like every Gazan his age, Mosab had lived through countless air assaults. One day when he was eight and out shopping for dinner, he looked up and saw an Apache helicopter fire into a high-rise. This was at the start of the second intifada, in 2000. Since then, he’s lost friends and relatives; funerals and rubble are fixtures of life for him and his neighbors. When he was sixteen, in the midst of what the Israelis called Operation Cast Lead, he was hit in the head, neck, and shoulder with shrapnel during a bombing.

Podcast: The New Yorker Radio Hour

[David Remnick talks with two sources about the October 7th attacks.](#)

Mosab was not inclined to defer to the intelligence assessments of the Israelis, any more than Israeli officials were apt to accept discussions of the blockade of Gaza and the occupation of the West Bank as “context” for the massacres in the south. There were, of course, facts—many of them unknown—but the narratives came first, all infused with histories and counter-histories, grievances and fifty varieties of fury, all rushing in at the speed of social media. People were going to believe what they needed to believe. And so, while the Israelis and their allies were relieved by the intelligence reports of a disastrous misfire by Islamic Jihad, the Palestinians and most of the Arab world were having none of it. The funerals went on. The Israeli bombing of Gaza—with thousands dead, [hospitals at the brink of collapse](#), infrastructure crumbling—intensified. So did the mobilization for an Israeli ground offensive. There were skirmishes between Israel and Hezbollah on Israel’s border with Lebanon, threats from the ayatollahs in Iran, American warships in the eastern Mediterranean.

The cab dropped me off at the I.D.F. compound in Ramat Aviv. A soldier in a guard booth shoved aside an aluminum container of takeout macaroni, inspected my passport, and took me up to the second floor. I entered a large open-plan room filled with young officers and younger soldiers working

intently at their phones and laptops, delivering the Israeli position to media around the world. For a week, their priority had been to make sure that everyone knew about the atrocities in Otef Aza. Now the task was to put out intelligence on the hospital bombing and, no less essential, to slam the foreign media, whose early push alerts and headlines had blamed Israel. “For the last ten days, we have been continuously asked about whether children were beheaded, not only murdered,” one reservist, Yair Zivan, who is a diplomatic adviser to the former Prime Minister Yair Lapid, told me. “Yesterday, these same news outlets didn’t wait for one moment before reporting that Israel was responsible for the bombing of the hospital. Where does that come from?”



"Whoa, whoa! Where do you two think you're going?"
Cartoon by Harry Bliss

I was led to a large, windowless conference room and took a seat. There were three bowls of snacks—peanuts, walnuts, and sugar cookies—and complimentary I.D.F. notebooks. Across a table sat two men: Amnon Shefler, a lieutenant colonel and a senior I.D.F. spokesman, and, hunched over a laptop, Mattan Harel-Fisch, who had compiled video of the massacre from closed-circuit security cameras, from GoPro cameras and cell phones that the Hamas gunmen used to record what they did, and from social-media clips posted by both Hamas and its Israeli victims. The compilation he was about to show was forty-three minutes long. But, Harel-Fisch said, there was

endless material: “I am now making a second movie.” The video would be shown on a flat-screen on the wall to my right.

The officers were more than aware that they would be accused of propagandizing. They did not much care. As Anshel Pfeffer, a columnist for *Haaretz*, had written a few days before, what took place on the morning of the 7th was “the greatest massacre of any Jewish community in the historic Land of Israel since the Middle Ages.” Demands for vengeance were commonplace.

And yet who would prevent another march of folly? Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had always fancied himself his country’s Churchill and kept a framed portrait of Britain’s wartime leader near his desk, next to one of Theodor Herzl, the founder of modern Zionism. In speeches against appeasement, Netanyahu quoted his hero on the “confirmed unteachability of mankind.” But Churchill, for all his flaws, did not bring a collection of messianic zealots into his cabinet; he did not lead a country while being under criminal indictment; he did not leave the security of the state vulnerable to bulldozers and armed men on motorcycles.

Netanyahu has been heckled by reservists and vilified in the press. A poll published in the newspaper *Ma’ariv* six days after the massacre showed that forty-eight per cent of Israelis preferred that Benny Gantz, a phlegmatic retired Army general and a centrist politician who was brought into a new unity government, lead the country; only twenty-nine per cent preferred Netanyahu. The same paper also reported that eighty per cent of Israelis wanted Netanyahu to take responsibility for the security failures on October 7th, as leaders of the I.D.F. and the Shin Bet, the country’s internal security service, had done. Netanyahu, who cannot bear to express repentance or regret for his government’s failure, or even to show compassion for the bereaved—something that, many Israelis noted, Biden was able to do—is unlikely to step down or step back.

Harel-Fisch said that the footage was horrifying. There would be extended clips of stalking, shootings, abductions, torched houses, burned corpses, terrorized children, dead children, dead infants, mutilation, jubilation. Before the viewing started, Shefler wanted to make one last point. He had just come back from a stint in the U.S., studying at the Kennedy School of

Government, at Harvard. He said that he found his fellow-students “frozen” when it came to discussing the Israeli-Palestinian issue, scared to get into its history lest the discussion go sideways. But while the shades of gray were important, he went on, there were times when “some things are black and some things are white.”

Shefler excused himself and left the room. Harel-Fisch turned out the lights. He tapped a key on his laptop and the horror show began.

The night flight from J.F.K. to Ben Gurion Airport, six days earlier, was packed. On the El Al check-in line, a complicated security process even under normal circumstances, the passenger behind me, a man of late middle age, had perched on his suitcase what appeared to be a shrink-wrapped machine gun. I stopped worrying about the tube of toothpaste in my carry-on.

“What is your business in Israel?” the security person asked.

I landed in time for dinner with friends outside Tel Aviv on Friday. Later that night, Avichai Brodutch, a father of three, from Kibbutz Kfar Aza, was trying to sleep at his parents’ apartment south of Tel Aviv. Brodutch is forty-two, an exceedingly modest man, a grower of pineapples who had turned to studying nursing. In the dark of his room that night, he stared at the ceiling; as he told me the next day, his mind was “spinning.” He’d taken half a Klonopin. It did him no good. His wife, Hagar, and his children—Ofri, Yuval, and Uriah—were hostages in the Gaza Strip.

Early on the morning of October 7th, Hamas fighters swarmed the lush grounds of Kfar Aza. According to documents recovered by the I.D.F., they carried accurate maps of their targets and detailed battle plans: “The subordinate cell advances with the securing forces. . . . They must shoot down as many victims as possible, take hostages and take some of them to the Gaza Strip using various cars.” After roughly two years of planning, the fighters—led by members of the Nukhba, élite forces of the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades—breached the border fence around Gaza, and more than fifteen hundred of them sped toward the kibbutzim, on motorcycles, in pickup trucks with mounted machine guns. Some went over the border fence on paragliders. After getting past the yellow gate of Kfar Aza, they went

house to house, peeking in windows, testing doors. Their pace was methodical. To smoke people out of their safe rooms, they set fire to spare tires. To prevent escape, they torched cars. Then the real killing began.

In the chaos, Brodutch lost contact with his family. Only hours later did he learn that they were missing. Soldiers sorted through the corpses strewn around the grounds—many of them burned and blackened. In the days after the massacre, Brodutch was told that the bodies of his wife and children had not been found, and that a witness had seen them being led away, presumably en route to Gaza. When Brodutch heard this, he recalled, “I felt like I’d won the lottery.” His family was alive.

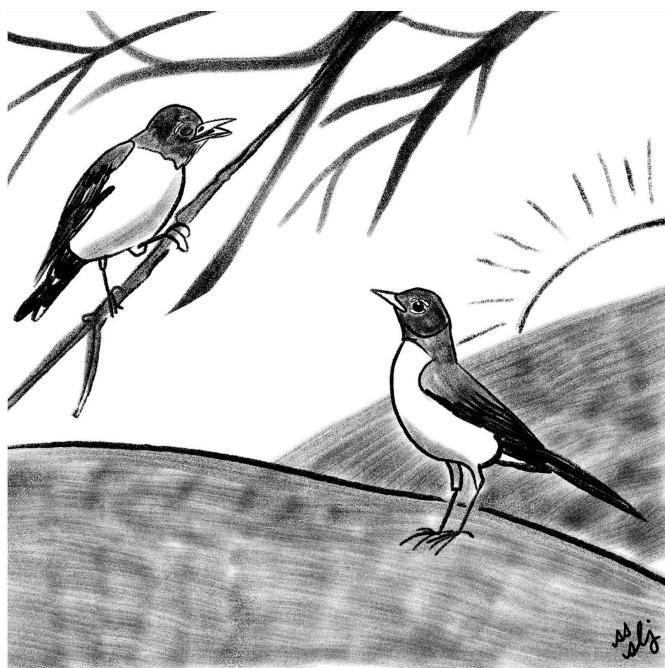
Now, in his sleeplessness, he needed to do something, anything, to make sure that his wife and children were not forgotten. He got up, showered, and dressed in donated clothes: shorts, a T-shirt, and Crocs. He collected his dog, Rodney, a chocolate-brown Ridgeback, and drove to Tel Aviv, getting out at the Kirya, the I.D.F.’s headquarters, on Kaplan Street. This was where, since January, tens of thousands of Israelis had assembled every week to [protest](#) the Netanyahu government’s plan to reduce the authority of the Supreme Court. At around three, he sat down on a plastic chair next to a sign that he’d drawn reading “*HaMishpacha Sheli Be’aza*”: “My Family Is in Gaza.” Brodutch’s brother, who was visiting from Canada, posted a picture of him and sent it to their WhatsApp groups. By daylight, a small crowd had gathered around him. By late morning, when I arrived, there were hundreds of people, many of them chanting slogans calling for Netanyahu’s resignation. Another slogan was “*Hayom!*” “Today!” As in, Bring the hostages back today.

The victims of the Hamas attack—the dead, the survivors, the kidnapped—were not settlers or fanatics; they were, in the main, the liberals of Israel, a breed that still speaks (with caveats and shades of difference) about peace and two states for two peoples. They tend to loathe Netanyahu for his hubris and corruption, his disdain for the Palestinians, his attempt to diminish the Supreme Court, and his alliance with such lurid reactionaries as his national-security minister, [Itamar Ben-Gvir](#), and his finance minister, Bezalel Smotrich. Some of the survivors were not especially political; some had come to the previous Kaplan Street demonstrations. They joined groups like

Achim Laneshek, or Brothers in Arms, reservists who marched against Netanyahu. After October 7th, they put aside protest for rescue work.

Brodutch sat down with me on a bench to talk, but every few minutes someone would come up and hug him, hard, shaking with grief and fury. People kept bringing him clothing, drinks, food: kugel, couscous, a pile of meatballs. Brodutch was touched and embarrassed, but, even in his gratitude, he could not eat. To please one visitor, he ate a teaspoonful of pomegranate seeds. His smile was sheepish, his eyes full of hurt, though he could not manage to cry, much as he wanted to.

"I don't know what my state of mind is," he said. "There is so much grief, so much love." The night before the attack, Ofri, his eldest child, had celebrated her tenth birthday at a restaurant near the kibbutz. "We were meant to have the birthday cake on Saturday," Brodutch told me. "It's probably still in the fridge."



"That's an old wives' tale. You can wake up whenever and there are worms all over the place."
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

A paratrooper named Ido Buhadana tapped Brodutch on the shoulder. Brodutch recognized him immediately. On their rampage, Hamas fighters had not only managed to blind the Army's surveillance systems and break through the forty-mile-long border fence at more than twenty points; they also stormed at least eight military bases and killed dozens of soldiers who

might have been able to beat back the onslaught. Buhadana was among the reservists who made it to Kfar Aza that day, first to hunt for remaining terrorists, then to search for survivors. Now he, too, was shaking with emotion. After a while, he wiped the sweat from his head and the tears from his face, and sat down. “If you are speaking by proportion, this is way worse than 9/11,” he said. “The world should know how cruel these people are.”

The scene outside the I.D.F. headquarters was an open-air shiva, part of a *national* shiva. So many well-wishers were descending on Brodutch that he finally asked to take a break, and headed off with his brother. When we met again, a short while later, Brodutch made it clear that he wanted to deliver a message that was out of keeping with the dominant emotions of the day—the hunger for vengeance, the outrage at the failure of the Israeli government to protect its citizens. Brodutch allowed that the state had failed: “This is a colossal disaster that will be investigated in years to come.” But he was painstakingly deliberate in his comments about his family’s kidnappers. His wife and his children were in the hands of Hamas, and Hamas was keenly aware of what was being written and said about the organization abroad, including in Israel. Every time Israel dropped a bomb, he worried that it might kill his family. “I have to hope that there is someone watching over them,” he said. “It was overkill by Hamas. I don’t think they thought things would go that far. At least, I want to believe that. Their religion is peaceful. No religion can be successful for long if it is not peaceful.”

He was terrified by the prospect of a ground war. “We are going the wrong way,” he said. “We’ve had a sign from God, and if we read it as a sign to go to war that is one thing. We should be sending humanitarian aid to women, children, and the elderly. Hamas believes that women, children, and the elderly should not be attacked, but something on their side went very wrong. I don’t think they thought this attack would be so easy, and they just *lost* it.”

Uriah, his youngest, is four and a half. Brodutch said that he imagined his son would be “causing havoc wherever he is,” and that, maybe for that reason, Hamas would lose patience and let him be the first one released. “I’ve seen military conflict for years and years,” he said, “and it solves nothing.”

On a trip to Gaza during the second intifada, I met one of the founders of Hamas, a former surgeon named Mahmoud al-Zahar. This was 2001, and al-Zahar was fifty-seven. “ ‘David,’ ” he said. “That’s a Jewish name, isn’t it?” Hamas, a radical, religious rival to the Palestine Liberation Organization, was determined to free “the whole of Palestine.” Hamas might consider a two-state solution, but only as a *hudna*, a ceasefire. The ultimate goal, al-Zahar said, “is to establish an Islamic state in Palestine, in Egypt, in Lebanon, in Saudi Arabia—everywhere under a single caliphate.” Certain conclusions followed from this: “We will not tolerate a non-Islamic state on Islamic lands.”

The spiritual leader of Hamas, an outgrowth of the Muslim Brotherhood, was a Gazan sheikh named Ahmed Yassin, who, in the years after the 1967 Six-Day War, established a range of social-service organizations in Gaza, which had just become Israeli-occupied territory. In those days, many Israelis shopped in Gaza City or went to the beach nearby; tens of thousands of Gazans commuted regularly to jobs inside Israel, a practice that Yassin feared would be corrosive to the moral values of young Muslims. He stressed *da’wa*, the call to God. But, as a way of keeping militants within the fold and of keeping pace with the P.L.O. as a force of resistance, Yassin sanctioned the import of arms and the formation of nascent militia groups. In 1987, when the first intifada began, in a Gaza refugee camp, Hamas—an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiyya, the Islamic Resistance Movement—was born. Four years later, Hamas established its military wing, the Izz ad-Din al-Qassam Brigades. Led today by Mohammed Deif, who was born in a refugee camp in Khan Yunis, in southern Gaza, the Brigades have been behind countless military operations against Israel over the years, from car bombs to suicide attacks, though never anything as tactically intricate or as ambitious as Operation Al-Aqsa Flood. Among the stated objectives of the massacre, a Hamas leader said, was to free Palestinian prisoners in Israel and to protect the Al-Aqsa Mosque from desecration, but many suspected ambitions that were wider in scope, including scuttling a rapprochement between Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The original Hamas charter, or covenant, was a nine-thousand-word treatise adopted shortly after the group’s founding. It was filled with antisemitic conspiracy theories, all the traditional tropes of cunning, greed, and world domination: the Jews started the First World War, it asserted, in a scheme to

topple the Islamic Caliphate, and they started the Second World War in order to make “huge profits from trading war materiel.” The Zionists, who had replaced “the state of truth” with “the state of evil,” aspire to “expand from the Nile to the Euphrates,” while Hamas “strives to raise the banner of Allah over every inch of Palestine.”

Hamas, in its first decade, established no caliphate, but it did help propel the ascent of the right in Israeli politics. After Israel and the P.L.O. signed the Oslo Accords, in Washington, in 1993; in Cairo, in 1994; and in Taba, Egypt, in 1995, Hamas tried to undermine progress toward a binding two-state resolution. The organization, which condemned the P.L.O. for having recognized the state of Israel, backed a string of suicide bombings in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, and elsewhere. Israeli militants, too, sought to sabotage the accords, and in 1995 a young right-wing zealot assassinated Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Israeli voters at first seemed likely to turn to a candidate from Rabin’s Labor Party, Shimon Peres, who had received a Nobel Peace Prize, along with Rabin and Yasir Arafat, for his role in conceiving the Oslo agreements. Hamas, in a sense, was the spoiler. Playing on the fears of the people, Netanyahu and his Likud Party won with the support of conservatives, settlers, the ultra-Orthodox, and the Mizrahi, Jews with origins in the Middle East and North Africa. During the campaign, he made sure to be overheard when he told a spiritual leader of the Sephardim, Rabbi Yitzhak Kaduri, “Leftists have forgotten what it is to be Jewish. They think they will put security in the hands of the Arabs—that Arabs will look out for us.” He won the election, and though he has spent occasional periods in the wilderness, he has now been Prime Minister for a total of sixteen years, longer even than David Ben-Gurion.

In Netanyahu’s first term, I spoke [at length](#) with him in Jerusalem, and even interviewed his father, Benzion, a reclusive scholar of the Spanish Inquisition whose sense that Jewish history is in perpetual danger of coming to an end exerted a powerful influence on his son. “The Jewish people have had a history unlike any other people’s because they lacked the elements of national survival,” the Prime Minister told me. “On the other hand, they didn’t perish completely. They perished *mostly*. They were about ten per cent of the Roman Empire at the time of the birth of Christ, so by any calculation they should be about a hundred and twenty million and not twelve million. . . . What happened after the worst catastrophe in our history

is that we somehow amassed the national will to reforge a vital center for Jewish life here in Israel.” Netanyahu’s sense of the state and of himself as its unillusioned guardian was clear: “You have to protect yourself. This is what the Jews didn’t have. They didn’t have the means to protect themselves against evil, the baser impulses of mankind. And they paid a price unlike any other people. We now have the means to protect ourselves.”

In 2005, Ariel Sharon, a Likud Prime Minister known as the Bulldozer, defied much of his right-wing constituency by evacuating the Israeli settlements in Gaza. The aim of disengagement was to yield a rough peace and make Israel more secure, but the following year Hamas rose to power, winning legislative elections and, after a military confrontation, ousting the Palestinian Authority from the Gaza Strip. There have been no elections since.



“We have an extensive wine list designed to overwhelm you with choices, leading you to say ‘Sounds good!’ to whatever I recommend.”
Cartoon by Mads Horwath

Although the occupation had, in the Israeli view, ended, Gaza remained under siege and blockade, and a spiral of violence deepened the immiseration of daily life. In December, 2008, following a period of Qassam rockets and counterraids, Israel launched Operation Cast Lead, which killed at least a thousand Palestinians, devastated civic infrastructure in Gaza City, and left many thousands homeless. In 2012, Israel responded to Hamas rocket fire with eight days of air strikes; at least eighty-seven Palestinian

civilians were killed. In 2014, after Hamas abducted and murdered three Israeli teen-agers, Israel commenced a seven-week assault, killing more than fourteen hundred Palestinian civilians.

In 2017, Hamas toned down its rhetoric. Despite its authoritarian rule in the Strip—its suppression of the Palestinian Authority and any other rival for power—the group asserted in Article 28 of its updated manifesto that “Hamas believes in, and adheres to, managing its Palestinian relations on the basis of pluralism, democracy, national partnership, acceptance of the other and the adoption of dialogue.” The new document said that Hamas’s fight was with Zionism, not with the Jewish people as such, but it unhesitatingly reaffirmed its ultimate ambition of eliminating the “Zionist entity.”

As the Israeli right solidified its hold on power, some in the country came to view its draconian anti-Palestinian policies with repugnance. Yair Golan is a retired Army general in his early sixties; he is graying yet as trim as a blade. He was an infantry commander during the second intifada, and then led the Judea and Samaria division, in the West Bank. But he grew increasingly disgusted with the military’s treatment of Palestinians, and he did not keep his views to himself. A speech that he delivered seven years ago at a Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremony at Kibbutz Tel Yitzhak caused a furor. Golan, who was then the deputy chief of staff of the I.D.F., warned that Israeli society had grown callous to “the other,” and said, “If there is something that frightens me in the memory of the Holocaust, it is identifying horrifying processes that occurred in Europe, particularly in Germany, seventy, eighty, and ninety years ago, and finding evidence of their existence here in our midst today, in 2016.” He referred to an incident in Hebron in which an I.D.F. sergeant was filmed shooting a Palestinian who had stabbed an Israeli soldier but had already been subdued and was prostrate. “There is nothing easier and simpler,” Golan said, “than behaving like a beast, becoming morally corrupt, and sanctimonious.”

Although Isaac Herzog, now Israel’s President, praised Golan for his “morality and responsibility,” Netanyahu blasted Golan’s reference to the Holocaust as “outrageous,” and there were countless calls for the general’s resignation. In the end, he walked back his comments somewhat, but his disenchantment was such that he joined Meretz, a political party to the left of Labor, vowing to battle the annexation of the West Bank.

I ran into Golan at the studios of Channel 13, near Jerusalem. He was there to tell the story about what he did on the morning of the massacre. As a reservist, he threw on his uniform, got his gun, drove to a military outpost in the city of Ramle, and asked to be an “envoy.” He made his way south and started getting calls from people whose friends or family were in the area, some of them at the Nova festival, in Re’im. The calls came first from his sister and from a reporter at *Haaretz*—both of whom had relatives hiding from the attackers—and then from others. He rescued them all, pulling them from behind bushes and trees and shuttling them to safety. Suddenly, he was all over the news.

As we sat together, Golan talked about the depths of the Israeli failure. About officials who thought that by “shrinking the conflict” they could maintain the status quo indefinitely. About the complacency engendered by high fences and a security system overly reliant on “startup nation” technologies and the Special Forces. About the failure of Netanyahu and his intelligence and military bureaucracies to heed warnings of imminent danger, in Gaza and beyond. About the moral deficits of a government obsessed with protecting its Prime Minister from criminal prosecution and indifferent to the corrosive effects of the blockade of Gaza and the occupation of the West Bank. All these factors helped open the way to the October 7th massacre, he believed, and to a war being led by an untrustworthy leader.

“When you have a crisis, like Pearl Harbor or September 11th, it is a multidimensional crisis, a multidimensional failure,” Golan said. Netanyahu, who in 2009 was elected for the second time, after Operation Cast Lead, “made a terrible strategic mistake,” Golan went on. “He wanted quiet. So, while Hamas was relatively quiet, Netanyahu saw no need to have a vision for the larger Palestinian question. And since he needed the support of the settlers and the ultra-Orthodox, he appeased them. He created a situation in which, so long as the Palestinian Authority was weak, he could create the over-all perception that the best thing to do was to annex the West Bank. We weakened the very institution that we could have worked with, and strengthened Hamas.”

Golan was referring to a strategy of Netanyahu’s, deployed over the past fourteen years, that is known as the “conception.” Its aim was to weaken the

Palestinian Authority, which sought territorial compromise, by bolstering its enemy Hamas. While refusing to engage the P.A. and its leader, Mahmoud Abbas, in any serious negotiations, the government permitted hundreds of millions of dollars from Qatar to stream into Hamas's coffers and increased the flow of work permits for Gazans with jobs inside Israel. It wasn't that Netanyahu cared one way or another about the poor of Gaza; it was, in his view, a matter of strategic guile. But, as Golan's old boss Gadi Eisenkot, a former I.D.F. chief of staff, told *Ma'ariv* last year, Netanyahu carried out this strategy "in total opposition to the national assessment of the National Security Council, which determined that there was a need to disconnect from the Palestinians and establish two states."

One aspect of Netanyahu's Churchill complex is his colossal self-assurance, and he was unflinchingly confident in his "conception." As he reportedly put it in a Likud meeting, "Anyone who wants to thwart the establishment of a Palestinian state must support bolstering Hamas and transferring money to Hamas. . . . This is part of our strategy." Last December, he told an interviewer for Saudi television, "I think my record speaks for itself. The last decade in which I led Israel was the safest decade in Israel's history. But not only safe and secure for Israelis, also safe and secure for the Palestinians." It was a litany of bad faith, deception, and delusion, with disastrous consequences.

"I commanded Judea and Samaria from 2005 to 2007," Golan told me, referring to the West Bank. "The most frustrating thing to me is the inability of anyone to envision how these two peoples can live together. We are not going anywhere. And they are not going anywhere. Occupation is not a solution. Our peoples should both be led by sensible majorities, but both peoples are being led by their extremists. This is the challenge of Israel."

In the meantime, there was the spectre of a land war. Golan argued that this could not be avoided: "To recover our villages and kibbutzim in the south, we need one-hundred-per-cent security in the area. To do that, you need to make the military of Hamas irrelevant. There will be an ongoing operation, attacks all the time. In the next few days, you will see only the first stage of that war."

Before he hurried off to his next appointment, I asked him about the prospects of a multifront war: with Hamas, in Gaza; with Hezbollah, on the border with Lebanon; with Iranian proxy militias coming from Syria and Iraq; even with Iran itself. He put the chances at “ten or fifteen per cent.”

In school or beyond, nearly every Israeli encounters Hayim Nahman Bialik’s 1904 poem “In the City of Killing,” written in Hebrew just after the pogrom in Kishinev, in the Russian Empire’s Pale of Settlement. After a local antisemitic newspaper published reports that Jews had murdered a Christian child in the area to use his blood for Passover matzo, mobs led by priests went on a rampage, with cries of “Kill the Jews!” A historical commission, in Odesa, assigned Bialik, a young Hebrew teacher, to travel to Kishinev and interview survivors for a kind of oral history. The poem became a rallying cry against the tsar and the Russian Empire, and, eventually, for Jewish national pride. Inspired by Bialik’s words, many Russian Jews left for Europe, the United States, and Palestine.

Get up and walk through the city of the massacre
And with your hand touch and lock your eyes
On the cooled brain and clots of blood
Dried on tree trunks, rocks, and fences; it is they.
Go to the ruins, to the gaping breaches.

Forty-nine Jews were massacred by the mob in Kishinev. It is hard to know what the fourteen hundred killed in a single day in Otef Aza will mean. Unlike the Jews in the Pale, Israel is hardly defenseless. But it is vulnerable, and it was plain that this massacre would influence the collective psyche—and the politics—of Israel for years to come.

A week after the events of October 7th, an Israeli journalist and friend arranged for us to travel about an hour south from Tel Aviv to Kibbutz Kfar Aza. Once we passed the coastal cities of Ashdod and Ashkelon, we veered east, away from Gaza and into an area heavily guarded by I.D.F. soldiers. In the fields near Gaza, troops, tanks, and armored personnel had started to establish positions for the planned ground invasion.

An I.D.F. press officer gave us bulletproof vests and Kevlar helmets. There had been no exchanges of gunfire in a few days, no evidence that Hamas

fighters remained in the area, but an officer cautioned, "This is an active scene." Founded in 1951, Kfar Aza was a prosperous kibbutz with two businesses on the site, one that made a dye for plastics, another that provided lighting and sound systems for events. Around seven hundred and fifty people lived there, with kindergartens, a gym, a swimming pool, and a cemetery. Now most of the houses were bullet-pocked ruins, caved in, blown up, torched. Earlier that day, the grounds had been cleared of the last cadavers, but the stench of death lingered. We were told there had been so many corpses, often burned or mutilated, that the young I.D.F. soldiers could not bear the work and called in *Zaka*, an organization of religious volunteers who, with meticulous care, collect bodies, body parts, and even blood, and give the dead a proper burial according to Jewish law. I'd seen a video in which a volunteer poured cold water on one of the burned corpses. I asked why. To cool it off, I was told, so that when it is placed in a plastic collection bag the bag doesn't melt.



"One of these dollars is the first dollar I ever made. Choose carefully, and you will become C.E.O."
Cartoon by Ngazi Ukazu

One of our guides was Golan Vach, a reserve colonel in the I.D.F.'s Home Front Command search-and-rescue unit. In a long career, he had gone on missions in the wake of all manner of disasters, in Haiti, Brazil, the Philippines, and Surfside, Florida. In February, following the earthquake in southern Turkey that left more than forty-five thousand dead, Vach and his

team pulled nineteen people from the rubble, and received a commendation from the President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Vach, a lithe, purposeful man in his late forties, led us from house to ruined house, describing the battles fought by local security, soldiers, and police who, though under-armed and outmanned, had raced to Kfar Aza and rescued whomever they could until the Army arrived in force. That took many agonizing hours, and, for long periods, the Hamas fighters were able to take their time, killing, burning, collecting hostages.

Vach led us into one ruin and described two women who'd been found there, both naked, their hands bound behind their backs, shot in the head. Elsewhere, he said, he had found butcher knives, a decapitated soldier. He pointed to scraps of Hamas gear on the ground: a singed Kalashnikov clip, an abandoned battle vest, a paraglider. He was getting accustomed to questions about a dead baby he had carried out of a house. "People ask me why I didn't take a picture," he said. "I said, 'I'm sorry, I, too, have my limits.' "

Then, unprompted, he took out his phone and started showing me photographs he did take, one corpse after another. "Wait," he said, swiping. "You will see the pile. They brought gasoline with them. Their intention was to burn."

In some parts of the world, I said, people will say it's all fake, it's all *hasbara*, government propaganda. Vach looked at me unblinking. "Some people say that the Holocaust didn't exist, right? How do you respond to such people?" he said. "I have pictures. But unless those people will be here and see with their own eyes, I guess they will not believe. But these people also, if they would see it with their own eyes, they would say that we faked the situation. So it doesn't matter." His shoulders slumped. His hands slapped to his sides, and he looked around once more at the ruins. "This is evil." In the near distance, from Gaza, we could hear rockets, Iron Dome interceptions, and Israeli jets.

Most of the evacuees from Kfar Aza were taken to a hotel on the grounds of Kibbutz Shefayim, on the Mediterranean coast, north of Tel Aviv. I arrived one afternoon to see yet another mass shiva—a sombre picnic taking place

on the lawn, families huddled together, eating, carefully eying their kids kicking a soccer ball, playing tag.

Inside, in a conference room off the lobby, a woman from Kfar Aza named Yael Felus had helped set up what she called a “war room.” A dozen people were there, working phones and laptops, to arrange psychiatric care, to organize buses for funerals, to distribute clothes and food. Felus had grown up in Sderot, a coastal city about a half mile from Gaza. “I needed a quieter place,” she told me. “So I went to Kfar Aza. It seemed like a good place to raise my kids.” Now, she said, she would go back only “if they flatten Gaza and they go to live in Egypt.” She knew how that sounded and didn’t seem to care. How could she go back? Before sending me to meet survivors from the kibbutz who were milling around the lobby, she said, “Most of my friends are dead.” She tried to count them all on her fingers, then gave up.

I met a woman named Roni Stahl Lupo, who was born at Kfar Aza in 1972; she knew nearly everyone who had died there. She, too, could not give an accurate count. She and her husband have three children and run a small business, designing industrial kitchens. Her sister, Ziv Stahl, is the executive director of Yesh Din (There Is Law), a human-rights group. Her family had barely escaped Kfar Aza alive. Before her daughter and her boyfriend fled the kibbutz grounds, Hamas gunmen shot at them, hitting the boyfriend twice in the hand. Lupo had lived through countless rocket attacks over the years, but now she was unsure whether she would stay in Israel at all.

“During the demonstrations against this government, I began to feel that I’m no longer part of the majority of this country,” she said. “Morally, socially, this is not my Israel. I’m left-wing, Ashkenazi, a kibbutznik, and secular, and this is not the identity of Israel any longer. My contract with this country is over. It’s broken.”

She was both enraged at Hamas and deeply anxious about the bombing of Gaza and the ground incursion taking shape near her old home. “I keep thinking that these operations will happen because of me, someone will be killed because of me,” she said. “And I cannot live with that.”

One morning, I visited [Sari Nusseibeh](#), in East Jerusalem. A scholar of early Islamic philosophy who had been an informal adviser to Yasir Arafat,

Nusseibeh was born in Damascus and lives in Sheikh Jarrah, a Jerusalem neighborhood that has been under assault and encroachment by settlers and the Israeli government for years. His family is distinguished in the extreme. For centuries, the Nusseibehs have been Muslim custodians of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, in the Old City. Nusseibeh's father, Anwar, was the governor of Jerusalem and Amman's Ambassador to the Court of St. James's. Nusseibeh, who is seventy-four, has always been a distinctly moderate voice in Palestinian public life, with friends all over the scholarly world. He is uncompromising in his insistence on Palestinian rights, and, in his books, he evinces sympathy with Jewish history and Israeli anxiety. At the same time, his disapproval of violence—whether perpetrated by Israeli settlers or Palestinian suicide bombers—is absolute.

Nusseibeh's weariness and apprehension as we sat down were palpable. "We have made so many advances—in technology, A.I., medicine, everything except human relations," he said. "I knew there would be constant explosions for as many years as it takes for people to finally learn that there has to be another way, but not a confrontation like this." He shrugged. "No matter what, we will end up where we started, with the Palestinians and the Israelis living here together and needing to find a proper formula."

On the morning of October 7th, Nusseibeh had just returned home from dropping off his wife and his daughter at the airport when he heard sirens. "My first reaction was 'Hmm, interesting.' This happens every now and again, but then there were more sirens, then thuds, and the house actually shook. I thought, This might be serious."

At first, he sensed great pride among many in his East Jerusalem community as the news broke. Palestinians on motorcycles, in pickup trucks, and on hang gliders had managed something that not even foreign armies had done. In 1973, the Egyptian Army surprised Israel in the western Sinai and the Syrians wiped out Israeli tanks in the Golan Heights, but, for the most part, they did not get close to Israeli population centers. Many Palestinians initially celebrated the Hamas attack as a blow to Israel's sense of invulnerability. But then, as the evidence of atrocities became common knowledge, Nusseibeh said, that elation curdled. Some even spoke of the incursion as a conspiracy, a guarantee that Israel would now turn so far to the right that the Palestinians would *never* get statehood. The images were

shocking. One detail that struck Nusseibeh was more banal: ordinary Gazans trailing the armed terrorists into Israel and looting. In one video, I saw a Gazan calmly walking with a guitar he had stolen; others took flat-screen TVs and carried them back into Gaza. “It’s like in the wars in the Middle Ages,” Nusseibeh said. “People come behind the fighting to steal.”

He despairs at the spectacle of bloodlust, the ecstasies of killing. But he is also convinced that [Hamas](#) and violent extremism, in general, will not recede without a political resolution. “It’s a mistake to think that Hamas is an alien being—it is part of the national tapestry,” he said. “It grows bigger or smaller depending on other factors. You can eliminate the guys running Hamas now, but you cannot eliminate it entirely. It will stay as a way of thinking, as an idea, so long as there is a Palestinian-Israeli conflict.” He went on, “People say there is more support for Hamas in the West Bank than in Gaza and the reverse is true in Gaza, that there is more support for the P.A. And it has to do with governance.” In fact, a survey taken shortly before the October 7th attack showed widespread disaffection with Hamas among Gazans. Both entities are riddled with corruption and plagued by a lack of basic competence. And they were crippled, above all, by the circumstances of occupation and siege. The P.A. was no more capable of taking care of the needs of Ramallah and Jenin, Nusseibeh argued, than Hamas was able to cope with the burdens of daily life in Rafah, Khan Yunis, and Gaza City.

Before we went our separate ways, Nusseibeh said he thought that Arab rulers, despite it all, had no taste for a multifront war, one that might pull in the United States. This was not the mid-century, when many Arab leaders still thought of Israel as temporary. But he was hardly optimistic—not in the short run, anyway. “I think people are crazy,” he told me. “Especially people in positions of power. They are crazier than the average person and can easily lead populations to war.”

On August 10, 2006, three Israeli novelists—David Grossman, [Amos Oz](#), and A. B. Yehoshua—called on the Israeli government to accept a ceasefire proposal to end the Second Lebanon War. Two days later, Grossman’s son Uri, a twenty-year-old staff sergeant in an Israeli tank brigade, was killed in a battle with Hezbollah. Grossman had been a peace activist for much of his adult life, speaking at demonstrations and publishing essays, alternately fierce and soulful, that were intended to pierce the indifference of his

compatriots. “[The Yellow Wind](#),” from 1987, was a collection of reported essays about the occupation (some of them published [in these pages](#)) which startled Israeli readers. When it was uncommon to do so, Grossman visited refugee camps and classrooms in the West Bank. While reporting on proceedings against Palestinians in an Israeli military court in Nablus, Grossman quoted the essay “Shooting an Elephant,” in which George Orwell wrote of an imperial police officer in Burma, “He wears a mask, and his face grows to fit it.” The theme is common to both writers: in enforcing injustice, the colonist deceives, and destroys, himself. “To the End of the Land,” a 2008 novel imbued with the loss of Grossman’s son, is his masterpiece. I asked Grossman, who lives in Mevaseret Zion, in the hills outside Jerusalem, about his reaction to the events of October 7th.

“Of course, we felt something was wrong with the whole management of the country,” he said. “We felt that our Prime Minister invests all his time in his trials and doesn’t have enough time to take care of the country. But no one could anticipate *this*.” He went on, “We saw a process that could have led to Hamas taking over Tel Aviv. We don’t ever want to think about catastrophe, but thinking about catastrophe is my profession, and we were very close to that. I will tell you frankly, when I am confronted with such evil, pure evil, I don’t want to live in such a world that allows such monstrosities. Just to be exposed to such things, to see the murder of children, women, pregnant women, babies—it is impossible to absorb it. The fifty-six years of occupation is terrible. I’ve spent my entire life writing and acting against it, and I see some friends at American universities and elsewhere trying to achieve some sort of balance. But evils cannot always be compared. Sometimes, I tell my friends, objectivity is a nice way to cover up cowardice, to say, ‘We are bad and they are bad.’ By doing so, you spare yourself, you refuse to expose yourself to the atrocities in front of you.”



"Nothing like travelling hundreds of miles to immerse yourself in art for the sole purpose of killing time between meals."
Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

We spoke of the Palestinians who argued that they had been forgotten. "First of all, they are right," Grossman said. "And yet there is something in the joy of killing, it just feels different. Hamas made a major mistake in 2005, when we evacuated. Around ten thousand settlers were uprooted. If, after our withdrawal, the Palestinians had started to build in Gaza using the financial support they were promised, if they had made Gaza a kind of test case on how to build a life again, if Gaza had become, if not the 'Singapore of the Middle East,' then at least a place where life could be developed, the next withdrawal would have come quickly. Instead, they chose another path. There were thousands of missiles aimed at us from Gaza in the next two years. And now, after they have done this, you start to think, Well, if you have such a neighbor, you had better be well equipped and suspicious all the time."

In his view, the prospects for Israel, which just celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary of existence, were grave. "I think the task of being an Israeli will be harder now," he said. "The need to protect this country will be an even more serious issue. We thought this was all behind us after signing agreements with various Arab countries and the Abraham Accords. But you cannot have an Abraham Accord and ignore the Palestinians. We shall see now how exhausting it is to be an Israeli, to be all the time on the alert for

surprise and violence. Once more, we will have to be both Athens and Sparta. We will try to be tolerant and decent to our neighbors, not racist but pluralist, liberal, yet at the same time very tough militarily.”

In reality, Grossman knew, the political temper of the country was likely to grow increasingly distant from his view of the world. “I guess that Israel will become more and more right-wing, more and more religious,” he went on. “Jewish identity will be narrowed to self-defense. There will be more and more adoration of the Army, even though the Army has failed. My cry out to my Prime Minister is this: You have Israel in your hands, this precious thing. You are responsible for this unique country. If this country fails, will history be generous again?”

Sam Bahour is an American-born Palestinian who moved from Ohio to the West Bank in the wake of the Oslo Accords, a generation ago. Thinking he was building a future state, he helped establish the Palestine Telecommunications Company, travelling frequently between the West Bank and Gaza. He lives in Al-Bireh, the West Bank town his father came from, and when we spoke he was furious about the way that settler harassment and violence and seemingly random arrests of Palestinians were rising fast. “We turn on the radio every morning and we don’t hear about the weather,” he said. “We hear about arrests.” Even more alarming, there were reports that dozens of Palestinians in the West Bank had been killed since the Hamas attack, some by settlers.

For Bahour, there was nothing utopian about demanding a political solution; it was only its denial that was impractical, as well as unjust. “We don’t ask for the moon,” he said. “We ask for a military occupation of fifty-six years to end. My fear is that this round, as much as it’s doing tremendous damage, physical damage, to Gaza and to the people of Gaza, it is also exposing the hypocrisy of the West and the international community. And, if we go on doing that, it’s a free-for-all.”

In the West Bank and elsewhere, Bahour told me, “all the attention now is focussed on stopping the bombing in a small, intensely overcrowded place that is fifty per cent children. The entire civilian infrastructure is being torn up. I don’t know how anyone—an Israeli or a Jewish American or anyone—thinks this assault will make Israel safer. They are doing just the opposite.

Ironically, what Hamas did could have the effect of saving Netanyahu, of keeping him in power. Everyone knows that the day that this war stops he will be out of government. So now he is someone with nothing to lose, much like the people in Gaza. And people with nothing to lose lash out.”

The scenes of Hamas fighters standing in triumph over the dead, taking selfies and shouting “*Allahu akbar!*,” recalled, for some, Frantz Fanon’s line that “the colonized is the persecuted person who is always dreaming of becoming the persecutor.” Now those scenes were giving way to scenes of a devastated Gaza. Like Nusseibeh, and like Grossman, too, Bahour was unequivocally opposed to the killing of civilians. At the same time, he said, “we have to be wise, wise enough to hold multiple thoughts in our heads. There is the thought that Gazans would breach the fence and break out of their open-air prison—that is one thing. But it is another thing that they went into villages and killed civilians the way they did. It is a horrific act and must be condemned. But I also can’t just have a knee-jerk reaction and think this is a story that started October 7th.”

The task of holding in one’s head multiple thoughts—multiple facts—was nearly impossible, particularly in the face of sloganeering and the allure of militancy. There is the thought that Israeli settlers, many of them armed, have stepped up their daily violence against Palestinian villagers, egged on by ministers in the Netanyahu government. That, though Israel is well armed and has powerful allies, it is also the size of New Jersey and faces multiple enemies—Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran—whose leaders speak regularly of the elimination of “the Zionist entity.” That the unemployment rate in Gaza is forty-five per cent, the water barely potable, electricity and food in short supply, the health-care system in ruins. That antisemitism has, yet again, grown in breadth, intensity, and violence. That contempt for Palestinians is practically a norm in the current Israeli government, as when Smotrich, the finance minister, spoke at a memorial service in France and, standing in front of a map with Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan melded into “Greater Israel,” declared, “There is no Palestinian history,” or when Ben-Gvir, the national-security minister, told journalists, “My right, my wife’s, my children’s, to roam the roads of Judea and Samaria are more important than the right of movement of the Arabs.” That many thousands of Palestinians have already been killed in the recent air strikes and well over a million have

been internally displaced. There will be no end to it anytime soon: the funerals, the recriminations, the threats, the fear, the assaults.

There was also the grim fact that Hamas had, in the most brutal fashion, shattered the illusion that a state could provide Israelis the guarantee of security. As Yonit Levi, the news anchor of Channel 12 put it to me, “Every single Jewish nightmare came true.” And so what would come in return? The air strikes on Gaza were proceeding at an unprecedented pace every night—lethal and incessant—and a ground incursion could lead to a hellscape of urban warfare, another Fallujah. It was a familiar nightmare, reminiscent of what followed 9/11, in which a stronger nation pursues a policy that, while trying to defeat an enemy for carrying out an unspeakable massacre, kills countless civilians and ultimately inflicts untold and lasting damage on itself.

The day after my visit to Kfar Aza, I took a cab to the town of Gan Yavne, twenty miles from Gaza, to attend the funeral of all five members of the Kutz family. Livnat and Aviv Kutz had been found dead together on a bed with their children, Rotem, Yonatan, and Yiftach. Throughout Israel, everyone seemed to know the story, that they had been discovered in a kind of final family embrace. Few knew that, over the wall, in Khan Yunis, nine members of the al-Bashiti family were reported to have been killed in an air strike. Killing was the common condition.

At Gan Yavne, mourners stared at the five graves, deep and sharply dug. As people gathered under and around the perimeter of a white tent that blocked the hard afternoon sun, a volunteer from *Zaka*, a man of astonishing industry and fitness, kept hopping in and out of the graves, preparing them, lining up sacks of dirt, ordering things according to Jewish law. Pressing forward to get a little closer to the service, I spotted Mia Kraus, a teen-ager and an evacuee from Kfar Aza whom I’d spoken with at Kibbutz Shefayim. I reintroduced myself. “I remember you,” she said shyly. Like everyone at Kfar Aza, she knew the Kutz family well.

More teen-agers from the kibbutz squeezed past the surrounding headstones and gathered tightly together, arm in arm with Mia in the first row behind the family’s relatives. Her mind was here and *there*: one of her friends was kidnapped and later found dead. Mia was sixteen, the same age, I recalled,

that the poet Mosab Abu Toha had been when he was nearly killed on the streets of Gaza. In Mosab's poem "The Wounds," he writes:

If, when the rocket fell, I had moved my head a bit
to watch a bird on a tree or to count
the clouds coming from the west side,
the shrapnel might have cut through my throat.
I wouldn't be married to my wife,
father of three kids, one born in America. . . .
I look around me, relatives circle my bed.
I watch them as they chat. I imagine them praying round my coffin.

The funeral service began. When Mia and I had spoken at Kibbutz Shefayim, she told me that she could no longer be in a room with the door closed, not even the bathroom. It brought back the memory of hiding in her house for twenty hours with Hamas gunmen outside her door. Through a partially open window, she could hear their conversations. Somehow, the gunmen never came in. Her family survived. Yet she regularly found herself overtaken by crippling waves of fear.

The coffins were carried in and the names were read: one by one by one by one. At first, there was silence, but now a great communal lamentation convulsed the assembled. I have never heard such weeping as I did that afternoon. There would be many more funerals to come, many more convulsions of grief. But the sounds of lamentation never carry as far as those of rockets, missiles, artillery, bombs. As I was finishing this piece, Mosab messaged me, describing the nightly bombings in his neighborhood. A ground assault was imminent. "Any moment I may not be in this world," he said. ♦

By Masha Gessen

By Steve Coll

By Adam Rasgon

By Adam Rasgon

By [Dan Kaufman](#)

Listen to this article.

Late in the summer, several hundred autoworkers jammed into the auditorium of United Auto Workers Local 12, in Toledo, Ohio, for a monthly meeting. Local 12 is the largest amalgamated union in the country, representing more than ten thousand people, including nearly six thousand at a Jeep factory in town. Typically, the monthly meeting attracts a far smaller crowd, but word of a possible strike had been circulating among U.A.W. membership. The union's contract was set to expire three weeks later, at midnight, and negotiations between the union and representatives of the Big Three—General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis (Chrysler and Jeep's parent company)—were going nowhere. Bruce Baumhower, who is sixty-eight years old and has been president of the local for more than three decades, got up to the lectern. He has wisps of reddish-gray hair and the large forearms of a former assembly-line worker. He described how, not long ago, the union had given up hard-won wages and benefits to help save the industry in a period of crisis. Those compromises had been exploited by corporate greed, he said; close to a third of the unit still earned less than sixteen dollars an hour. The starting rate had barely budged in fourteen years. “That’s all going to change now,” Baumhower said. “Now it’s our time!”

The crowd exploded, applauding and yelling. Mike Sawaya, whose family has worked at the plant for three generations, was leaning against the wall behind the lectern. He was eight years old when he first met Baumhower, in the same auditorium; he’d been so nervous that he spilled two plates of chili mac onto his lap. “Bruce let it rip,” Sawaya said. “This is what he’s known for.” Baumhower told me later, in his office, “It probably wasn’t a very professional speech—I just said the scam’s up.”

On September 14th, the U.A.W.’s new president, Shawn Fain, called the first simultaneous strike against all Big Three companies in the union’s history. He deployed a new tactic—the “stand-up strike”—which initially called for only one assembly plant from each company to walk out. The name was a reference to the sit-down strikes of the nineteen-thirties, in which workers occupied plants to prevent management or strikebreakers from operating the machinery. The stand-up tactic, as opposed to walking out all at once, would

allow the U.A.W. to stretch its eight-hundred-and-twenty-five-million-dollar strike fund, so that the strike could go longer and wider if progress wasn't made.

Baumhower, who started at Jeep in 1972, told me that he was pleased his plant was one of the first. "We *wanted* to be the target," he said. "We think we have the most injustice going on at the shop floor." The plant's percentage of "supplemental," or temporary part-time, employees—some of whom have been working that way for five or six years, with no guaranteed path to full-time employment—is one of the highest in the country, he said. A member's son recently came to see Baumhower about getting a job. Baumhower assured him that it would be no problem—the company needed more than a hundred new workers. "The kid goes, 'Yeah, how much?'" Baumhower recalled. "I said, 'Fifteen seventy-eight.' He says, 'Oh.' I said, 'What's the matter?' He said, 'I'm working at Arby's dropping fries for seventeen dollars. So I can drop transmissions in a car for fifteen or drop fries into a basket for seventeen?' He's still at Arby's. Pretty smart kid."

The 2007-08 financial crisis was followed by a government bailout and a supervised restructuring of Chrysler and G.M., which forced U.A.W. workers across the Big Three to make major concessions to keep their jobs—and to keep the companies solvent. Gone was the annual cost-of-living adjustment and the health insurance for retirees, many of whom are not old enough to qualify for Medicare. Even break time was reduced from six minutes to five. Most significant was the introduction of a two-tiered pay system, under which new hires would start at half of what existing workers made. New hires also would not receive a pension.

Since the crash, average hourly wages for workers in vehicle manufacturing, adjusted for inflation, have fallen by nearly twenty per cent, according to a recent study by the Economic Policy Institute. The automakers, meanwhile, have seen enormous financial success. By 2013, the Treasury Department had sold its last stakes in Chrysler and G.M. and lifted restrictions on executive compensation. In the past decade, profits at the Big Three have almost doubled. The companies have spent billions on stock buybacks, and C.E.O. pay has gone up by forty per cent; Mary Barra, the C.E.O. of G.M., earned twenty-nine million dollars last year.

The Big Three aren't a monolith. Last Wednesday, Ford, which is reputed to have the best relationship with its workers, reached a tentative agreement to end the strike at its factories. The terms included a twenty-five-per-cent raise over a four-and-a-half-year contract, an end to wage tiers, and a right-to-strike provision over plant closures, a first for the U.A.W. An agreement with one company generally pressures the other two to settle along similar lines.

The strike comes amid a wider revival of labor. Though union membership is at a historic low, in the past few years the number of striking workers has reached its highest level in decades. Recent walkouts by members of *SAG-AFTRA* and the Writers Guild and by workers at Kaiser Permanente have enjoyed broad public approval. According to a Gallup poll, sixty-seven per cent of Americans now support labor unions, nineteen points higher than in 2009. Moreover, the poll showed that seventy-five per cent sided with the U.A.W. in its battle with the auto companies. Still, there have been pockets of antipathy. Jim Cramer, an analyst at CNBC, implied that Fain was a Trotskyite and encouraged the auto companies to move their entire production process to Mexico.

Recently, at Baumhower's striking Jeep plant, a group of workers from the Wrangler paint line were marching in front of one of the main entrances of the three-and-a-half-million-square-foot complex. The mood was defiant. They chanted, "No justice, no Jeeps!" and shouted as drivers on Interstate 75 zipped past, honking. Earlier, someone had incinerated a copy of the old U.A.W. contract in a burn barrel. Todd Gibson, the strike captain on duty, kept the workers walking, back and forth, for six hours. Semi trucks were still making deliveries to the plant, slowly nosing forward through the picket.

"Thirty-eight years in jail," Gibson said with a laugh, when I asked how long he'd worked at the plant. "Not everybody is molded to be a factory worker. You have to be able to handle the long-term, repetitive nature, let your mind go into a different place." This was the first time during his tenure that the plant had been on strike. What changed? He pointed to Amy Jo Luedtke, a middle-aged woman with bleached-blond hair. Luedtke was in elementary school when she decided that she wanted to work at the plant one day, after driving in a friend's parents' "naked" Jeep (no doors, no top).

She'd been on the paint line for four years, as a supplemental. "I'm here doing the same thing they're doing," she said, glancing at her co-workers. "I should get the same thing they're getting." Gibson told me, "See, I'm on the end of this show, right? These guys are just starting it. I want to make it *good* for them."

On Halloween night, 2021, Jennifer Fultz went trick-or-treating with her seven-year-old daughter, Aria, and her ten-year-old son, Jordan, in her home town of Rockford, Illinois. The kids were both dressed as Pikachu. Fultz, who has long chestnut hair, hazel eyes, and thick glasses, had to finish the rounds early. She brought the kids home, hugged and kissed them goodbye, packed up her car, and, with her mother and her two cats, began the six-hour drive to Toledo. The next day, she was starting a new job at the Jeep plant there. Though the children would soon join her, she was nervous and heartsick. "I worried that, if something were to go wrong, it was just me and my mom in a brand-new city," she said. "I was praying to God that I had made the right decision."

For years, Fultz had worked at a Stellantis plant outside Rockford, building Jeep Cherokees. The company laid people off in waves, then idled the plant completely, eliminating the remaining thirteen hundred jobs. The next line of Cherokees would reportedly be built in Toluca, Mexico, making the plant another casualty of the North American Free Trade Agreement. Since *NAFTA* went into effect, in 1994, it has cost the United States nearly a million jobs, a significant percentage of them in vehicle and parts manufacturing, according to a study by Robert Scott, a recently retired economist at the Economic Policy Institute. *NAFTA* paved the way for other similar agreements, most notably one that established permanent normal trade relations with China, facilitating its entry into the World Trade Organization, in 2001. Scott estimates that the ensuing trade deficit cost the United States nearly four million jobs, most of them in manufacturing, which tended to be more heavily unionized than other industries. Even the spectre of outsourcing has provided corporations with a powerful cudgel: Stellantis recently threatened to move production of its Ram 1500 to Mexico, too, according to one of the U.A.W.'s lead negotiators. (In a statement, Stellantis said, "We are not commenting on production sites for future products.")

In the past twenty years, the Big Three have closed more than sixty American plants. Fultz told me that her previous plant had been a “melting pot” of autoworkers from shuttered factories in New York, Maryland, and Missouri. Before getting hired by Stellantis, she had worked three other jobs—at Kohl’s, at Papa John’s, and at Subway, as a supervisor—and still could not afford to move out of her mother’s house. “There are not a lot of good jobs back home,” she said. “Once Stellantis pulled the plug, that was it for the whole community.”

Fultz works ten-hour shifts, six or seven days a week. The long hours have taken a toll on her physical health. A “little gremlin,” she said, lives on her shoulder. (Fultz spent a year and a half in the body shop, where she lifted and pulled heavy parts all day.) “I can’t hold my daughter, who is light as a feather, for more than five seconds, because my hands go numb,” she told me. Last year, her mother was diagnosed with lung cancer. Fultz takes care of her but is guilt-stricken that the rest of her mother’s family and friends are so far away. “I know that my family is suffering because I brought them here,” Fultz told me, as tears started to stream down her face.



“Now that we live together, whose copy do we keep?”
Cartoon by Adam Sacks

Her career in the auto industry has been marked by a sense of delayed recompense for the bailout concessions. “We were promised that future generations would be able to get back what was given up,” she said. “And

that never came. I don't have a pension. I don't have health care when I retire. I'm thirty-three, and my body is broken down already. That's not the American dream. The American dream isn't to work sixty, seventy hours a week in a factory, making a billionaire more billions, while I neglect time with my kids, time with my mother, time with my mister—just time. Then for the billionaires to say, 'You're being greedy'—am I?"

In late September, President Joe Biden announced that he would visit a picket line in Michigan. Fultz met him there. "We fist-bumped," she recalled. "I told him, 'Please keep jobs in America, Mr. Biden.' His response was 'That is why we need E.V.s.'" Biden wants electric vehicles to make up two-thirds of the domestic market for passenger cars by 2032. He has also declared his intention to be the "most pro-union President in American history." The U.A.W.'s strike, in part, aims to push him to fulfill both promises, to enact what the union calls a "just transition."

The Biden Administration has called for tens of billions of dollars to support electric-vehicle manufacturing. Various federal laws and programs have established incentives for companies to build E.V.s and their batteries in America and to staff those plants with union workers. (The House version of the Inflation Reduction Act, passed last year, included a forty-five-hundred-dollar tax credit for buying union-built E.V.s, but it was stripped from the Senate version at the behest of Joe Manchin.) "If our tax dollars are going to finance this transition, then labor can't be left behind," Fain said recently, on "Face the Nation." Some prominent Democrats and political commentators have suggested otherwise. "If climate change is a central problem, we should want climate-change technologies produced as inexpensively as possible," Lawrence Summers, the Treasury Secretary under Bill Clinton, said last month.

In 2022, G.M. partnered with a Korean electronics company to form a new venture called Ultium Cells, which opened a non-union battery plant behind a shuttered assembly complex in Lordstown, Ohio. The companies received two and a half billion dollars in low-interest federal loans. But the starting pay at Ultium was only \$16.50 an hour. (In September, it was raised to twenty dollars.) So far, one worker has died from injuries sustained at the plant. Others have been hospitalized for electric shock and for possible chemical exposure; there have also been reports of dizziness, nausea,

vomiting, and burns. (A technician had to be wheeled out on a gurney after being “sprayed in the face with toxic electrolyte.”)

In December, workers at the plant voted overwhelmingly to unionize, but have so far been unable to secure a contract. According to a U.A.W. safety report, there were twenty-two injuries reported to *OSHA* in the first five months of 2023. A few weeks ago, federal regulators announced their intention to fine the company nearly three hundred thousand dollars. “It’s a dangerous facility, much more than Lordstown,” Dave Green, a U.A.W. regional director, who worked on the assembly line at the old complex, said. The U.A.W. found a fifty-per-cent-higher incidence of *OSHA* violations there than in traditional G.M. plants. (A spokesperson for Ultium said, “All safety concerns are taken seriously, investigated, and addressed promptly.”)

Last year, Jim Farley, Ford’s C.E.O., predicted that fewer workers will be needed to manufacture electric vehicles, given that their power trains don’t require engines and thus have significantly fewer moving parts. Other experts disagree. A study last year by researchers at Carnegie Mellon University, for example, estimated that producing electric vehicles will actually require more jobs in the short and medium term, because the necessary components are more complicated to make, even if there are fewer of them. In any event, most of the newly announced battery plants will be built in Southern states that are hostile to labor. In June, the federal government awarded Ford and a partner company a nine-billion-dollar loan to build three battery plants in Kentucky and Tennessee. Fain criticized the Biden Administration for failing to pressure the companies to commit to using union labor.

Fultz and I walked out to the parking lot of Local 12, so she could show me her bright-blue Wrangler. Its dashboard, like those of several other Jeeps in the lot, was lined with toy ducks—tokens of good will that fellow Jeep owners give to one another, in a practice known as Jeep ducking. “I have a love-hate relationship with Stellantis,” Fultz said. “I need them to stay financially successful. But even if they were to close their doors today—and I hope they never do—I would probably go to G.M. or Ford. As crazy and unstable as the automobile industry is, there’s something about knowing that a family is sitting in a car I could have built.”

The day after Biden's visit to the Michigan picket line, Donald Trump showed up at Drake Enterprises, a non-union automotive-parts manufacturer in Macomb County, forty miles away. A lectern was set up in front of a row of enormous shelving units piled high with gear-shift levers and other transmission parts. Secret Service officers shared security responsibilities with heavily tattooed, bearded men wearing black gloves and olive-green shirts. Campaign volunteers passed out signs that read "*Union Members for Trump*" to anyone who would take them.

Tony Brouckaert, a self-employed tool-and-die maker, was standing by himself in the crowded room. He used to work in a hydraulic-tool factory, which has a union. He'd tried to get rid of it. "I'm a firm believer that, if you're a hardworking employee, you don't need the union," he told me. Nevertheless, most of his political grievances were economic, and rooted in the disappearance of benefits that unions once reliably provided. His job has left him with a bad shoulder, but Obamacare is too expensive, so he is waiting until he's sixty-five and on Medicare to have it treated.

After several hours, Trump entered to Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the U.S.A." and an ecstatic standing ovation. His speech, at turns fluid, deceptive, and frightening, called for a "revival of economic nationalism" and stoked rising economic anxieties. "I put everything on the line to fight for you," he said. "I have risked it all to defend the working class from the corrupt political class." He fixated on *NAFTA*, a persistent theme of his campaigns, especially during stops in Rust Belt states, whose political swings have determined the winners of the past two Presidential elections. Trump called *NAFTA* "the worst trade deal ever made" and boasted about having renegotiated it in 2018. (The new deal preserved much of the original one; it has been called *NAFTA 2.0*.) He repeatedly emphasized the threat of electric vehicles. "For autoworkers, Biden's forced transition is a transition to hell," he said. "It's a transition to unemployment." The current strike was meaningless, he added, because "under Biden's mandate the entire car industry will be packed up and shipped to China." Though not many U.A.W. members were present, he implored the crowd to lobby Shawn Fain to endorse him.

In 2016, exit polls showed that Trump won two-thirds of voters who believe trade with foreign countries takes away American jobs; this helped him flip

Wisconsin, Michigan, and Pennsylvania, which he carried by fewer than eighty thousand total votes. Fultz told me that she felt she had “the most job security when Trump was in office.” But Trump’s political career has been marked by intense hostility toward labor. In 2015, when campaigning for President, he told the *Detroit News* that automakers should pursue a kind of intra-national *NAFTA*, moving plants out of Michigan to parts of the U.S. where labor was cheaper, and then returning to the state after workers there had become desperate enough to accept lower wages. “You can go to different parts of the United States, and then ultimately you’d do full circle,” he said. “We can do the rotation in the United States—it doesn’t have to be in Mexico.”

During Trump’s Presidency, the country lost a hundred and seventy thousand manufacturing jobs and close to seven thousand factories. In 2017, Trump appointed Peter Robb, a management-side lawyer, as general counsel to the National Labor Relations Board. Robb had served as Ronald Reagan’s lead attorney when Reagan fired more than eleven thousand air-traffic controllers, effectively breaking their union and igniting a decades-long attack on labor by the right.

When Trump finished his speech, it was pouring outside. Standing in the rain, waiting to wave on the motorcade, was Isaiah Goddard, a U.A.W. member who works at a Ford parts plant. “I think it was a very beautiful speech, from the heart,” he said. “It shows that he cares about us autoworkers.” Goddard was eager to take up Trump’s challenge: “I’m going to do everything I can to talk to Shawn Fain and try to get him to endorse Donald Trump.”

Two days later, a “solidarity convoy” of Broncos, Jeeps, and Colorados gathered in the parking lot of Local 51, on Detroit’s East Side. The procession cruised toward the city’s downtown, honking to diverse approval: a Black man walking along a deindustrialized artery raised his fist; in tony Indian Village, two white joggers stopped to applaud. Union members had already convened in the parking lot of Solidarity House, the convoy’s destination and the headquarters of the U.A.W. Built in 1951, the low-slung modernist structure is situated on a site along the Detroit River which once contained Edsel Ford’s mansion, orchard, and garden. Loudspeakers in the

parking lot blasted DJ Khaled's "All I Do Is Win" as a group of workers began dancing wildly.

Fain grabbed a microphone and jumped onto the bed of a Ram pickup. He has short-cropped gray hair and wears glasses; he looks a bit like a high-school shop teacher. He began by talking, in a measured drawl, about a plan conceived by Walter Reuther, a former president of the U.A.W., to use excess capacity at Detroit's auto factories to make military equipment during the Second World War—to create what came to be called an "arsenal of democracy." Elements of the plan were adopted by Franklin D. Roosevelt, turning Detroit into an unrivalled industrial powerhouse; a single Chrysler plant produced half the country's tanks. "Eighty years later, we find ourselves again as a part of the arsenal of democracy," Fain said. "It's different this time. The enemy is not a foreign power, across an ocean. The enemy is right here among us—it's corporate greed."

Fain, who is fifty-four, was raised in Kokomo, Indiana, a city of sixty thousand. Kokomo has five Stellantis power-train plants, which together employ more than seven thousand people. Fain's mother was a nurse; his father was the town's chief of police. "I was taught by my parents: Don't ever forget where you come from, no matter where you go or what you do," he told me. "We came from destitution."



"The doctor will see you shortly. In the meantime, please fill out your medical Google search history."
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez

All four of Fain's grandparents worked at Kokomo auto plants. They had grown up during the Depression, in deep poverty in Tennessee and Kentucky; one grandmother was abandoned with her siblings at an orphanage. Fain's paternal grandfather was hired by Chrysler in 1937, the year it was organized by the U.A.W. "He was so proud of that job," Fain said. His grandfather saved every one of his pay stubs for the next thirty-five years. "He kept them in a box until the day he died," Fain continued. "Before he passed, he was asking his grandkids if there was anything we wanted." Fain asked for the stubs. "Honestly, I didn't even know why," he said. "But those have become a treasure to me."

In 1994, Fain was hired by Chrysler as an electrician. Like many autoworkers, he recalls his first day with a mixture of awe and terror. "They took us out on the shop floor," he said. "The die-casting plant where I worked was very hot in the summertime—it could reach a hundred thirty degrees." Overhead cranes carried molten aluminum on a monorail. Sirens went off constantly. "I thought, What the hell did I get myself into?" he told me.

Two years earlier, Fain had voted for Ross Perot over Bill Clinton and George H. W. Bush in the Presidential election. "Pretty simple," Perot said, in a debate that year. "If you're paying twelve, thirteen dollars, fourteen dollars an hour for factory workers, and you can move your factory south of the border, pay a dollar an hour for labor . . . have no environmental controls, no pollution controls, and no retirement, and you don't care about anything but making money, there will be a giant sucking sound going south." "That resonated with me," Fain said. "He was the only candidate saying that."

Fain acknowledged the symbolism of Biden's visit to the picket line, the first time a sitting President had done so. "It was a historic moment," he said. "But what's going to matter is how the government drives this transition." I asked whether the U.A.W. would endorse Biden. "Our endorsements are no longer going to be freely given," Fain said. "They're going to be earned." He worries that if electric-vehicle manufacturing becomes another low-wage, low-benefit carve-out, Democrats in the Rust Belt will see a repeat of 2016. "Trump's saying what our members are experiencing," he said.

At the same time, Fain vehemently denounced Trump, drawing a connection between the migrants at the heart of the current border crisis and his own ancestors. “I look at these destitute people that Trump likes to call rapists or thieves or drug dealers,” he said. “They are the same as me. They are no different from my family.” Despite his fear that workers will be left out of the green transition, he has little patience for Republican politicians, including Trump, who rebuke it as liberal pandering. Fain notes that Reuther, one of his heroes, was an early proponent of environmentalism; it was part of his broad political vision for the union. He lobbied for the Clean Air Act against opposition from the major American auto companies, and wrote the first check for the first Earth Day, in 1970, to which the U.A.W. became the largest contributor. He once asked, “What good is another week’s vacation if the lake you used to go to is polluted and you can’t swim in it and your kids can’t play in it?”

Walter Reuther was born in 1907 in Wheeling, West Virginia. His father, Valentine, a union organizer, drove a horse-drawn beer wagon and ran for state legislature on the Socialist Party ticket. In 1919, when Eugene Debs was in prison in West Virginia, Valentine took Walter to meet him. (Debs was convicted of violating the Espionage Act for opposing America’s involvement in the First World War.) Walter became a Socialist, too, dropped out of high school, and started working as an apprentice tool-and-die maker at Wheeling Steel. (A four-hundred-pound die landed on his foot, costing him a toe.) He later moved to Detroit, where wages were better, and got a job at a Ford plant while attending what became Wayne State University. In 1932, Reuther left Ford, claiming that he was forced out because of his political activities. He withdrew a chunk of his savings and went to Europe with his brother Victor. They travelled through ten countries, mostly by bicycle, before ending up in the Soviet Union, where they worked for a year and a half at a new automotive plant. The food was unfamiliar—each brother lost about twenty pounds—but Walter found the atmosphere in the plant’s cafeteria “absorbing,” and praised “the wonderful spirit” found among the workers, who sometimes strummed guitars and danced at lunch.

Reuther returned to Detroit in 1935, the year Roosevelt signed the Wagner Act, which guaranteed the right to collectively bargain—and to strike. At the time, conditions in automobile plants were appalling. During a heat wave, hundreds of autoworkers died in plants in Michigan. Autoworkers earned an

average of nine hundred dollars a year; the government estimated that a family of four needed nearly double that, at a minimum, to survive. Meanwhile, General Motors was employing a Ku Klux Klan offshoot called the Black Legion to break up union-organizing efforts.



Cartoon by Mike Twohy

In 1936, Reuther was elected as a delegate for the U.A.W. He became president of Local 174, where he presided over a dramatic expansion of the union's membership. He participated in the Flint Sit-Down Strike, a violent forty-four-day battle that led to the unionization of G.M. A similar tactic was used to unionize Chrysler. During the Battle of the Overpass, in which U.A.W. organizers were savagely beaten by Henry Ford's private security guards outside an assembly plant in Dearborn, Reuther was kicked in the face and thrown down two flights of stairs. Finally, in 1941, after a ten-day strike, the union succeeded in organizing Ford, too.

During the Second World War, with factories running around the clock, there was a tremendous demand for workers. Hundreds of thousands of them, Black and white, migrated to the city, especially from the South. In June, 1941, Roosevelt issued an executive order banning discriminatory employment practices in the defense industry, the first Presidential civil-rights order since Reconstruction. White workers, sometimes stoked by management, responded with so-called hate strikes—in 1943, twenty-five

thousand walked out from Packard after it promoted three Black people to the aircraft assembly line. R. J. Thomas, the U.A.W. president at the time, suspended thirty of the ringleaders, and, with help from government agencies, brought the rest of the strikers back to work. “We will not retreat,” Thomas said. “If we take any other position, our organization is lost.”

Reuther was elected president of the U.A.W. in 1946. In a speech that year, he argued that the labor movement should not focus solely on economic gains for its members but instead must “fight for the welfare of the public at large.” Two years later, a hit man nearly assassinated him in his kitchen. Afterward, his renown grew; there was speculation that he would run for President of the U.S. His social-democratic vision came to encompass a variety of causes—nuclear disarmament, environmentalism, and, especially, civil rights. When Martin Luther King, Jr., and dozens of other demonstrators were arrested in Birmingham, in 1963, Reuther sent two deputies with a hundred and sixty thousand dollars in cash to bail them out. He was the only prominently featured white speaker at the March on Washington.

In 1970, Reuther died in a plane crash en route to Black Lake, Michigan, where he was building a thousand-acre labor-education retreat. Not long afterward, real wages for non-college-educated workers began to decline. Oil shocks, deregulation, high interest rates, and globalization increasingly shifted industrial jobs first to the non-union South and then to low-wage foreign countries. By that point, the U.A.W.’s membership had peaked, at one and a half million.

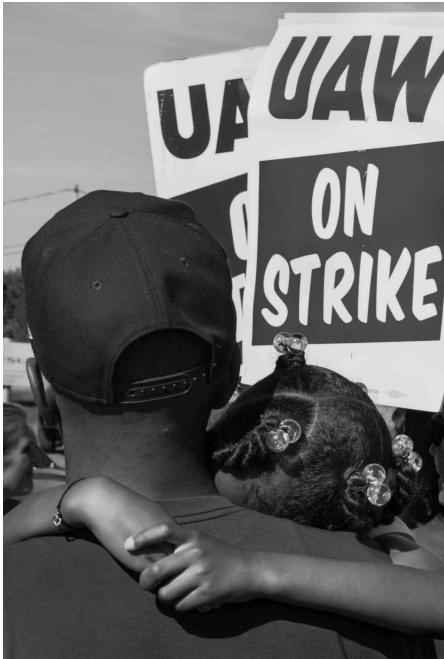
The U.A.W. got weaker. Fain traces this downswing in part to the creation of “joint programs”—management-labor partnerships that he believes undermined the union’s independence. Forty years of what Fain calls “company unionism” contributed to a series of bad contracts and laid the foundation for a corruption scandal that broke in 2017, after a federal probe, and led to seventeen convictions, including of two past U.A.W. presidents, in 2021, and three former Chrysler executives. The executives had paid more than three and a half million dollars in bribes to U.A.W. officials, partly through credit cards issued by one of the company’s joint training centers, in Detroit. Union officials also spent more than a million dollars of members’ money on golf, steak dinners, cigars, and booze. Earlier this year,

Fain narrowly won the U.A.W. presidency, on a promise to restore the union to its Reuther-era militancy. (The U.A.W. is still under a court-appointed monitor.)

Today, the union has three hundred and eighty thousand active members; less than half are employed by the Big Three. (In the seventies, the U.A.W. organized administrative staff at Wayne State; more than a quarter of the union's members now work in higher education.) The accumulated troubles have driven Fain to take an aggressive approach to the current negotiations—he needs the deal to be good enough to woo workers in the burgeoning electric-vehicle industry, where many competitors, including Toyota and Tesla, are not unionized. Fain told me that there was little to distinguish non-union jobs from many of the positions that the Big Three were offering. He added, “It’s hard to grow a movement when people can’t see the difference.”

Two weeks into the strike, the kitchen at Local 12 was buzzing. Doris Jones and a few assistants were making a hundred breakfasts to bring to the picket line. Jones, who is fifty-five years old and has long braids, poured gallons of eggs onto a griddle next to piles of turkey sausage. She had been arriving at the hall at six in the morning every day since the strike started and staying until midnight, sometimes later. “I’m a twenty-four-hour time bomb,” she told me. She has worked at the Jeep plant for more than two decades. Shortly before the strike, she’d placed boxes around the plant to collect donations for the union’s food pantry. It was now stacked with diapers, one of the most coveted commodities, and with packaged food, including rice and instant mashed potatoes, which she gave to any member who came in, along with whatever fresh food—plums, peaches—she could get hold of.

Twenty-four years ago, Jones was in nursing school in Toledo when a counsellor offered her an application for a position at the Chrysler Jeep plant. Two weeks later, she was working in the body shop. “I was using weld guns, connecting stuff like the fenders, hoods, the doors,” she told me. “I was getting burned up—my hair, my body, my clothes—and would go home crying. I said, ‘I’m not going back.’ But as the days went by I knew I had a good job, enough money to take care of my family.”



Since 1998, the U.S. has lost more than seventy thousand plants and five million manufacturing jobs, many of them in the Rust Belt.

Jones, the team leader of the Gladiator right-side-door line, has a maternal relationship to her co-workers, who call her Mama D. She earns about thirty-three dollars an hour, and in six years will be eligible for a pension. Several members of her family have worked at the plant, too, including one of her three sons, who was a supplemental employee, earning half of what his mother made. He told me, of the strike, “It’s hurting a lot of people who need the money.”

By late September, the number of people coming into the food pantry had increased. Striking plants have gummed up entire supply chains, causing thousands of layoffs in other factories. Those workers do not receive five hundred dollars a week in strike pay from the union, though they can file for unemployment insurance, which, in Ohio, is half a worker’s average weekly wage. One day, as I was leaving the pantry, a middle-aged Black woman wearing tinted glasses walked in. She had been laid off from a Chrysler supplier that shut down because of the strike, and she was still waiting for her first unemployment check. She wrote her name in a ledger, and Jones handed her a bag of food. “I’m very, very thankful,” the woman said quietly, as she slipped out the door.

Marcy Kaptur, the Democratic representative for Ohio’s Ninth District, which includes Toledo, describes herself as a “daughter of the U.A.W.” Her

mother, who worked at Champion, the spark-plug company, was on the union's first organizing committee there; her father worked at the Jeep plant for a decade. She believes that this strike is historic. "The conditions have become so untenable in these plants," she said.

In the early nineties, in the House of Representatives, Kaptur led the fight against *NAFTA*, which nonetheless passed, 234–200. It was a bipartisan bill; a hundred and two Democrats and a hundred and thirty-two Republicans supported it. On the night of the vote, Kaptur said, corporate lobbyists were given a Ways and Means Committee room as an improvised headquarters from which to whip up last-minute support. At one point, she saw John Sweeney, who would soon be elected president of the A.F.L.-C.I.O., come in through a side door to the Capitol. No one paid attention to him. He held his raincoat over his arm, and walked up the stairs to the gallery, alone.

After *NAFTA* passed, Kaptur visited the *maquiladoras*, mostly electronics and car-part factories just south of the U.S.-Mexico border. The workers there, who had no independent trade unions, were making as little as a dollar an hour. Many of them, she said, lived in "hard paper shacks, if you could call them that," and had no fresh water. "I'm for free trade among free people," she went on. "When people are not free, they become exploited by their own governments." She blamed *NAFTA* for other deleterious outcomes, such as allowing American agribusinesses to flood Mexico with cheap corn, wiping out much of the country's subsistence farming. Studies estimate that some two million Mexican farmers lost their livelihoods as a result. Many of them immigrated to the United States; others stayed behind and replaced corn with opium poppies, for producing heroin.

The over-all national income is higher in the United States with free trade, but the majority of people are worse off. According to research by Josh Bivens, of the Economic Policy Institute, trade with low-wage countries costs American workers without a college degree—roughly sixty per cent of the population—twenty-three hundred dollars a year in lost wages, even after accounting for the lower prices of consumer goods. Since 1998, the U.S. has lost more than seventy thousand plants and five million manufacturing jobs, many of them in the Rust Belt. Sherry Lee Linkon, who teaches working-class studies at Georgetown University, coined the phrase "the half-life of deindustrialization" to describe how the ripple effects of

factory and mill closures can last for generations. Last month, Anne Case and Angus Deaton, economists at Princeton, published new research showing that life expectancy for Americans without a college degree peaked around 2010 and has been falling ever since. By 2021, not having graduated from college meant eight and a half fewer years of life.

Bill Clinton and Barack Obama each won Ohio twice, but neither arrested the economic decline of the state's working class, which is particularly acute in the traditionally Democratic northern corridor. (During Obama's first Presidential campaign, he called *NAFTA* "devastating" and "a big mistake"; in office, he pushed for the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free-trade deal with eleven countries.) "As deindustrialization occurred, especially in steel-making places like Youngstown, those areas became increasingly redder," John Russo, an emeritus professor of working-class studies at Youngstown State University, told me. "The reason for that, as much as any other, is the Democrats couldn't—or wouldn't—protect those places from what was happening." In Kaptur's view, Trump seized on this opening. "He's like the last brass ring on the merry-go-round," she said. "He expresses, in his rather demented way, the angst that people feel, the uncertainty that people feel—and he expresses their rage."

The Democrats, meanwhile, are in thrall to the coasts. (The Party's House leaders are all from coastal states.) "We have to fight like hell for this part of the country, because we're ignored," Kaptur said. She noted that the most recent Amtrak appropriations contained "nothing" for rail in the Midwest and twelve billion dollars for the Northeast Corridor. In 2021, Republicans in the Ohio state legislature redrew her district to include more conservative areas, in a clear attempt to oust her, yet she was reelected, defying expectations. That victory, and those of Senator Sherrod Brown, who has also vigorously opposed free-trade agreements, reflects the salience of the issue. Kaptur is worried about 2024, and beyond. "The Democrats are very fortunate to have many educated people in the Party," she said. "But, when you start losing the working people of America, you're in big trouble—and they are."

A recent New York *Times*/Siena poll showed Biden slipping badly with working-class voters of all races; his lead among nonwhite, non-college-educated voters has fallen to just sixteen points, down from forty-eight in

2020. Meanwhile, the U.A.W. strike has become something of a cause célèbre for aspiring right-wing populists. In September, the Republican senator Josh Hawley joined a G.M. picket line in Wentzville, Missouri, despite his previous support for a right-to-work bill, which would have weakened the finances and the bargaining power of the state's unions. Soon afterward, the Republican senator J. D. Vance, who had a previous career in venture capital, joined Kaptur on the Jeep picket line. "First time here?" she asked him.

The union's stand-up-strike strategy is paying off. In late September, minutes before a 10 A.M. deadline at which more plants would go offline, Stellantis agreed to reinstate its cost-of-living adjustment. After the U.A.W. threatened to strike at a lucrative General Motors plant that makes Cadillac S.U.V.s, the company committed to placing new battery plants under its master agreement with the union. (Later, that plant went on strike anyway.) "We've been told the E.V. future must be a race to the bottom," Fain, wearing an "Eat the Rich" T-shirt, said in a video announcement. "Now we've called their bluff." By late October, he had expanded the strike to include more than forty-five thousand workers across twenty-two states, and the most profitable facilities for each of the three automakers.

Then came the breakthrough: the tentative agreement with Ford. Fain instructed his members there to get back to work, so that the company could start building and selling cars again as quickly as possible, which would further pressure General Motors and Stellantis to settle. According to the Anderson Economic Group, the Big Three have lost more than four billion dollars since the strike began.

The economic pain has also been deepening for the workers still on strike. After speaking to the convoy in Detroit, Fain paid a visit to the Jeep picket line in Toledo. He was received with adulation, but also drew notes of skepticism. "How long do you think before we start struggling?," one worker, who was holding his young daughter, asked. Another said, "Some of us are struggling already. Like, is that a discussion?" (For most workers, strike pay is less than half a weekly paycheck.) Fain nodded. "It sucks," he said. "We don't want to be out here. But at the end of the day the company's put us in this position. It's a choice: Do we strike? Or do we continue to go backward?"

When Fain left, I drove to Local 12, past a number of vacant, grassy lots, remnants of former factories. Toledo appeared to be in somewhat better shape than other Rust Belt cities where I had spent time—Racine, Youngstown, River Rouge—but the emptiness was unmooring. The United States has destroyed its industrial base more deeply than other Western countries have. Given that both Democrats and Republicans had a hand in the destruction, the political fallout has been unpredictable. Many workers I met seemed to view the upcoming Presidential race with distance and cynicism. They were more animated by the visceral, immediate politics of the strike.

By the time I got back to the hall, it was getting dark. I saw Jones bustling around. It had been another long day; she looked exhausted but also content. Someone had donated trays of fried chicken, and she was going to the picket to deliver them. We walked out to her white Jeep and she opened the back door. The smell was enticing, and she insisted I take a piece. I asked what she had thought of Fain's visit. She answered slowly and deliberately. "He spoke the truth," she said. Anxiety about the strike was rising among the door-line-crew members, but Fain had managed to calm them. "I saw them being a little more at ease, listening to the words he was saying," she said. "He was reassuring them that they're going to be great." She shut the door, waved goodbye, and drove back to the line. ♦

This story was supported by the journalism nonprofit the [Economic Hardship Reporting Project](#).

An earlier version of this article misstated the boundaries of Ohio's Ninth Congressional District.

By Barry Blitt

By Triana Muñoz

By Carolyn Kormann

By Elizabeth Kolbert

The Critics

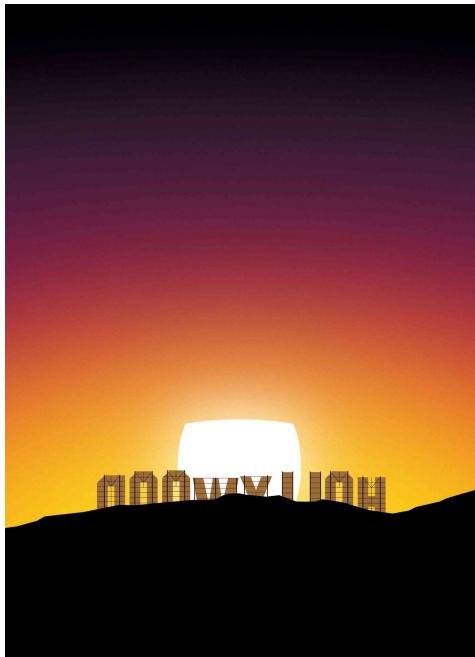
- [The Twilight of Prestige Television](#)
- [Briefly Noted Book Reviews](#)
- [The Real Story Behind Patrice Lumumba's Assassination](#)
- [Did Mitt Romney Save His Soul?](#)
- [Stephen Sondheim's Last Musical, "Here We Are," Comes to the Shed](#)
- ["Fellow Travelers" Shows Another Side of Gay History](#)
- ["The Killer" Misses](#)

Books

The Twilight of Prestige Television

Every so often, industry incentives shift and make room for a cavalcade of groundbreaking art. But the default setting is appealing to the masses.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



Two new books explain how we went from Tony Soprano to Ted Lasso, and how peak TV wasn't all it was made out to be. Illustration by Ben Wiseman

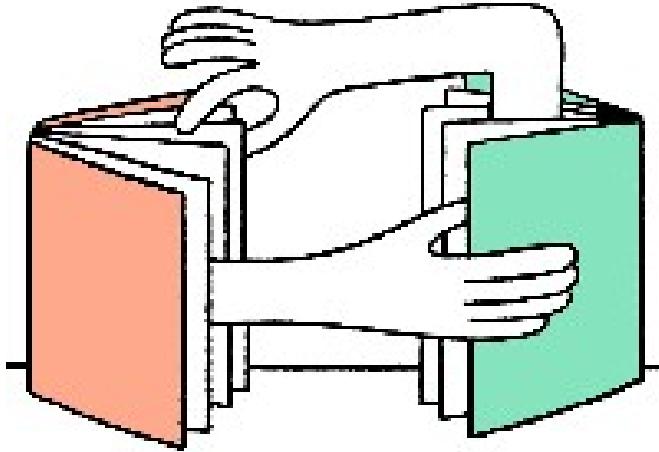
When did “prestige TV” jump the shark, or maybe just get chomped up in its jaws? Flip around for something to watch, and you’ll find star-crammed absurdities (“[The Morning Show](#),” “Only Murders in the Building”), I.P.-brand extensions (“Wednesday,” “Obi-Wan Kenobi”), [“Yellowstone” spinoffs](#), or, under the banner of the once genre-busting HBO, rehashes of better shows (“House of the Dragon,” “And Just Like That . . .”). When a worthy new series breaks out (“[Reservation Dogs](#),” “[The Bear](#)”), it feels like an anomaly, and just as many get prematurely cancelled (“A League of Their Own,” “Winning Time”). Many streaming services are cutting costs and curbing output while casting around for the broadest possible audience. We used to say that twenty-first-century TV was like the nineteenth-century novel—instead of staring at the idiot box, we were communing with Dickens or Zola!—but at some point that stopped seeming true.

What happened? One answer is what always happens: golden ages never last. Just look at the New Hollywood of the late nineteen-sixties and seventies, which gave us such boundary-pushing classics as “Midnight Cowboy,” “The Godfather,” and “Taxi Driver.” “At its most ambitious, the New Hollywood was a movement intended to cut film free of its evil twin, commerce, enabling it to fly high through the thin air of art,” Peter Biskind writes in [Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-and-Rock ’n’ Roll Generation Saved Hollywood](#) (1998), his rollicking overview of the era. In the late sixties, Biskind recounts, the crumbling studios were held in the “rigor-mortis-like grip” of aging moguls who had no idea how to speak to a young audience. That left an opening for counterculture hits like “Bonnie and Clyde” and “Easy Rider,” Dennis Hopper’s hippie motorcycle odyssey, which made sixty million dollars on a six-figure budget. Upstart auteurs—[Martin Scorsese](#), Robert Altman, [Francis Ford Coppola](#)—had the run of the town. Bewildered executives were suddenly barking, “Get me the next ‘Godfather’!”

Then, as Biskind tells us, the “movie brats” [Steven Spielberg](#) and George Lucas came along with “Jaws” and “Star Wars,” which restored the reign of commerce, complete with sequels and Luke Skywalker action figures. Of course, commerce had never really left; it had just lost its footing, except in the case of a few producers—Bert Schneider, Robert Evans—hip enough to bottle the counterculture. In the late seventies, the business reoriented itself, with the rise of the mega-agencies I.C.M. and C.A.A. and of a new breed of executive (Michael Eisner, Barry Diller). Many of the renegade directors self-destructed in a blaze of coke and ego, or joined the counter-revolution of the blockbuster eighties.

[The Best Books We Read This Week](#)

Read our reviews of notable new fiction and nonfiction, updated every Wednesday.



Biskind, a longtime contributor to *Vanity Fair* and one of Hollywood's shrewdest chroniclers, followed "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls" with "[Down and Dirty Pictures: Miramax, Sundance, and the Rise of Independent Film](#)" (2004), another panorama of a short-lived creative efflorescence. In the late eighties, Steven Soderbergh's "Sex, Lies, and Videotape" came out of the U.S. Film Festival (the future Sundance) and kick-started a movement of grungy, low-budget indies that counterbalanced Hollywood bloat. Harvey Weinstein's Miramax acquired the film and used it, along with Gen X hits like Kevin Smith's "Clerks," to break out of the "art-house ghetto." The big money followed: Disney acquired Miramax for sixty million dollars; "Pulp Fiction" became the first indie to pass the hundred-million mark; and "Indiewood" was born, with Fox Searchlight and Sony Pictures Classics competing on the film-festival circuit. ("Get me the next 'Pulp Fiction'!") By the turn of the millennium, Miramax was spending big on middlebrow fare like "The Cider House Rules" and "Kate & Leopold," the kind of stuff the studios made. As Soderbergh laments to Biskind, "The independent film movement, as we knew it, just doesn't exist anymore."

Like many Hollywood sagas, Biskind's turns out to be a trilogy. His latest book, "[Pandora's Box: How Guts, Guile, and Greed Upended TV](#)" (William Morrow), explains, in punchy, propulsive prose, how we went [from Tony Soprano to Ted Lasso](#). Biskind's turn to television is telling: the movies, he

sighs, are stuck in “superhero monoculture.” Soderbergh, who directed the Cinemax series “The Knick,” reappears to complain, “The audience for the kinds of movies I grew up liking has migrated to television.” Not network television, mind you—Biskind dismisses it, somewhat ungenerously, as “a measureless tract of hard, cracked soil, inhospitable to intelligent life”—but the other kind, starting with HBO.

Michael Fuchs, who joined the pay-cable company in 1976 and was fired in 1995, tells Biskind that he set out to produce counterprogramming to the stuff put out by the “homogenized, fake” broadcast networks. Freed of the standards-and-practices departments that kept the networks neutered, he put on boxing matches and risqué docuseries such as “Real Sex,” all geared toward men. “HBO was an insurgency,” Fuchs says. By the mid-nineties, it was expanding into edgy original series, including “Oz,” a prison drama whose pilot ends with a main character getting burned alive—not exactly “Touched by an Angel.” “Oz” primed audiences for “The Sopranos,” which premiered in 1999 and completed HBO’s metamorphosis, as Biskind writes, “from a fighting-and-fondling irritant to the networks into the Rolls-Royce of cable.”

We meet the three HBO Davids: Chase, Simon, and Milch—the headstrong, high-strung men who reinvented the Mob drama (“The Sopranos”), the crime procedural ([“The Wire”](#)), and the Western (“Deadwood”), respectively. Biskind is skilled at the quick character sketch. Chase, he writes, “is a slender man, with deep-set eyes, a broad expanse of forehead, and a mouth that alternates between wry amusement and a frown, as if he has bitten into a lemon.” With “The Sopranos,” Chase ushered in a serialized format that prized moral ambiguity and rewarded patient viewing. “On network, everybody says exactly what they’re thinking,” he tells Biskind. “I wanted my characters to be telling lies.”

The “Sopranos” writers’ room could reflect the sort of scheming that defined its onscreen characters; Biskind calls it “a hellhole of competitiveness and backbiting.” Midway through the sixth season, Chase abruptly fired the writer Robin Green, like Tony whacking Big Pussy. In “Deadwood,” Milch projected himself onto the Old West impresario Jack Langrishe (Brian Cox), “who was supposed to illustrate the power of the artist over the power of the capitalist,” Biskind writes. Of course, the talent-versus-suits morality tale

that undergirds Biskind's books is never that clean. HBO cancelled "Deadwood" after three seasons, citing its high budget, but Cox recalls someone describing its demise as a "Jewish pissing contest" between the volatile Milch and HBO's chairman and C.E.O., Chris Albrecht. If the rising television auteurs were the new Coppolas and Altman, they could be just as power-mad and self-immolating. The shows of HBO's golden age offered stories of brutal patriarchies headed by charismatic antiheroes, which is what HBO was, too. In May, 2007, Albrecht was arrested for choking his girlfriend in the parking lot of a Las Vegas hotel, and resigned. (Three years later, he was running Starz.)

HBO, meanwhile, was flush with money, top-heavy with executives, and the envy of Hollywood. ("Get me the next 'Sopranos'!") After "The Sopranos" ended, in 2007, HBO had a dearth of juggernauts; Milch followed up "Deadwood" with the disastrous "John from Cincinnati." The drought ended in 2011, with the arrival of "Game of Thrones." But rivals were already filling the void. Showtime realized that women could be antiheroes, and put out "Weeds" and "Homeland." Basic cable had entered the fray. FX had the tough guys of "The Shield" and "Justified." AMC, which had been a second-rate Turner Classic Movies, picked up "Mad Men" after HBO passed on Matthew Weiner's pilot, and then followed it with [Vince Gilligan](#)'s "Breaking Bad." For a time, AMC was hot—until it zombified itself into a "Walking Dead" spinoff factory.

HBO, defending its turf, scooped up big-name authors and directors, among them Margaret Atwood and Noah Baumbach, in what the industry terms "schmuck insurance"; the development deals meant that HBO wouldn't see a project it rejected being peddled elsewhere and possibly becoming a hit. The risk-taking era was receding. Albrecht's successor Richard Plepler tells Biskind, "We were under tremendous pressure to deliver more and more money to an earnings-based corporation that prevented us from expanding our programming, and that was just the reality of being part of Time Warner."

The story of these turbulent masterminds and their antihero doubles has been told in any number of books, including, ten years ago, Brett Martin's "[Difficult Men](#)," which critics compared to "Easy Riders, Raging Bulls." Biskind has the benefit of having waited to see the other side of Peak TV's

peak. In retrospect, a pivotal moment came in 2011, when David Fincher was shopping around “House of Cards,” about another seductive antihero: a devious congressman who plots his way into the Oval Office—and who, in his first scene, kills a dog. “I don’t spend any time in D.C., but I spend a lot of time in Hollywood,” Fincher would tell people. “If you’re talking about hubris and venality, they’re not that different.” The show’s natural home was HBO, which offered to shoot the pilot and see. Fincher had lined up big stars, Kevin Spacey and Robin Wright, and wanted a thirteen-episode commitment. That wasn’t the way business was done, certainly not at HBO, which was mired, Biskind says, in “internecine warfare, bad calls, and overdevelopment.” Then Fincher got an offer that blew HBO out of the water: a hundred million dollars for not one but two full seasons. It came from Netflix.

The company was founded in the late nineties, by the computer scientist Reed Hastings and the entrepreneur Marc Rudolph. Hastings, according to Rudolph, wanted to create “the Amazon.com of something.” Rudolph suggested home video. Netflix amassed subscribers by mailing out DVDs. It began streaming in 2007. Hastings, convinced that he could mine user data to pinpoint what customers wanted to watch, started researching “taste clusters.” He spent one family ski vacation holed up in a Park City chalet, tinkering with his algorithm. The studios kept licensing out content, thinking little of it. David Zaslav, now the C.E.O. of Warner Bros. Discovery, tells Biskind, “They fed Netflix when Netflix looked like a harmless animal. And then they were stuck having to continue to feed it, when it was clear that Netflix was a beast.” In 2010, Jeff Bewkes, the C.E.O. of HBO’s parent company, Time Warner, made one of those deathless “We’ll be greeted as liberators” statements when he said, of Netflix, “Is the Albanian Army going to take over the world? I don’t think so.”

With “House of Cards,” which premiered in early 2013, Netflix established itself as a purveyor of original series to rival HBO’s. Jenji Kohan’s “[Orange Is the New Black](#)” came later that year, helping to boost Netflix’s stock price five hundred and sixty-six per cent. For both shows, Netflix dropped the entire first season at once, creating a model of viewership known as binge-watching. The Albanian Army had arrived. Showrunners flocked to this newfound haven of creative freedom, which seemed willing to throw money

at something weird or dark. “Before you knew it, you had a revolution within the revolution,” Biskind writes.

In Peak TV terms, consider the opening map from “Game of Thrones”: HBO was the arrogant Lannister clan of King’s Landing; FX and AMC were the brooding Starks of the North; and Netflix was the Targaryens, invading from across the sea with the help of a fire-breathing dragon—Hastings’s algorithm. Now Big Tech got in the game: Amazon premiered “Transparent” on its streaming service in 2014; Apple launched Apple TV+ in 2019, bearing “The Morning Show.” The tech giants “flooded the streaming space with money,” Biskind writes. But, as the FX chief John Landgraf, who coined the term “Peak TV,” tells him, “you don’t make art just by throwing money at it.” The legacy studios sprinted into the streaming wars, with Disney+, Paramount+, and Peacock. WarnerMedia funnelled HBO—along with DC superheroes and other properties—into HBO Max, designed to reach a broader audience than the premium-cable mother ship. The merger of Warner Bros. and Discovery, in 2022, turned Zaslav into a Hollywood power player. In a twist that the author of “Easy Riders, Raging Bulls” might have found a little on the nose, Zaslav had acquired the storied home from which Robert Evans ran Paramount during its New Hollywood renaissance.

Zaslav lacked his predecessor’s palate, though. His streaming outlet, renamed Max, is now the place, Biskind laments, “where you go to watch Batman spinoffs” or reruns of “Gossip Girl.” Fuchs delivers the eulogy. “This is a fifty-year-old company,” he told Biskind last year. “I consider that it died at fifty. There’s no longer an HBO.” But all the outlets were getting more cautious. In the spring of 2022, Netflix told its investors that it had lost two hundred thousand subscribers in the year’s first quarter, and its value plummeted. The “Great Netflix Correction” effectively ended streaming’s roll-the-dice era, and although Netflix itself recovered, its debt-saddled competitors were running scared. Hungry for subscribers, the streamers developed an “allergy to risk,” Biskind observes, leaning harder on preexisting I.P., movie stars, and comfort viewing. Netflix and Amazon recruited executives from network TV, with the goal, in Biskind’s words, of “reaching as big an audience as cheaply as possible.” Now the algorithm rules us all.

“Pandora’s Box” is as unsparing as “Easy Riders, Raging Bulls,” and the thesis of the two books is the same: Hollywood’s golden ages don’t arise from the miraculous congregation of geniuses. The industry’s default setting is for crap. Occasionally, the incentives change just enough to allow a cascade of innovation, but those incentives inevitably shift back to the norm. Many streamers, including Netflix, are now launching ad-supported tiers, meaning that they’ll be answerable to the same sponsors that propped up the networks. We’ve come full circle. “The post-network streaming world could turn out to look very much like the pre-streaming broadcast world,” Biskind concludes. “Instead of the Big Four networks, we might see Big Five Streamers.” Fewer protagonists are likely to murder a dog.

Then again, what if something else has been happening, something not cyclical but transformative? Midway through “Pandora’s Box,” the shows under discussion signal a vibe shift. “The Sopranos” and its progeny of ruthless male antiheroes give way to “Orange Is the New Black,” “Girls,” “Insecure,” “Transparent,” and “I May Destroy You”—shows that empowered female, queer, and Black creators and offered complicated protagonists reflecting a wider range of identities.

This, too, tracked a change in the marketplace: suddenly, it was seen as good business to diversify the screen, even if C-suites stayed demographically stagnant. Amid the backstabbing boys’ clubs, “Pandora’s Box” is littered with talented female executives who were unceremoniously ousted, including Carolyn Strauss at HBO, Cindy Holland at Netflix, and Christina Wayne at AMC. “It was the most devastating thing that had ever happened to me,” Wayne recalls of her firing, in 2009. “And may they rot in hell, is all I can say.” Matthew Weiner was also appalled at Wayne’s dismissal. According to Wayne, he lambasted the male executives at a black-tie event for “Mad Men,” saying, “You just didn’t want her there because your penises are too small.”

Not that Weiner himself comes off well. “There was often drinking and getting high after five or six, and I really felt like he was recapitulating the atmosphere of the show,” the writer Marti Noxon tells Biskind. “He wanted to be Don Draper, and he’s not. The women just fell into Don Draper’s arms, but with Matt it was manipulation and power, targeting people about their bodies and their sexuality day in, day out, and an assumption that you have

to play to his good side.” In late 2017, another “Mad Men” writer, Kater Gordon, accused Weiner of sexual harassment, a claim he denied.

In “Pandora’s Box,” the #MeToo movement is a passing plot development. But it’s the engine behind Maureen Ryan’s galvanizing [Burn It Down: Power, Complicity, and a Call for Change in Hollywood](#) (Mariner). In her view, “a lot of beliefs and norms still enshrouding Hollywood are in dire need of reboots,” first and foremost the notion that “creative people are ‘temperamental,’ and that that word—along with ‘passionate,’ ‘driven,’ and ‘difficult’—automatically encompasses some terrible things.” Ryan reports on a variety of “toxic” workplaces, among them the producer Scott Rudin’s office and the writers’ room for “Lost,” unveiling a horror show of “nightmare narcissists, well-connected incompetents, and garden-variety abusers,” along with the corporate instinct to silence victims and maintain business as usual.

Ryan—like Biskind, a longtime entertainment reporter and a *Vanity Fair* contributor—focusses less on the machinations of high-powered monsters than on the assistants and junior writers who endured their misbehavior. She says that hearing about Hollywood’s abuses for years left her in a “haze of exhaustion and fear.” Aaron Sorkin’s half-hearted response to Rudin’s alleged workplace bullying gave her “rage migraines.” But she’s had enough, and now she’s lighting a match.

Among the myths that Ryan wishes to torch is “the Myth of a Golden Age.” “The vast majority of the most buzzed-about Golden Age shows featured heterosexual white dudes at the center of their sagas, which was, honestly, just a continuation of what Hollywood had been doing forever,” she writes. In 2014, as a TV critic for the Huffington Post, she wrote [a piece](#) titled “Who Creates Drama at HBO? Very Few Women or People of Color.” A high-level executive from the company e-mailed her, saying that the headline was unfair and asking her to change it. She refused.

In a section on “Toxic Myths Around Creativity,” Ryan takes on “Easy Riders, Raging Bulls” itself. “Throughout the book, women (and some men) sigh at a wide array of Creative Guy antics like these, many of which were fueled by insecurity and rivalry, not to mention drugs and alcohol,” she writes. “I have talked to so many people who have encountered various

flavors of miserable-prick energy throughout their industry careers, and they are, in a word, *tired*.¹

To be fair, “Easy Riders, Raging Bulls” doesn’t set out to glamorize the misbehavior of the New Hollywood, but no doubt some of its readers—especially aspirants who go to L.A. planning to be the next Dennis Hopper—see what they want to see. In that sense, Biskind has something in common with David Chase, who viewed “The Sopranos” as a show “about evil” and was disturbed by the subset of fans who wanted “less yakking, more whacking.” If Biskind, like Chase, lays out a sprawling, amoral ecosystem with the dispassion of an omniscient narrator, Ryan is more akin to Michaela Coel, the creator and star of “I May Destroy You”: personal, indignant, and unimpressed by “big-swinging-dick” behavior. Ryan is also more hopeful, despite the rage migraines. Where “Pandora’s Box” mourns the end of an era, Ryan sees “the beginning stages of the entertainment industry’s shift to better models.”

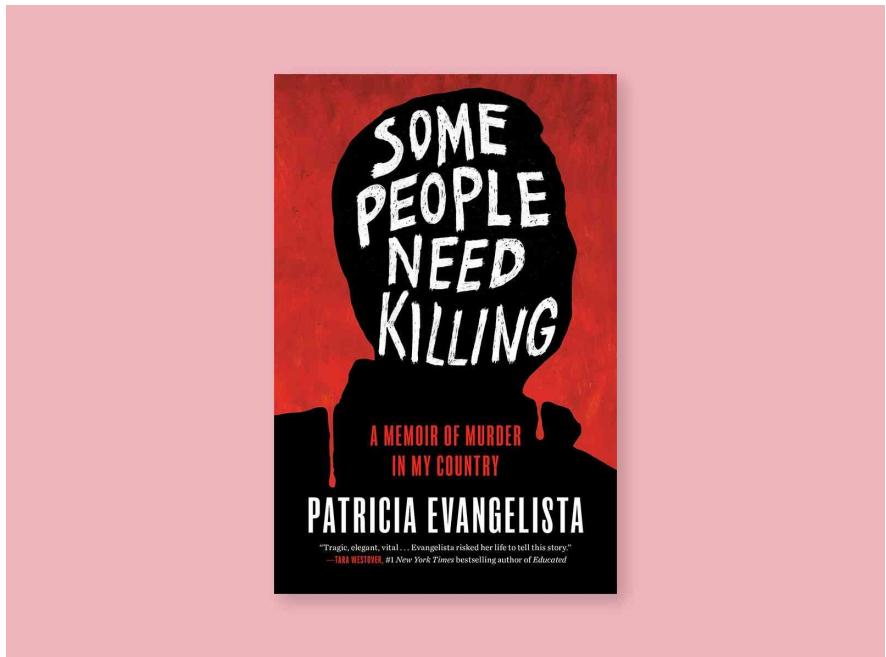
Both books bring Hollywood’s recent history to the precipice of the double strike of the writers’ and actors’ guilds. For Biskind, whose book goes up to the start of the writers’ strike, in May, the picket lines are one more sign of the devolution of Peak TV. Ryan’s book went to press earlier, and it only hints at the labor clash to come. But she’s attuned to the conditions that led to it: “The shred of hope that many used to nurture—that a job on a twenty-two-episode show might provide a measure of job security—is, for many, pretty much gone.” Maybe a Hollywood that’s more equitable and less in thrall to “temperamental geniuses” will bring its own kind of golden age. “I want to burn Hollywood down some days, I really do,” Ryan writes. “And then I fall in love with a TV show or a movie and I want to know everything about it.” ♦

By Richard Brody

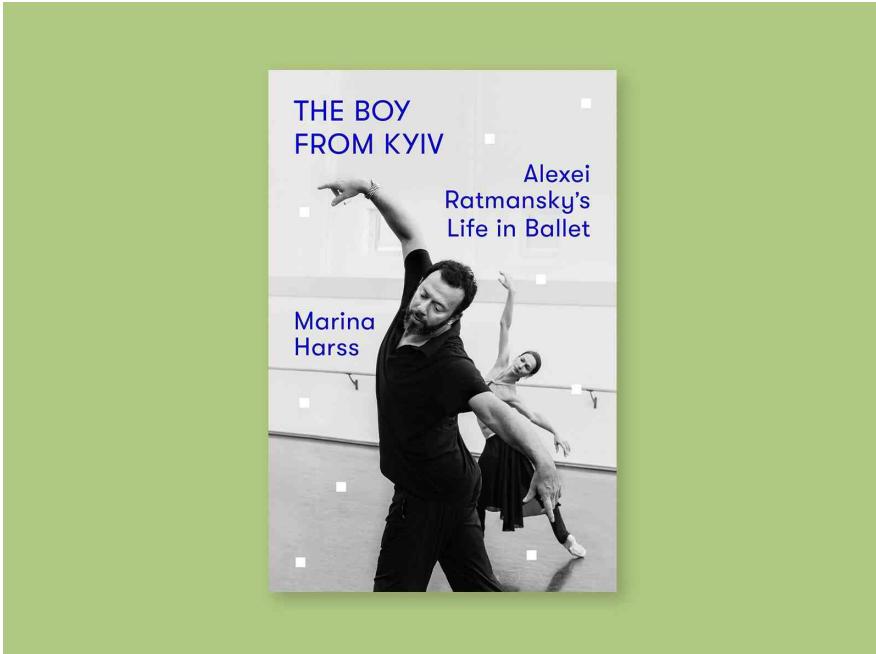
By Richard Brody

By Jody Rosen

By Inkoo Kang



Some People Need Killing, by Patricia Evangelista (Random House). In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte was elected President of the Philippines after campaigning on the promise of slaughtering three million drug addicts. In this unflinching account of the ensuing violence, a Filipina trauma journalist narrates six years of the country's drug war, during which she spent her evenings "in the mechanical absorption of organized killing." The book, conceived as a record of extrajudicial deaths, interweaves snippets of memoir that chart Evangelista's personal evolution alongside that of her country under Duterte. In this period, she became "a citizen of a nation I cannot recognize as my own."

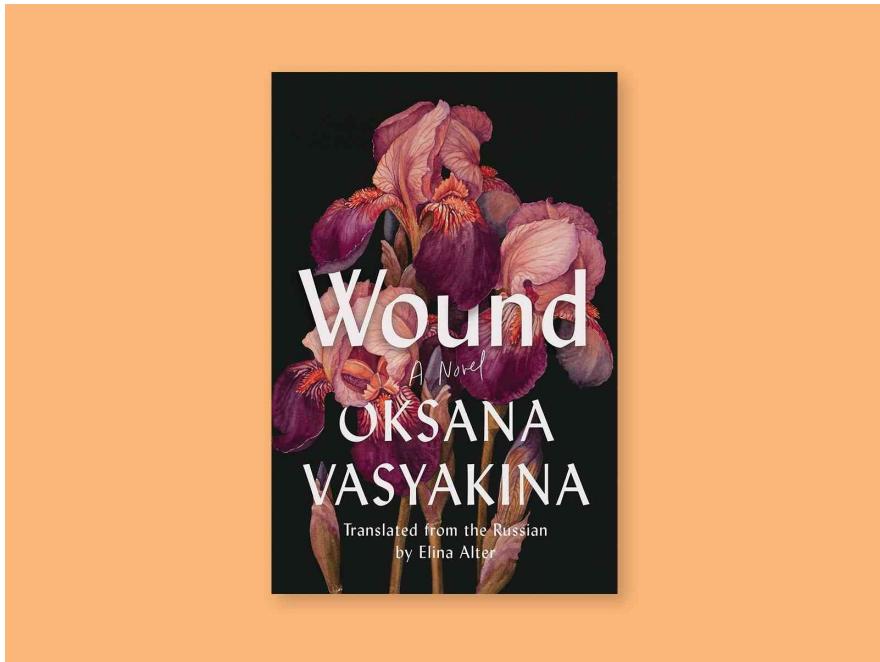


The Boy from Kyiv, by *Marina Harss* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). This deft, intimate biography traces the career of Alexei Ratmansky—arguably the preëminent ballet choreographer of our time, currently in residence at New York City Ballet—and examines the tensions between traditionalism and innovation within his field. Born in St. Petersburg (then Leningrad), raised in Kyiv, and trained at the Bolshoi, Ratmansky danced with the National Ballet of Ukraine during perestroika. After the Soviet Union’s dissolution, he ventured abroad to join companies in the West before eventually returning to the Bolshoi as its director. His eclectic, erudite œuvre includes a variety of original pieces—narrative, abstract, satirical—and reconstructions of classics, like “The Sleeping Beauty,” that make radical use of century-old dance notation. Harss’s insightful portrait of a prolific creator highlights how Ratmansky’s art reflects the frictions and the liberations of a changing world.

The Best Books of 2023

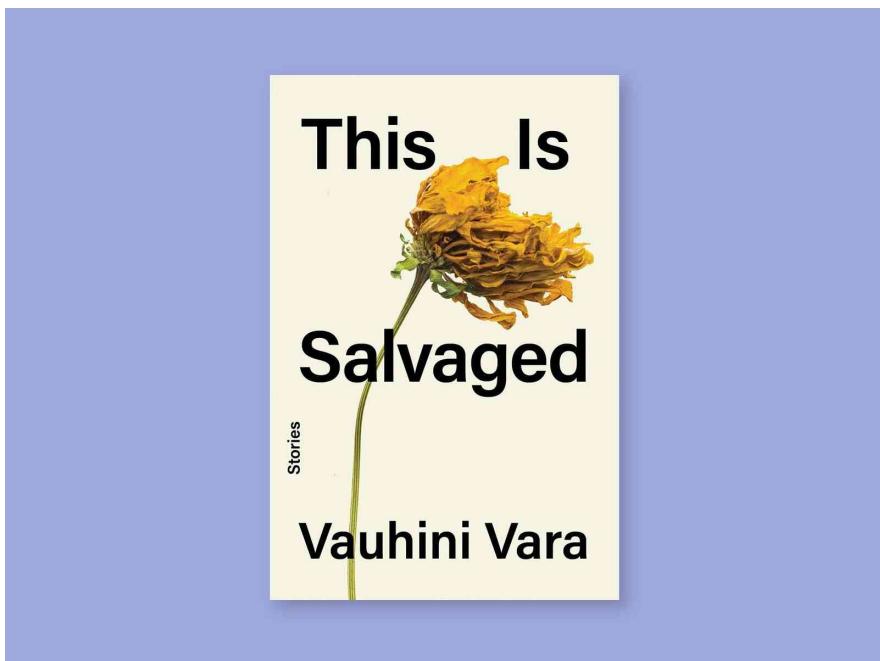


Read our reviews of the year's notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Wound, by Oksana Vasyakina, translated from the Russian by Elina Alter (*Catapult*). In this affecting début novel, a narrator who resembles the author grapples with the death of her mother—her “integral wound”—and with her mother’s disapproval of her lesbianism. She makes a pilgrimage through

Russia, carrying her mother's ashes in an urn to be buried in their home town, in Siberia, but her grief is continually punctured by the bureaucracy of dealing with death. Drawing from Siberian legend and Greek mythology and from modern works by artists like Louise Bourgeois and Annie Leibovitz, Vasyakina meditates on time, womanhood, and sexuality, using the novel to make sense of the parent she has lost. "I feel that she is looking at the world through me," Vasyakina writes. "I feel her inside me all the time."



This Is Salvaged, by Vauhini Vara (Norton). The narrator of the title story in this collection is an unappreciated artist who beholds a warming planet and wishes to express that the precariousness of life is, among other things, darkly funny. This thesis propels the stories that follow. A teen-age girl avoids processing her brother's death while working above her favorite eggroll shop at an operation that sells everything from phone sex to gardening magazines. A boy who doesn't fret about technological advancements that pose a risk of alienation fantasizes about owning a car in a driverless future. The exuberant optimism of Vara's characters allows the author to approach heavy topics—predatory bosses, globalization, class difference—with levity.

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Nathan Heller

Books

The Real Story Behind Patrice Lumumba's Assassination

The Belgians wanted to protect their mining money. The Americans feared a Soviet foothold. A new book sorts through the fate of the leader of the fight for Congolese independence.

By Isaac Chotiner



The U.N.'s Dag Hammarskjold considered the Congolese leader "erratic and inept"; Ralph Bunche deemed him a "schizophrenic." But Lumumba's paranoia was well founded—and his assassination made him a martyr. Illustration by Pola Maneli

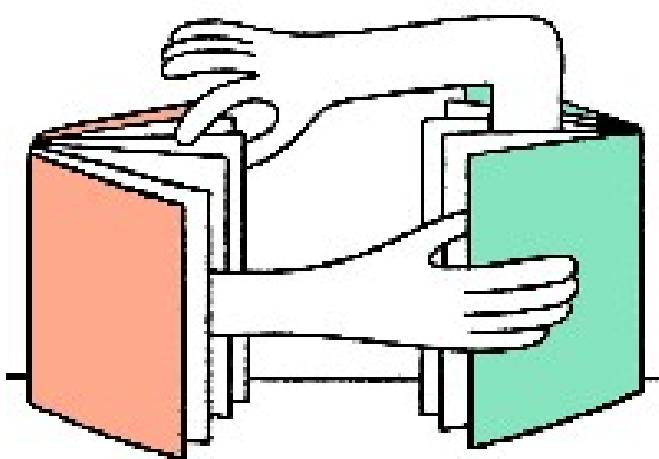
"It is now up to you, gentlemen, to show that we were right to trust you." So King Baudouin, of Belgium, declared in the Congolese capital of Léopoldville (present-day Kinshasa) on June 30, 1960. It was a handover ceremony: the Belgian Congo would henceforth belong to the Congolese people. Decades later, Baudouin's condescension remains startling. His great-great-uncle Leopold II had overseen what was then called the Congo Free State as his personal fiefdom—and established a system of exploitation that was monstrous even by colonial standards. But by 1960 the Belgian government could no longer ignore the wave of anti-imperialist movements that had swept much of the continent. Now the twenty-nine-year-old

monarch told the crowd—made up of new Congolese citizens, Belgian officials, and dignitaries from around the world—that independence would be “achieved not through the immediate satisfaction of simple pleasures but through work.”

Baudouin was followed in the speaking order by Joseph Kasavubu—Independent Congo’s President, a relatively ceremonial role—though nobody really remembers what he said. It was Patrice Lumumba, Congo’s Prime Minister, who left an impression when he rose to speak next. A slim, enigmatic man, Lumumba was the most important politician in the country, and the one whom the Belgians were most concerned about. Lumumba’s remarks were clearly a direct reply to Baudouin’s. He ticked through the daily humiliations of life for Black Africans in the Belgian Congo, and recalled the violence visited upon his people. And then, his voice rising, he told his countrymen, “We who suffered in our bodies and hearts from colonialist oppression, we say to you out loud: from now on, all that is over.”

The Best Books We Read This Week

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Seven months later, Lumumba was murdered, brought down by a combination of Congolese politicians and Belgian “advisers,” with the tacit support of the United States and the malign neglect of the United Nations. The crisis that then engulfed Congo—impossibly complex, increasingly brutal—ended with the three-decade rule of Joseph-Désiré Mobutu, a onetime Lumumba ally who went on to govern as a ruthless Western client. Mobutu’s bloody final months, in the nineteen-nineties, were followed by an even more brutal war between Congo and its neighbors, which left millions dead. The death of Lumumba was a signal moment of both the Cold War and decolonization, two defining events of the post-1945 world. His story is the story of how they became inseparable.

The Congo catastrophe may have seemed inevitable, but the geopolitics of the era were by no means straightforward. In the fall of 1956, an Anglo-French-Israeli military operation against Egypt and its President, Gamal Abdel Nasser, prompted by his decision to nationalize the Suez Canal, ended in humiliating failure after the Eisenhower Administration made clear that it would not support such a venture. The larger subtext was that the days of colonialism—at least European colonialism—were over. Eisenhower was angry about the Suez operation. The attack on Egypt would make the Western side in the Cold War look hypocritical, and help the Soviets gain ground in the Arab world. More pressing, it was a distraction from the concurrent Soviet invasion of Hungary. (Meanwhile, the United States was engaging in subversion in countries as far afield as Iran and Guatemala.)

After the Suez debacle hastened the end of Prime Minister Anthony Eden’s government in Britain, his successor, Harold Macmillan, travelled to Cape Town, in February, 1960, and invoked “the wind of change” blowing across the continent, in effect accepting decolonization. By then, France had suffered an embarrassing military defeat in Indochina, which was followed by the decisions to grant independence to Morocco and Tunisia. Charles de Gaulle had used the ongoing war in Algeria, whose conclusion he later helped negotiate, to leverage his way into power. Europe was grudgingly making strides toward discarding its empires, while still attempting to maintain some influence. Washington was eager to have a presence in these new markets.

One of the virtues of Stuart A. Reid's "[The Lumumba Plot: The Secret History of the CIA and a Cold War Assassination](#)" (Knopf) is that it shows how Congolese independence was never given a chance. Reid is interested not only in how external forces arrayed themselves to bring about a calamity but also in how the personalities of Lumumba, Mobutu, and the separatist leader Moïse Tshombe made finding a solution more difficult.

Lumumba, Reid's central figure, had left his home province of Kasai, where he was born in 1925, and settled in Stanleyville (now Kisangani) in the mid-nineteen-forties. Intent on becoming a part of the Belgian Congo's Black middle class, Lumumba, a fanatical reader of French classics and political philosophy, immersed himself in Stanleyville's civic life. By the early fifties, according to Reid, Lumumba had held leadership positions in seven different civic groups in the city. During much of this period, he sounded like someone of whom Baudouin would have approved. Lumumba viewed himself as an *évolué*. He urged the Belgians to provide wider access to education in Congo and to promote racial equality, but did so in the gentlest possible terms. In 1952, he wrote, "We promise docility, loyal and sincere collaboration to all those who want to help us achieve, in union with them, the element that is beyond us: civilization."

This reverential tone garnered him the attention of Belgian colonial officials, and even an audience with Baudouin, when the King visited Congo in 1955. But when Lumumba was found to have embezzled money at a postal-service job he held, he was sent to the Stanleyville Central Prison for fourteen months. Comments he made about the conditions there—including food that, he wrote, "a European would never serve to his dog"—suggest a sharpening political consciousness. (Even so, while in prison he wrote that political rights were not meant for "people who were unfit to use them," such as "dull-witted illiterates.") After his release, he moved to Léopoldville and began to speak out more aggressively against imperial rule, calling for Congo to "free itself from the chains of paternalism."



Cartoon by Michael Maslin

It wasn't just the conditions in his country that changed his thinking; much of Africa was forging a route to independence. It was Congo's time. Owing in part to his magnetic speaking skills, and to his following in Léopoldville—and even to the gusto with which he took up a new job as a beer salesman—he became the dominant figure in the political party that secured the most parliamentary seats in elections determining Congo's first democratic government. Lumumba, still in his early thirties, had now travelled across the whole country, and he believed that an independent state should unite Congolese divided by ethnic and regional loyalties.

Regional conflicts in Congo were particularly combustible because the Belgians were determined to shape the new state to their liking and, in particular, to keep control of the mineral-rich southern province of Katanga. (Congo currently has nearly half the world's reserves of cobalt, which is essential for cell phones and a variety of batteries and alloys.) The province had held a special protected status since Leopold II ran Congo as a personal possession, from 1885 to 1908; before independence, it was effectively governed by mining interests, which maintained their own army. On the eve of independence, a single mining company provided half the colony's tax revenue.

Tshombe, the most important politician in Katanga, came from a wealthy family in the province, and was close to the Belgian settlers there. Long before [Malcolm X](#) referred to him as “the worst African ever born,” Tshombe became known for his foreign suits and foreign bank account, courtesy of his Belgian allies. He also projected some of the resentment that native Katangese felt toward other Congolese, which often stemmed from a dislike of the laborers who had come to work the mines. (Lumumba’s party scored zero victories in Katanga during the 1960 election.) But Tshombe’s biggest concern about the new state—one shared by his Belgian allies—was pecuniary: he feared that the new government in Léopoldville would take control of the mining profits.

And so, where once the Belgians had favored centralization, they now favored federalism. Reid, an editor at *Foreign Affairs*, quotes a U.S. Embassy memorandum summarizing Belgian attitudes. Émile Janssens, the notorious Belgian leader of the Force Publique, the Congolese army, “would presumably take his orders from the President of the new Congolese republic,” it reads. “But if these orders were of a destructive nature, the Belgian government would hope that he would use his common sense and not follow them.”

The third crucial figure of Reid’s book is Mobutu, who was a soldier before transitioning to journalism in the mid-nineteen-fifties; Lumumba befriended him after coming to know his byline. Cagey about his opinions, Mobutu—like many people in the Congolese political class—was almost surely passing intelligence to the Belgians before independence. Lumumba eventually began to distrust him, but by then he had already made him a top military aide, in part because of the support Mobutu had among soldiers.

With the stage set, Reid turns to detailing how quickly the country collapsed. On July 5th, the African rank and file of the Force Publique were growing restless; for one thing, despite independence, no Congolese soldier had been promoted above the level of first sergeant major. Janssens, in response, gathered soldiers under his command, took out a piece of chalk, and wrote on a blackboard, “Before independence = after independence.” This assertion of authority backfired, and large-scale rioting and attacks on white officers followed. In a calculated response, Belgian troops, welcomed by Tshombe, landed in Katanga, ostensibly to protect their countrymen. In short

order, Tshombe and his Belgian minders declared Katanga an independent state. Within a month of Congo's independence, Belgian soldiers advanced on the capital; they controlled airfields across the country, and gave Lumumba orders about where he was allowed to travel. One night, in an incident that could have been straight out of Evelyn Waugh, a Belgian soldier shot at a correspondent for *Time*, and then apologized, saying, "In the dark I thought you were an African."

Lumumba requested U.N. assistance in the form of international troops to support the Congolese government and keep the peace, thus paving the way for the Belgians to leave. The U.N. was led by the Swedish diplomat Dag Hammarskjöld, and today, when few people can name the organization's head, it is hard to comprehend how large a figure he was. The son of a Swedish Prime Minister, he was cool and cerebral and difficult to read, and he commanded international respect. Largely liberal in outlook, he was clearly upset by the Belgian intervention, and saw the importance of newly independent states developing into truly sovereign countries. "I must do this," Hammarskjöld said upon hearing of Lumumba's request. "God knows where it will lead this organization and where it will lead me."

But Hammarskjöld, who held many of the prejudices typical of his background and his era, took an immediate dislike to Lumumba. Conor Cruise O'Brien, the Irish diplomat and writer who led later U.N. operations in Congo—Hammarskjöld picked him for the job after reading a book of his essays on Catholic writers—once wrote that Hammarskjöld shared the "sometimes unconscious European assumptions that order in Africa is primarily a matter of safeguarding European lives and property."

The U.N. ended up limiting Lumumba's options. Its forces dithered about entering Katanga, causing Tshombe's breakaway regime to further establish itself with Belgian help. Hammarskjöld wrote that it was critical to insure that U.N. troops would not be used by Lumumba to subdue Katanga, Reid explains. When Hammarskjöld visited Congo, he passed through the capital without meeting Lumumba, and went directly to see Tshombe. Lumumba was stunned and enraged. We're accustomed to stories about an ineffectual U.N., of course, but Reid attributes its conduct to the preferences of major Western powers—they didn't want an aggressive U.N. deployment that would appear directed against Belgium—and of Hammarskjöld himself.

Even before independence, Eisenhower regarded Congo's prospects as dim, and a trip that Lumumba made to America, in July, 1960, had been a disaster: he was not afforded a high-level reception, and failed to garner the military assistance he sought. Lumumba could mobilize crowds with his radio speeches, but, Reid notes, his efforts at face-to-face diplomacy tended to alienate the people he was negotiating with. In the meantime, the American Ambassador to Congo was known to make jokes about Lumumba being a cannibal, while the C.I.A. on the ground was raising concerns about "Commie influence." As Reid and many others have established, Lumumba was not a Communist; Hammarskjöld, for his part, considered Lumumba an "ignorant pawn" but too "erratic and inept" for the Soviets to find useful.

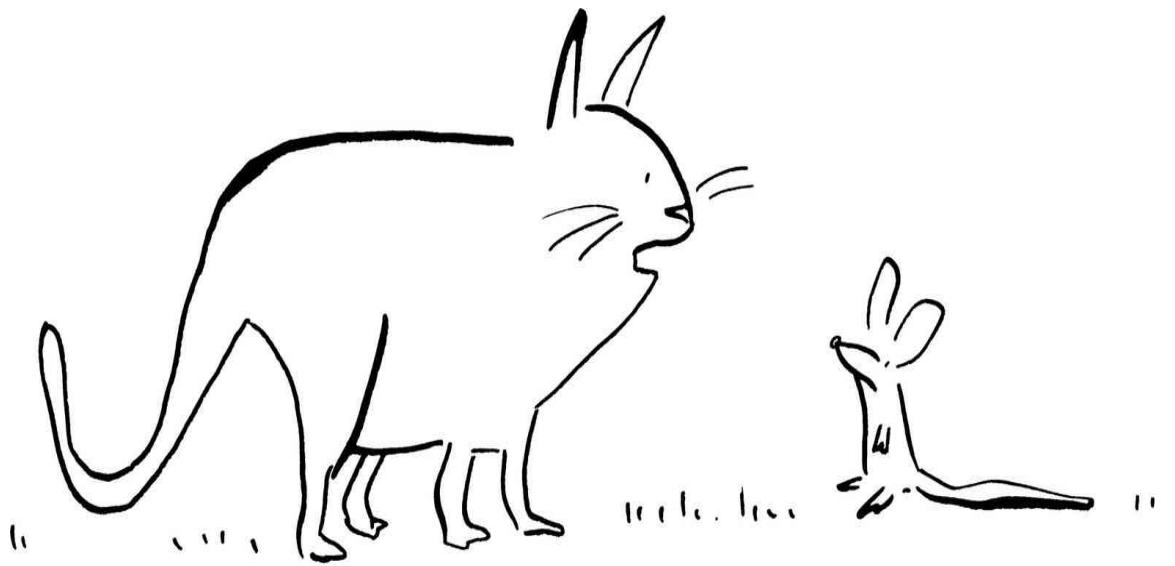
Around this time, Lumumba gave the go-ahead to Mobutu's plan to put down a second secession, in South Kasai, another mineral-heavy province. Congolese troops went on a rampage and murdered many South Kasai civilians, further entrenching the idea that the central government could not be trusted. Feeling abandoned by both the United States and the U.N., Lumumba appealed to the Soviets for military aid. They eventually agreed, but what they offered was meagre.

By August of 1960, the White House, galvanized by Lumumba's turn to the Soviets, had authorized a secret C.I.A. scheme to "replace the Lumumba Government by constitutional means," whatever that meant. The same month, at a Cabinet meeting, Eisenhower made comments that some interpreted as a call for assassination. (Lumumba, Reid notes, "offended his sense of decorum.") C.I.A.-sponsored protests started disrupting Lumumba's speeches, and then the agency began scheming to kill him.

As the situation worsened, leaders within Congo and in the West found Lumumba recalcitrant and increasingly erratic, and formed a plan, backed by President Kasavubu, to remove him. Reid presents cables from Hammarskjöld indicating that the U.N. had no objections to Lumumba's ouster; its officials on the ground prevented Lumumba from going on the radio.

The next several months played out as a tragedy. Lumumba's wife was denied access to medical care and gave birth prematurely to a daughter, who died. Lumumba was arrested twice by Mobutu, who sided with Kasavubu

before asserting himself—with C.I.A. backing—as the country's preëminent power broker. Lumumba escaped, but was caught, with U.N. soldiers looking on while he was beaten. As O'Brien later wrote, "The United Nations displayed a concern for legal punctilio when it was a question of rescuing Lumumba which was quite absent from their very uninhibited phase of activity when it was a question of bringing about Lumumba's political destruction."



"Don't worry. I have no motivation."
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

The final days were gruesome: on January 17, 1961, Mobutu flew a captive Lumumba to Katanga, where Tshombe and his associates—with Belgian officials and mercenaries in attendance—beat him for hours. Tshombe was covered in Lumumba's blood by the time they were done. Lumumba was then driven to a remote area and murdered, along with two members of his political party. Reid describes this in vivid detail. "You're going to kill us?" Lumumba asked; Frans Verscheure, a local police commissioner, simply answered, "Yes." After the men were dead, the killers poured sulfuric acid on the bodies. One of the Belgians present, Gerard Soete, brought home Lumumba's molars and a finger as trophies.

The fighting among different factions over the next four years became increasingly vicious, but for a brief moment it appeared that the U.N. could force a solution. Reid coolly notes, "For all the recriminations against the

UN and the West, in a strange way Lumumba's death made international agreement on the Congo easier." After his murder, the U.N.—in operations led by O'Brien—did try to end the Katanga secession. The attempts initially failed, and Hammarskjöld, under pressure, flew to meet with Tshombe in Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia), but his plane went down, killing everyone on board, in circumstances that remain murky. (Reid seems skeptical of the conspiracy theories.)

Reid's narrative doesn't extend much beyond the assassination; its particular focus is the role of the United States, and especially the Eisenhower Administration, in this period of chaos. (Reid may underplay the degree to which an independent Katanga was always a Belgian project, even as the U.S. and Great Britain coveted the region's minerals.) The eventual assassination plot was different from the one the Americans had planned, but Washington's desires were clear to people on the ground. When Larry Devlin, who was running C.I.A. operations in Congo, heard that Lumumba was being flown to Katanga, he chose not to alert his superiors, or to intercede with Mobutu, with whom he had developed a close relationship. Still, even if Devlin could have persuaded Mobutu to spare Lumumba's life, the situation had reached a breaking point. This was the result of months of Western policy choices characterized by shortsightedness, carelessness, and, as Reid makes plain, a fear of the Soviet Union, which, in reality, had little interest in Congo beyond the public-relations wound the West had inflicted upon itself.

Tshombe fled Congo in 1963, after the secession was finally ended by the U.N. He was enticed back to become Prime Minister, in part because Mobutu and Kasavubu knew that he had Belgian support, and, indeed, soon afterward, Belgian and American intervention helped put down another quixotic rebellion, which had, famously, been joined by Che Guevara. Tshombe went into exile again after Mobutu seized power in 1965; he died in 1969 in Algerian custody, despite the attempts of various American anti-Communists, including William F. Buckley, Jr., to get him released. (Buckley lauded Tshombe, upon his death, for understanding that progress would come for Congo only with "the aid of white expertise and capital.")

By this time, Mobutu had overthrown almost the entire Congolese political class, and established a kleptocratic dictatorship. He then changed the

country's name to Zaire, changed his own name to Mobutu Sese Seko, and instituted a nationalization program more ambitious than what Lumumba likely would have attempted. Much of this was carried out as part of an anti-Western "authenticity" campaign. The irony was that through it all Mobutu retained the support of Western governments and intelligence agencies.

As for Lumumba, the man Reid presents is sometimes inspiring but also in over his head and prone to outbursts. (Ralph Bunche, an African American U.N. representative whom Hammarskjöld dispatched to the region, called him a "schizophrenic.") As the summer of 1960 wore on, Lumumba was "overworked, overtired, and overwhelmed," Reid writes. "He trusted no one. He typed most of his letters himself. He saw personally to the management of his residence's garage. . . . Propelled by a messianic belief in his historical destiny—'The Congo made me; I shall make the Congo,' he liked to say—he worked at all hours." Even while Reid leaves no doubt about Lumumba's humanity and vision, his portrait of the late Prime Minister avoids the nostalgia that has become a part of his legacy.

O'Brien, despite his disagreements with Hammarskjöld, became obsessed with the U.N. chief's death and wrote a play, "[Murderous Angels](#)," about Lumumba and Hammarskjöld. In the preface, he observed, "The flash of his destruction, in its very exposure of the unrealities of the new sovereignties, and in its intolerable light on white power in Africa, creates a new reality, to which in turn the protector of Peace must respond." He added, hauntingly, that Lumumba had become an "African demigod, the effort to appease whose devotees will bring Hammarskjöld to his death."

The question that Reid leaves mostly unanswered is what a different policy might have looked like. What if Eisenhower had shown the foresight that he displayed during the Suez crisis? Lumumba's death occurred three days before the Kennedy Administration took power, but the hope of a substantial shift by a Democratic Administration proved futile. Within three years, the United States had taken over from the French in Vietnam, and went on to fight its own decade-long war there. As has often been said, the habitual error of the United States during this period was to view nationalist struggles for independence through the lens of anti-Communism, and to turn people who might have been allies (Ho Chi Minh is typically cited) into enemies.

Yet the problem in the case of Congo was not simply that an anti-Communist lens distorted American policy; it was that this lens helped enable colonial maneuvering to continue into the post-independence era. Lumumba emerges in Reid's book as a frustrating and cryptic figure who, buffeted by foreign machinations, rarely appears to be the leader of a sovereign country. We're given plenty of reasons to speculate that Lumumba might have failed on his own. But he—and the Congolese people—should have had the chance to do so. ♦

By David Remnick

By James Somers

By Sue Halpern

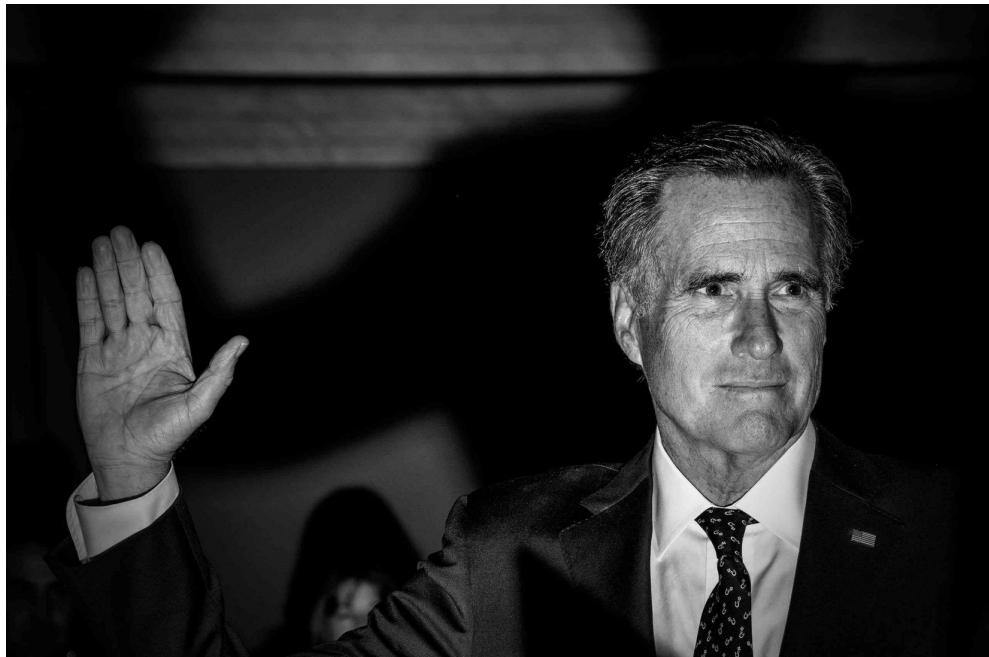
By David Remnick

Books

Did Mitt Romney Save His Soul?

In “Romney: A Reckoning,” we get an intimate view of a man trying to reconcile faith and politics.

By [Michael Luo](#)



Photograph by Mark Peterson / Redux

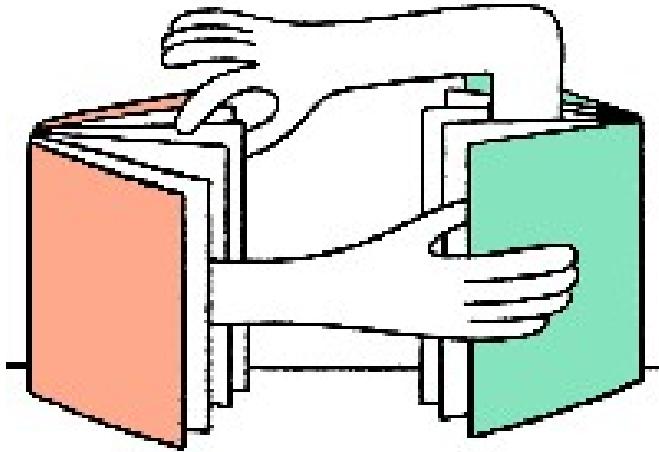
Mitt Romney and his family are gathered inside a budget hotel room. It is January, 2008, and the New Hampshire primary is just days away. Romney, a candidate for the Republican Presidential nomination, sits in a high-backed chair, clad in his usual armor: a navy-blue tie, a gleaming white shirt with cufflinks, and dress pants. His wife, Ann, is seated next to him; two of his sons and a daughter-in-law are arrayed around them. Romney’s campaign is going poorly. He lost badly to Mike Huckabee, the former Arkansas governor, in the Iowa caucuses, and in New Hampshire he appears on track to lose again, this time to Senator John McCain. “Maybe you just wait a few years?” one of Romney’s sons suggests. Romney seems to dismiss the possibility. “When this is over, I’ll have built a brand name,” he says. “People will know me. They’ll know what I stand for.” He pauses. “The flippin’ Mormon,” he says, his face broadening into a half smile. There are

some titters from his family, more deflated than amused. Later, the clan kneels on the floor to pray. Romney bows his head, his elbows resting on the chair. In her prayer, Ann thanks God for His blessings and says that the family desires only to “serve Thee and to bring greater light to this earth.”

This moment, captured in the 2014 documentary “Mitt,” encapsulates the enduring paradox of [Mitt Romney](#). After serving as a moderate governor in Massachusetts, where his signature accomplishment was enacting universal health care, he went through an ideological and tonal makeover as he labored, during two failed Presidential campaigns, to navigate the rightward lurch of his party. He never shed the aspersion that he was a flip-flopper, a man lacking true conviction. During a [Republican candidate forum](#) in New Hampshire, in 2008, McCain turned to Romney and said, “We disagree on a lot of issues, but I agree you are the candidate of change.” On the hustings, Romney often came across as starched and stiff, like his crisply ironed dress shirts. Voters struggled to get a genuine sense of him. And yet his core has always been evident to those granted entrée to his world. It was evident in that New Hampshire hotel room, and it’s evident throughout McKay Coppins’s instructive new biography, “[Romney: A Reckoning](#),” in which the politician’s Mormon faith emerges as the substrate that nourishes all else in his life.

The Best Books We Read This Week

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It is no accident that both Coppins and Greg Whiteley, the director of “Mitt,” are fellow-members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Coppins relies on dozens of interviews with Romney, as well as hundreds of pages of personal journals and private correspondence, to narrate Romney’s interior journey as his ambitions and principles increasingly come into conflict. The result is a rare feat in modern-day political reporting: an account in which the subject engages in actual introspection. Romney spent years contorting himself for the hard-right elements in his party, eventually becoming the G.O.P.’s standard-bearer during the 2012 election. In interviews, he spoke about the rationalizations he’d made over the years and his “capacity for self-justification,” as Coppins puts it. But when Donald Trump won the Presidency—the moment of “reckoning” in the book’s title—Romney decided to fling himself into the fray. The forces of populism and outrage had already overtaken the Republican Party. The question was whether Romney could find redemption for himself.

The Epistle of James admonishes believers to be “doers of the word, not just hearers.” Without “works,” the epistle explains, faith is empty. The manner in which faith becomes works in politics, however, can be like an intricate knot, with many folds. Black evangelicals and white evangelicals share theological beliefs but diverge on their partisan affiliations. There is a rich social-justice tradition in Roman Catholicism, yet many conservative

Catholics are foot soldiers of the right. Religion offers a compass but not a map. Universal health care? Balancing the budget? Protecting the border? The Scriptures and other religious texts are silent. One can identify broad principles—and sometimes even these are contradictory—but specific policies must emerge from human wisdom and processes.

Romney's process came from another deeply rooted identity: the data-driven businessman. In the nineteen-seventies, after graduating with joint M.B.A. and law degrees from Harvard, Romney began working in the burgeoning field of management consulting. He eventually landed at Bain & Company, where he quickly became a star. Bain's leaders put him in charge of a new investment firm, Bain Capital, which identified ailing companies to invest in, overhauled them from within, then sold them for profit. The firm made Romney fabulously wealthy and helped to launch his political career. It also shaped his governing in Massachusetts, where he saw himself primarily as a “partisan of pragmatism,” not an ideologue. His approach to the health-care issue was illustrative. “I don’t look and say, ‘What’s the conservative point of view on this?’ ” he told Coppins. “I ask, ‘What do I think is the right answer to a particular problem?’ ” When Romney began considering a run for the Presidency, pitching himself to conservative audiences, he had a new set of data points to consider. He remade himself into a crusader on social issues; a lifelong hunter, even though he had gone hunting only twice in his life; and a zealot on illegal immigration. Romney thought little about the authenticity of his new persona. “It was a matter of simple math,” Coppins writes.

Even as Romney was remaking himself on the stump, his faith remained an abiding presence. Evangelical Christians, a crucial voting bloc in Republican primaries, consider Mormonism to be a heresy. Some of Romney's supporters suggested that he distance himself from his faith. Romney declined. According to Coppins, it was perhaps the *only* part of his life that he refused to compromise on. He prayed on buses and before debates, read the Scriptures daily, and avoided scheduling campaign events on the Sabbath. Romney even arranged for the Church's Boston temple to hold a late-night session for him and his family, an unusual accommodation. “Romney craved the closeness to God he experienced during those sacred worship ceremonies,” Coppins writes. “Swapping his presidential-candidate

costume for the simple white clothing of the temple that night, he felt fully, truly like himself.”

Perhaps the most stirring moment in Romney’s campaign came on December 6, 2007, when Romney decided to address concerns about his faith directly, in a speech at the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, in College Station, Texas. “I believe in my Mormon faith and I endeavor to live by it,” he said. “Some believe that such a confession of my faith will sink my candidacy. If they are right, so be it. But I think they underestimate the American people. Americans do not respect believers of convenience. Americans tire of those who would jettison their beliefs, even to gain the world.” Two months later, Romney’s campaign was over.

When it came time to decide whether to enter the 2012 Presidential campaign, Romney was conflicted. The press generally considered him the Republican front-runner, but most of his family opposed another bid. The right was undergoing a transformation. The Obama Presidency had helped to incite the anti-establishment Tea Party movement, and the G.O.P.’s restive, grievance-fuelled grass roots didn’t seem particularly hospitable to a patrician figure like Romney. He was also resolved to avoid the contortions of 2008. “Of course, I would want to win, but feeling that I have been true to what I believe is even more important,” Romney wrote in an e-mail to advisers.

The campaign decided to relentlessly focus on the economy; Romney had always been most comfortable making his case as a turnaround specialist. But, in Coppins’s telling, Romney’s advisers continued to nudge him to tend to the far right. His rhetoric on immigration verged on nativist; during one Republican debate, he suggested “self-deportation” for undocumented immigrants. He also sought the endorsement of Trump, who had spent months stoking baseless conspiracy theories about Obama’s birthplace. Romney captured the nomination but was trounced by Obama in the election. That night, when one of his advisers raised the prospect of yet another campaign, he insisted, “My time on the stage is over, guys.”

Romney first encounters Donald Trump in the fourth chapter of Coppins’s book. It is 1995, and Trump has invited Romney to spend the weekend at his extravagant estate at Mar-a-Lago. According to Coppins, Romney found the

experience “deeply weird,” and figured he would never see Trump again. The magnate’s rise in the polls, during the 2016 nominating contest, befuddled him. He and Ann watched Trump’s rallies, where the spectre of violence seemed omnipresent. “Those people weren’t at our events,” Ann said. When it became clear that Trump might win the Republican nomination, Romney scrambled to stop him, delivering a speech denouncing him as “a phony, a fraud,” and later working behind the scenes to send the nomination to the convention. He had predicted to friends that Trump would win the election. Even so, he was unprepared when it happened.

Yet Romney’s resistance to Trump did not proceed in a straight line. He famously flirted with joining the Trump Administration as Secretary of State. When a photo of the two men meeting over dinner at Jean-Georges, the lavish restaurant inside the Trump International Hotel and Tower in New York, went viral, the flip-flopper memes returned. In the orange-and-yellow-hued image, Trump appears to be almost cackling; Romney looks chagrined, his eyebrows raised and his lips drawn together. He later insisted to Coppins that his expression had nothing to do with Trump. “It had to do with the awkwardness of being in a public restaurant and cameras coming and taking pictures,” he said. After the dinner, he told reporters that he had “increasing hope that president-elect Trump is the very man who can lead us to a better future.” According to Coppins, Trump called Romney and told him that he needed to come out with a stronger statement: Trump was “terrific” and would be a “great president.” Romney could suffer the pretense no longer. “Maybe after so many years of allowing the petty indignities and moral compromises to pile up, he had finally reached his limit,” Coppins writes.

Coppins details Romney’s growing alarm during Trump’s first few months in office: the travel ban; the exodus from the State Department; the statement, after a white-nationalist rally in Charlottesville, that there were “very fine people on both sides.” At one point, Romney jotted down a line from William Butler Yeats’s poem “The Second Coming,” written after the First World War: “The best lack all conviction, while the worst / Are full of passionate intensity.” This was the new Republican Party, in Romney’s mind. In the fall of 2017, he decided to return to politics, running for a Senate seat in Utah. “Money is motivating when you don’t have it and when you are young,” he wrote in his journal. “A purpose greater than self is what motivates now.” That purpose was to become a counterweight to Trump.

In the Senate, Romney seemed to grow in stature and fortitude. Gone was the caution that had paralyzed him during his Presidential bids. He became one of the few in his party willing to criticize Trump's excesses. On December 18, 2019, the House [voted to impeach](#) the President over allegations that he'd withheld military aid from Ukraine in order to pressure its President, Volodymyr Zelensky, into launching investigations that would benefit Trump politically. Preparing for the Senate trial, Romney studied Federalist No. 65, in which Alexander Hamilton argues that the Senate is the only institution with sufficient independence to handle a trial with "necessary impartiality." The trial lasted just five days.

Romney was frustrated by his Republican colleagues. "How unlike a real jury is our caucus?" he wrote in his journal. One evening, after the Senate had recessed, Romney returned to his office, knelt on the floor, and prayed. Later, he listed in his journal the potential consequences of voting to convict Trump: he would be ostracized in the Senate; Fox News would tear into him, "stoking up the crazies"; the President would attack him mercilessly, or use the government to hurt his sons; Romney might need to move from Utah. That night, at his town house in Washington, he slept poorly, waking before dawn to review the case again. In his office, he convened his staff and told them that he had reached a verdict.

On February 5, 2020, Romney stood at the lectern in the Senate chamber to [explain his decision](#) to become the first senator in American history to vote to remove a President from his own party. "As a Senator-juror, I swore an oath, before God, to exercise 'impartial justice,'" he said. "I am profoundly religious. My faith is at the heart of who I am." Here, Romney paused for several seconds, his eyes downcast, seemingly overcome. "I take an oath before God as enormously consequential," he went on. Disregarding that oath for a partisan end, he said, would expose his character to "the censure of my own conscience." He acknowledged that many in his party and his state would disagree with the decision. He also acknowledged that his vote would not remove Trump from office. "I will tell my children and their children that I did my duty to the best of my ability," he said, "believing that my country expected it of me."

After the speech, Romney reached Ann by phone. She described watching his address as a spiritual experience. In the days that followed, as vitriol

rained down on Romney, he thought of Parley Parker Pratt, an early Mormon missionary and a distant ancestor, who had toiled for months in New York City without winning any converts, but who one day received a vision of assurance from the Lord—that his labor had not been in vain, that his sacrifice had been accepted. Romney wrote in his journal that a huge weight had been lifted, that “the anxiety is gone.”

In the spring of 2021, Coppins and Romney began meeting weekly, in secret, for interviews that sometimes went on for hours. Several months had passed since the January 6th insurrection, and Coppins writes that Romney “often sounded like a spy behind enemy lines.” Romney confided that much of his party “really doesn’t believe in the Constitution.” He was mulling difficult questions, including his own culpability in what had become of the G.O.P.: “Was the rot on the right new, or was it something very old just now bubbling to the surface? And what role had the members of the mainstream establishment—people like him, the *reasonable* Republicans—played in allowing that rot to fester?”

Last month, Romney announced, at the age of seventy-six, that he would not seek reelection in the Senate. He cited his age in his decision, declaring that it was time for a new generation of leaders. According to Coppins, Romney has had recurring premonitions of his death. His church teaches him that, one day, he will stand before God and face an accounting, for his thoughts, words, and works. He will have to explain his time in politics—the positions he took, the compromises he made, where he chose to stand firm. If Romney is at a loss, he might bring along Coppins’s record of his reckoning. ♦

By Michael Luo

By Susan B. Glasser

By Peter Slevin

By Jonathan Blitzer

[The Theatre](#)

Stephen Sondheim’s Last Musical, “Here We Are,” Comes to the Shed

The writer David Ives and the director Joe Mantello continued without the late composer on an adaptation of two lacerating Luis Buñuel films.

By [Helen Shaw](#)



An all-star cast, featuring Bobby Cannavale, David Hyde Pierce, and Rachel Bay Jones, plays bourgeois characters suddenly forced to make do. Illustration by Laura Passalacqua

In September, 2021, two months before Stephen Sondheim died, at the age of ninety-one, he attended a read-through of his then incomplete final musical. Based on two lacerating, Surrealist Luis Buñuel films, “The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie” and “The Exterminating Angel,” it had, at various times in its decade of development, been called “Buñuel” and a title that Sondheim announced in a television interview—“Square One,” a reference to the work’s preoccupation with recursion and stasis.

Sondheim, a dizzyingly complex lyricist with an unparalleled ear for syncopation and sour-sweet harmonies, could seemingly turn anything into a musical: a 1934 Kaufman and Hart play (“Merrily We Roll Along”), a Victorian penny dreadful (“Sweeney Todd”), a Post-Impressionist painting

(“Sunday in the Park with George”). According to David Ives, a comic playwright best known for the claustrophobic “Venus in Fur,” and the director Joe Mantello, who won a Tony for his direction of the 2004 production of Sondheim’s “Assassins,” the composer was still creatively sharp yet somehow unable to make progress on the Buñuel show’s second act. Buoyed by the reading, Ives and Mantello apparently convinced Sondheim that they could complete it by using what he had already written and leaving the second half mostly without songs. The situation itself is surreal: the legendary Sondheim, like Penelope in the *Odyssey*, weaving and unravelling, promising and procrastinating—and then, after all delaying tactics fail, watching as the tapestry is cut from the loom.

This tapestry, with its associated loose threads, became “Here We Are,” now in a handsome, starry production at the Shed, in Hudson Yards. Simultaneously the last Sondheim musical and the lost one, it contains familiar textures: barbs aimed at his own rarefied social set (there’s tart treatment for those who clone their dogs), a measure of “Company”’s loving-hurtful friends, and “Merrily”’s bitter conviction that wealth kills creativity. Despite the multivalent talents of Ives and Mantello, though, the piece, finished without Sondheim, cannot mend the ragged edge torn by his absence.

For the first act, Buñuel’s dream-film about upper-crust corruption, “The Discreet Charm of the Bourgeoisie,” from 1972, has been streamlined and modernized. We meet the brash, tracksuit-wearing one-per-center Leo (Bobby Cannavale) and his daffy wife, Marianne (Rachel Bay Jones), who’s still in her nightgown. It’s midmorning, and they aren’t expecting company. But phone rings, door chimes, in come their dearest friends—a plastic surgeon, Paul (Jeremy Shamos), his power-agent wife, Claudia (Amber Gray), and Raffael (Steven Pasquale), a lustful ambassador from the made-up country of Moranda—all insisting that they’ve been invited for brunch. Marianne’s sister, Fritz (Micaela Diamond), a self-styled anticapitalist revolutionary, is borne along by the pack, which proceeds, in absurd(ist) fashion, to a series of cafés, none of which, for some reason, can feed them.

The set designer David Zinn presents Leo and Marianne’s apartment as a gleaming white box, as glassy as an Apple store, with a knockoff Damien Hirst dot painting in a corner. (Zinn also designed the costumes, and Hirst’s

gelato-bright shades show up in the characters' clothes, like Leo's *frutti di bosco* tracksuit.) At the klatsch's first stop, Café Everything, there's absolutely nothing in the kitchen. "I am so sorry, Madam," the waiter (Denis O'Hare, as slimy as two eels) sings in the show's crispest, patteredest number: "We do expect a little latte later / But we haven't got a lotta latte now." (I sat in a row with other critics; this lyric prompted a great bustling of pens.)

Along the way, the group is serenaded by a grieving waitress (Tracie Bennett, her voice beautifully weary) and joined by a rat-a-tat colonel (François Battiste) and a lieutenant (the exhilarating Jin Ha), who instantly falls for Fritz. Marianne remains the most blithe of the posse—even clues that society is breaking down around them can't diminish her enthusiasm. "Buy this day for us, sweetheart!" she sings to Leo. After each café, Leo tells his entourage, "Back to square one, everybody into the car!" Mantello articulates these resets by lining the characters up on the blank white stage, flanked by dioramas of a grassy field. It's an image borrowed from Buñuel, but it also makes the adventurers seem as if they're off to see the Wizard. Marianne, in a baby-blue silk peignoir, is our Dorothy; she certainly seems to be the one having the dream.

The group ends up at Raffael's embassy, where a nervous bishop thinking about changing careers (David Hyde Pierce, magnetically kind as always) joins them. In the second act, which adapts the "No Exit"-like "Exterminating Angel," from 1962, the whole gaggle, bishop included, find themselves mysteriously trapped in Raffael's black-panelled library, along with two servants, played by Bennett and O'Hare. After a lifetime of making out like bandits, the rich have to make do. Following one last gorgeously sung hymn from Marianne, existential paralysis sets in, and the songs stop. For the last forty-five minutes, Sondheim's musical presence is communicated mainly via underscoring, thanks to his gifted longtime arranger, Jonathan Tunick, and a vamp, one of his broken-in-the-middle arpeggios, that shocks the characters whenever they try to leave. This purgatorial situation is, of course, deliberately frustrating, and other perversities of "Here We Are" occasionally serve that mood: for instance, the choice to have the non-singers, like O'Hare and Pierce, deliver solos in the first act, while the generational voices, like Gray and Pasquale, perform only small portions of ensemble numbers. (Hell is being at a Sondheim musical with so many great singers not singing.)

I felt the composer's absence even more, though, as a guiding intellect. Surely the turn to sentiment in the second half was uncharacteristic? After all, Sondheim was our bard of ambivalence. The Buñuel films glint with class warfare: the parasitic rich are gunned down at dinner in a dream sequence in "Bourgeoisie"; in "Angel," literal lambs run to their slaughter, barbecued on the charred splinters of a cello. But "Here We Are" has taken that same dramaturgy-as-bayonet and dulled it—mainly through sympathy for sweet Marianne and the gentle bishop, who finally discovers a talent for pastoral care. Ives has also bougified and depoliticized the story to the point that the only clearly villainous character is one of the servants, which upends Buñuel's social critique. The central metaphor moves from patrician complicity with totalitarianism to, seemingly, the "square one" of *COVID* isolation, in which many of us were at the mercy of our inner resources. There's even a little coda in which the characters tell us what they most "miss about the room." No one says sourdough, but I worry they were thinking it.

At the Shed, unfortunate resonances emerge between the "Here We Are" scenario and the venue itself, a chilly culture palace, which contains a discombobulating stack of escalators that switch directions when you're not looking. You do carry warmth away, though, as you wander out of Hudson Yards. The rest of the city, like a huge singing wake, is full of Sondheim now, with stunning revivals of "Sweeney" and "Merrily" on Broadway and a concert staging of "The Frogs," one of his deeper cuts, coming to Jazz at Lincoln Center. Even though the Sondheimiest stuff drains away at the two-thirds point in "Here We Are," the evening is still full of a certain familiar sonic pattern, an only-Steve-could-do-it interval, which hops jarringly upward in the middle of a phrase. It's earwormy, so it follows you out of the Shed, into the subway, and all the way home. You hear it, and know Sondheim has been somewhere nearby. Perhaps he was here and you missed him? Perhaps he's just in another room. ♦

By Janet Malcolm

By Robert A. Caro

By Philip Gourevitch

By Nathan Heller

On Television

“Fellow Travelers” Shows Another Side of Gay History

The Showtime series, now streaming on Paramount+, embraces its protagonists’ complexity as well as their sex drives.

By [Inkoo Kang](#)



The affair between Tim and Hawk is both satisfactorily unpredictable and magnificently erotic. Illustration by Derek Abella

Joseph McCarthy, whose pursuit of national purity exposed his own moral degradation, wasn’t the sort to grant dignity to his enemies. “If you want to be against McCarthy,” he reportedly told the press, “you’ve got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker.” The Wisconsin senator’s right hand during his Red-baiting years was his chief counsel, Roy Cohn, who in turn recruited a pretty-boy hotel heir named David Schine. That the threesome spearheaded the Red Scare of the nineteen-fifties, as well as the accompanying Lavender Scare—which sought to rout gay men and lesbians from government service—didn’t stop rumors from circulating about their own sexual inclinations; the playwright Lillian Hellman dubbed the trio of bachelors “Bonnie, Bonnie, and Clyde.” By the time Cohn died, from complications of AIDS, in

1986, he was nearly as infamous for denying his own queerness as he was for his prosecutorial viciousness. McCarthy, too, was the subject of whispers—he was no stranger, allegedly, to Milwaukee’s gay bars. They wouldn’t be the last men to persecute their peers to deflect from their own apparent proximity to the closet, but they may have been the only ones to do so in such flamboyant fashion.

McCarthy and Cohn are secondary characters in the remarkable new period drama “Fellow Travelers,” on Showtime, a generation-spanning romance between two ambitious men who first find each other amid the hunt for “subversives and deviants” in Washington. (The title derives from the real-life McCarthy’s term for Communist sympathizers.) When Hawkins “Hawk” Fuller (Matt Bomer), a mid-level State Department official with a Bronze Star to attest to his manliness, meets the milk-sipping, charmingly priggish Tim Laughlin (Jonathan Bailey) at an Election Night party, the attraction is immediate. Unlike Hawk, who aspires to climb the ranks and cap a respectable if undistinguished career with a luxurious posting abroad, Tim is yet another young idealist who’s come to D.C. to make a difference. Hawk, though far from a McCarthy ally, gets Tim a position in the Senator’s office—a staggering opportunity for the devoutly religious young man, who excuses his hero’s “rough tactics” as necessary for the greater good. It’s not long before Tim learns that Hawk’s gifts are always meant to be repaid.

The series’ creator, Ron Nyswaner, who adapted Thomas Mallon’s 2007 novel of the same name, jumps between time lines, deftly weaving together Hawk and Tim’s decades-long ardor with the historical events that follow: the Vietnam War, the assassination of Harvey Milk, and the *AIDS* crisis, as the federal government’s treatment of the L.G.B.T.Q. community shifts from targeted hostility to malicious neglect. But it’s during the Eisenhower era that “Fellow Travelers” is at its most absorbing, when the D.C. gay scene is functionally segregated, and solidarity is contingent at best. Constant surveillance heightens the risks of intimacy—and the furtive thrills of bathroom hookups. As much as Hawk despises McCarthy and Cohn, he’s just as prepared to betray his associates to keep his own image clean; the difference between their mode of self-preservation and his is only a matter of scale. It doesn’t seem to occur to him, until he meets Tim, that other men are available not only for cruising but also for love. Throughout the series, people in Hawk and Tim’s orbit grapple with what queerness means, and

what it can be. A lesbian friend, Mary (Erin Neufer), advises Tim that “hiding a part of yourself and killing it are two different things.” Marcus (Jelani Alladin), a Black man burdened by his father’s dream for him to become the “Jackie Robinson of journalism,” distances himself from the gay movement—and elides his sexuality in his writing—in order to focus on race. His skittishness is a chronic disappointment to his on-again, off-again boyfriend, the drag queen Frankie (Noah J. Ricketts), who has no desire to pass as straight the way Marcus does. Tim comes to embrace the word “gay”; Hawk insists on “homosexual.” Each individual’s relationship to his identity is both a question of philosophical sweep and one of brute survival.

The eight-part miniseries benefits from its fairly novel (and thematically complex) historical backdrop, but it develops into one of the year’s best dramas through its rich characterizations. The casting of the leads is a particular achievement. Bomer, with his broad-shouldered athleticism and blandly handsome matinée-idol looks, channels Don Draper, whose besuited virility was all the more beguiling for his stoic unknowability. (For Hawk, like the “Mad Men” protagonist, the faultless masculine surface is all performance—though Draper never kept his heart rate down during a polygraph test by picturing Mamie Eisenhower.) But Bailey is the showstopper as Tim, a born zealot who’s at ease only when armed with a clear sense of purpose. As young men, Hawk and Tim tell themselves that, however much they love each other, they want other things more. Hawk’s cynicism and his desire for a traditional family life, including a wife and children, put him at odds with Tim, whose need to belong, if not to surrender, to something greater than himself can be met only temporarily with sex. The latter’s yearning for the sublime undergirds his tortured relationship to Catholicism; with his willowy frame, floppy hair, and bespectacled visage, he has the makings of a modern martyr. It’s no surprise that, as he grows older, he flips from the radical right to the activist left. The most compelling question the series asks is who, or what, will finally consume Tim in the way that he craves.

Tim and Hawk’s affair is both satisfyingly unpredictable and magnificently erotic, their trysts tinged with mid-century camp. (The heat between Bomer and Bailey, stoked in part by the gleeful creativity of the sex scenes, certainly helps.) During one of their early meetings, when Tim announces that he’s departing for noontime Mass, Hawk makes his interest explicit by

leaning in and half-whispering, “I’ll spend the rest of the afternoon picturing you kneeling in prayer.” Tim’s answering smile says it all. Once the complications of reality set in, the push-pull dynamic becomes irresistible not because you’re rooting for them to be together but because it’s impossible to decide whether they should stay that way. Unlike most great onscreen love stories, this is a romance in which one person is fundamentally unworthy of the other—and yet it’s undeniable that they’re each other’s best chance at happiness.

The supporting cast is nearly as strong, though the time-line hopping and the old-age makeup don’t always work to their advantage. Allison Williams, who plays Hawk’s wife, Lucy, is out of her depth as the gray-haired society matron who is finally forced to confront Tim’s indelible role in her husband’s life. The historical figures are among the most impressive, even if the series’ investment in their contradictions is perhaps more than they deserve. Will Brill embodies Roy Cohn brilliantly, full of the wounded, howling humanity implied by the epitaph on Cohn’s eventual *AIDS*-quilt panel: “Bully. Coward. Victim.” Chris Bauer is unrecognizable under heavy prosthetics, save for his bald pate and bulldog growl, but he manages to get at the oblique flirtations that McCarthy allowed himself with unsuspecting staffers. It’s in those fleeting moments of stolen pleasure that you can see what might have been, if these men had been motivated by anything other than fear. ♦

By Inkoo Kang

By Andrew Marantz

By Triana Muñoz

By [Anthony Lane](#)

A dozen years have passed since “Shame,” in which Michael Fassbender played an unappeasable sex addict named Brandon, and I remember wondering, back then, what Brandon would do once the juice ran dry. Sell real estate, perhaps? Get married, raise three kids, and work on his short game on weekends? Another possibility is suggested by “The Killer,” a new film from David Fincher, in which Fassbender—still lean and staring, spookily unchanged by time—takes the role of a professional assassin. I can’t prove anything, but I suspect that he is Brandon reloaded. From picking up strangers on the subway to picking them off with a silenced rifle, through a hotel window, is just a hop and a skip.

Fassbender is one of those actors who seem alone even when they’re in company. He specializes in the hard, the hollow, and the robotic, and the anonymous figure he plays in “The Killer”—which is based on a multivolume graphic novel by Alexis Nolent—spends the first half hour or so in monkish solitude. He waits in empty rooms on the top floor of an apartment building, in Paris, preparing to shoot someone across the way. He has a gun, a telescopic sight, and a watch that measures his pulse. (No trigger should be squeezed until the rate drops below sixty.) Determined to leave no trace, he wears gloves at all times and dozes on a workbench as if it were an operating table. And, in voice-over, he talks to us.

Some of the talk is advisory, like that of a lecturer in advanced homicide. (“Anticipate, don’t improvise.”) There are occasional quips, as when the killer cautions against using Airbnb: “Those Superhosts love their nanny cams.” For the most part, though, he trades in dead language. “It’s a dog-eat-dog world, to reuse the apt cliché,” he tells us. But *why* reuse it? A deliberate ploy, I guess, from Fincher and his screenwriter, Andrew Kevin Walker, who previously collaborated on “Se7en” (1995). It’s as though they wished to cauterize their hero—to numb him against any hint of moral sensation. He’s so uninterested in his environment that he can no longer be bothered to register it in anything but the flattest terms. Later, when he describes a suburb as “a stone’s throw from the city that never sleeps, barely off the beaten path,” he might as well be reading from a brochure.

The Parisian hit goes ahead, though not as planned, and the killer embarks on a fresh quest. The motive becomes one of revenge—a surprising

development, given that he was initially at pains to present himself as a cold fish, gutted of all sentiment and belief. His mission takes him to New Orleans (“A thousand restaurants, one menu”), Florida, Chicago, and the Dominican Republic. He switches identities as smoothly as he does locations, and we glimpse the various names that he employs: Felix Unger, Lou Grant, Sam Malone, and so on. The nod to the protagonists of TV series is a nice gag, and for any cop on the killer’s track it would be a clue. Yet there *is* no cop. Unlike the hired gun in “The Day of the Jackal” (1973), our man has nobody against whom to pit his wits. Instead, those wits are bent upon the minutiae of his trade: making a single call on a cell phone and then stamping it underfoot, or buying a garbage bin into which a corpse can be conveniently stuffed.

These tactics are absorbing to follow, and it’s clear that we are encouraged to regard Fincher, in his implacable handling of the action, as a kindred spirit of the assassin. (One poster for the film reads “Execution is everything.”) A similar kinship suffuses Jean-Pierre Melville’s “Le Samouraï” (1967), starring a lethal Alain Delon, but Delon resembles a nineteen-forties gangster, in his trenchcoat and fedora, whereas Fassbender looks like a dweeb. He wears a bucket hat, which in Melville’s domain would count as a capital offense. Technology, too, sets the two killers apart. Fincher’s guy orders a widget on Amazon that enables him to copy a digital key fob; his French counterpart, needing to steal a car, gets into a parked vehicle, gazes through the windshield, and patiently goes through a set of keys, on a ring the size of a saucer, until he finds one that fits.

Something else has shifted, though, besides the evolving of style. If “Le Samouraï” was an enigma, Fincher’s film has the sheen of a clever conceit. The killer’s mixtape of choice, for example, consists of songs by the Smiths. “I was looking for a job, and then I found a job, / And heaven knows I’m miserable now,” Morrissey sings, as if in tribute to Fassbender’s unsmiling murderous mien. Despite the shafts of black comedy, and a sudden ruckus of violence, “The Killer” is oddly calculated and cooked up; it’s easier to be excited and amused by the proceedings than to be stirred or convinced. This is especially true when, late in the movie, *two* assassins meet at a fancy restaurant. One of them is played by Tilda Swinton, no less, and the scene is as elegantly paced and staged as you’d expect, yet I felt that I was watching a slice of high-toned performance art rather than a link in a plausible plot.

For a similar encounter, with a very different twist, try “The Bourne Identity” (2002), in which Jason Bourne (Matt Damon) outsmarts and shoots a fellow-operative known as the Professor (Clive Owen). “Look at what they make you give,” the Professor says to Bourne, before lying down and breathing his last in a bed of dried reeds. There is no such rustle of gravity in “The Killer.” Never does it cross the movie’s mind, as it were, that ending the lives of others, for a living, might do fearsome damage to a person’s soul. Or could it be that souls—ungainly burdens, at best—are something that Fincher’s characters, on the whole, like to think they can do without?

The new film from Alexander Payne, “The Holdovers,” is set in the dying days of 1970. It is the season of good will, though not in the sour and unused heart of Paul Hunham (Paul Giamatti). At Barton Academy, a hidebound East Coast prep school, he has been teaching Ancient Civilizations for so long that most of his pupils, not to mention his colleagues, view him as a product of antiquity—no better than a broken shard of the past. He is, in every sense, history. Needless to say, the antipathy is requited; near the start, Hunham refers to the boys in his class as “lazy, vulgar, rancid little philistines.” In his dreams, I imagine, he would smite them with the jawbone of an ass.

Every year, for family reasons, a few kids—the holdovers of the title—end up staying at school over the festive period. On this occasion, there are five of them, although soon enough they are whittled down to one. (The whittling requires a *deus ex machina*, a rare bum note in an otherwise finely tuned tale.) The unlucky loner is Angus Tully (Dominic Sessa), bright and disruptive, who has already been kicked out of three schools and is careering fast toward his fourth kick. During this limbo, he is overseen by the rancorous Hunham; also in residence are the school cook, Mary (Da’Vine Joy Randolph), and a janitor named Danny (Naheem Garcia). Snow falls. Resentments rise. It’s like a murder mystery without a body. Can the crime of people’s misery be solved?

A heap of earlier narratives surround this movie, like Yuletide presents piled up at the base of a tree. “The Breakfast Club” (1985) and “Scent of a Woman” (1992) are there, plus a couple of Dickensian gifts: “A Christmas Carol,” obviously, and the wretched quartet in “David Copperfield”—a master, a caretaker, a cook, and young David, marooned at Salem House

over the holidays. As for Hunham, he's like the classics teacher in Evelyn Waugh's 1947 novella "Scott-King's Modern Europe," who declares, "I think it would be very wicked indeed to do anything to fit a boy for the modern world." What's engaging about Giamatti, who teams up with Payne for the first time since "Sideways" (2004), is that such reactionary resignation is voiced with a soft sigh and a dab of jesting levity. (In "Scent of a Woman," by comparison, Al Pacino's performance was one long bark.) Observe that when Hunham does lose his rag, at the dinner table, he's defending Mary against a puerile gibe. "You have *no* idea what that woman has been through," he says.

We can see where all this is headed, of course. It is an iron law of cinema that Scrooges must thaw their frozen spirits. The master will warm to the pupil, and fight his corner, if necessary. Lessons, far beyond the bounds of the curriculum, will be learned. The fact that an emotional template is clear and preset, though, does not make it any easier to adhere to, and seeing the job well done, as it is in "The Holdovers," can be immensely gratifying. And the fact that characters are provided with statutory secrets, to be disclosed at nicely timed intervals—as happens with Hunham, Angus, and Mary—does not guarantee any intensity in the revelation. The leading players here, however, bring force and grace to the task. (Randolph can do an awful lot with a simple murmur of "Mm-hmm.") Top marks to Payne, too, for concluding his fable not with a hug but with a handshake, in a sunlit New Year. Gratitude, even if it borders on a kind of grudging love, should always obey school rules. ♦

By Anthony Lane

By Richard Brody

By Anthony Lane

The Talk of the Town

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Trump Gets Fined in Court but Wins in the House

The former President is delusional on many subjects, but Mike Johnson's victory in the Speakership race suggests that he is clear-eyed about his hold on congressional Republicans.

By [Amy Davidson Sorkin](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

There were moments, last week, when—if not for the first time—Donald Trump seemed out of control. On Monday, at a rally in Derry, New Hampshire, he compared himself to Nelson Mandela; said that he had to save the country from fascists, Marxists, Communists, and “sick people”; mimed a fistfight with Joe Biden (“Poom! Poom! Poom! I’d hit him right in that fake nose!”); and went on a rant about seeing six-month-old McDonald’s containers in the streets of Washington, D.C. “Being in real estate,” he said, “I always kept clean properties, I like clean, clean, well-run, you know, tippy-top, we say tippy-top. We want them to be tippy-top. Well, our capital is the opposite of tippy-top! It’s a shithouse.”

Two days later, he stomped out of a New York City courtroom, after Judge Arthur Engoron refused to deliver a mid-trial verdict in his favor in a civil case alleging that he had fraudulently inflated the valuations of his tippy-top properties. During a break, he'd told reporters that the judge was a partisan, "with a person who's very partisan sitting alongside of him." Engoron's clerk was sitting next to him; on Truth Social, Trump had described her, fantastically, as the girlfriend of Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer. That post had led to a narrow gag order. Now, asked by Engoron to take the stand, Trump claimed that the "very partisan" person he'd referred to was actually his former fixer, Michael Cohen, who was testifying that day; Engoron told Trump that he wasn't credible and fined him ten thousand dollars. It was an ignominious and bizarre prelude to the four criminal cases Trump is facing, in D.C., Florida, Georgia—where the prosecution recently secured four guilty pleas from his co-defendants—and New York. (He has denied any wrongdoing.)

But the comments that Trump made during another courtroom break last Wednesday suggest that, in one respect, he is very much in control. "This time yesterday, nobody was thinking of Mike," he said, referring to Representative Mike Johnson, Republican of Louisiana. "And then we put out the word and now he's the Speaker of the House." That is a fair statement. Trump is delusional on many subjects, but Johnson's strange ascent suggests that he is clear-eyed about the hold he has on congressional Republicans.

The G.O.P. House caucus had seemed to be in a state of anarchy in the past few weeks. On October 3rd, in a coup engineered by Representative Matt Gaetz, Kevin McCarthy was voted out as Speaker, ostensibly because he had worked with Democrats to keep the government open; but the maneuver may simply have been a product of Gaetz's demonstrated narcissism. (Although Gaetz denies it, it might also have been a reaction to a pending ethics inquiry, which he has portrayed as politically motivated.) He didn't seem to know who might replace McCarthy—it just had to be a thorough Trumpist.

Next came the fight between Steve Scalise, the Majority Leader, and Jim Jordan, the chairman of the Judiciary Committee, both of whom are in Trump's camp. Scalise has a more senior role, but apparently he had an

enemy in McCarthy, for reasons having to do with each man's ambitions. Jordan had been deeply involved in Trump's efforts to hold on to power after the 2020 election, and Trump gave him the nod, which helped scuttle Scalise's bid. However, some Republicans balked at Jordan; there was talk of his being a bit too January 6th-associated for swing districts, but the real problem seems to have been his loud style and the thuggish approach his allies took to lobbying for votes.

By the time Jordan was voted down, the dysfunction was embarrassing. Congress's inability to move forward on any legislation in the absence of a Speaker was causing concern internationally, leaving further aid for Ukraine and Israel (and for civilians in Gaza) uncertain. The trouble was that the Republicans' next candidate, Tom Emmer, while being a Trump supporter, had voted to certify the 2020 election. He tried to make up for that last week by abasing himself before Trump. After Trump informed reporters that Emmer had "called me yesterday and told me, 'I'm your biggest fan,'" Emmer hurried to post a video of the remarks on X, adding, "Thank you, Mr. President."

It wasn't good enough. On Truth Social, Trump wrote, "I believe he has now learned his lesson, because he is saying that he is Pro-Trump all the way, but who can ever be sure? Has he only changed because that's what it takes to win?" and he dismissed Emmer as a "Globalist RINO." Emmer dropped out within hours. The message was that it is not sufficient to pay homage to Trump—you have to really feel it.

Mike Johnson seems to really feel it. He was elected as a freshman in 2016 and gained a foothold in the House by championing Trump on matters ranging from the would-be "Muslim ban" to the first impeachment trial, in which he was part of Trump's defense team. He spoke ecstatically about the President returning his calls, and got to fly on Air Force One. He, too, was involved in Trump's strategizing after the 2020 election, which Johnson suggested had been rigged with the help of Dominion voting machines—a thoroughly discredited conspiracy theory. Johnson rallied a hundred and twenty-five colleagues to sign on to an amicus-curiae brief in a case brought by Texas to invalidate the electoral votes of Michigan, Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. (The Supreme Court declined to hear it.) If

the 2024 election is contested, one can imagine how Trump might insist on Johnson using the Speaker's gavel to help him.

Before running for office, Johnson was a lawyer for conservative Christian causes, and has written that he views homosexual relationships as unnatural. The climate crisis, on the other hand, is something he has presented as natural—not chiefly to be blamed on human activity. On Thursday, he told Sean Hannity that the issue with mass shootings was “not guns.” Supposedly, the Party was willing to elect him without a single dissenting vote because he is very friendly. But Johnson’s affability is just another version of Jordan’s irascibility or Gaetz’s awfulness: a personal factor that fuels or settles squabbles within a closed, Trumpist circle.

Despite the spectacle of infighting, there is a sense in which the G.O.P. has rarely been so unified—behind Trump. He may be the only thing that brings the Party together, even as he imbues it with his own brand of nihilism. The Speakership race is not the only Republican contest he has been in control of. He was in New Hampshire the day of the rally to file his paperwork for that state’s Presidential primary. He’s still more than forty points ahead of any other Republican candidate in national polls. ♦

By Susan B. Glasser

By Adam Rasgon

By Ronan Farrow

By Sarah Larson

[Repair Dept.](#)

The Woman Restoring Basquiat's Forgotten Ferris Wheel

Rosa Lowinger, an art conservator and the author of “Dwell Time,” is salvaging an artist-designed amusement park, owned by Drake, with attractions by Dalí, Hockney, and Lichtenstein.

By [Dana Goodyear](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

In terms of disasters, Rosa Lowinger prefers fires to earthquakes and anything to hurricanes. “When you walk into a hurricane damage site, that water is not just water,” she says. “That water is full of dead snakes and animals and oil slicks. And things catch on fire.”

Lowinger, an art conservator in Los Angeles, was born in Havana in the midst of the revolution. Her grandparents, Ashkenazi Jews from Eastern Europe, had fled persecution to arrive in Cuba in the nineteen-twenties; after Castro took power, the family fled again, to Miami, losing everything. Her mother had a saying: “Man plans and God laughs.” Lowinger is in the business of repair.

The other day, Lowinger, who is petite and *rubia* and wears round glasses, was at a warehouse east of downtown L.A., overseeing the restoration of an artist-made amusement park called Luna Luna. The brainchild of an Austrian artist and impresario, Luna Luna had been presented at a fairground in Hamburg in the summer of 1987, then sat, disassembled and forgotten, for decades, before ending up in shipping containers in East Texas. (Litigation!) In 2022, the musician Drake, as part of a group of investors, bought the shipping containers, contents unseen. Inside were carnival rides and attractions designed by more than thirty of the previous century's geniuses, from Salvador Dalí to David Hockney to Roy Lichtenstein.

"There were, like, schmutzy schmear marks all over various things," Lowinger said—but not the pile of rust she'd have expected. The mandate from her employers was minimalist; with plans to put the objects on display again, they wanted to preserve their history. "You'll see the signs of wear, a little bit of abrasion, where somebody might have scuffed it or kicked it. We didn't remove that," she said.

She walked past a Ferris wheel—a Basquiat. The gondolas, shaped like skulls, were painted with phrases like "Skeezix" and "Rid of You." Hanging from the rafters was a gigantic Keith Haring banner of dancing figures with dogs' heads, which Lowinger had carefully de-grimed; it accompanied a Haring merry-go-round. In the back corner, there were screen-printed panels by Joseph Beuys. When Lowinger first saw them, they were besmirched with orange gunk: "I said, 'Well, let me just try and see if I can clean it.' " She did.

Dalí's contribution to Luna Luna was a geodesic dome made of mirrors and plastic panels with fried eggs painted on them. Lowinger hadn't got around to cleaning the eggs yet. She ran her pinky—least greasy of the fingers—across the white part, which was beginning to crack and detach from the surface. "A lot of times you get clients that go, 'Oh, that can't be saved,'" she said. "And it's, like, don't say to me what can be saved. Ask me if something can be saved."

In her memoir, "Dwell Time," which came out in early October, Lowinger describes a childhood punctuated by bomb blasts, upheaval, and the frequent rages of her mother, a great beauty, who had been traumatized by poverty

and instability. When restoring art, Lowinger writes, “it helps to have the psyche of a fleeing exile, or someone whose parent can flash like a wildfire. . . . Entropy is always around the next corner.”

She stopped at a caddy loaded with her cleaning supplies: makeup sponges, horse-washing soap, denatured alcohol, acetone, and a solvent gel, for the deepest stains. Her mother—ninety-one years old and still immaculately turned out—had other hopes for her only daughter’s career. “I know for a fact she would so much rather me be an aesthetician than a conservator,” Lowinger said.

Northridge, Port-au-Prince, Katrina, arson at Mission San Gabriel, wildfires in Napa and Bel Air: Lowinger has worked them all. Then there are the softer assaults, from salt air and bronze disease and inherent vice—the baked-in flaws in objects that sometimes take years to manifest. “Damage isn’t even an aberration,” she said. “It’s part of the natural course of things.”

Lowinger wandered to the far side of the warehouse to inspect her fix on a painting of a cartoonish butterfly wearing red high-heeled pumps. It was made by Kenny Scharf, as part of a fantastical swing ride. Securing a flake of paint, she said, required an elaborate process of applying glue to the back of the flake, letting it dry, and then re-melting it, before tacking it down. “ ’Cause if you just try to put an adhesive in, and push it to set, the memory of the flake coming up will pull it back out,” she said. She took a step back. There was a small spot where the paint had come off entirely. That was fine. “In this project,” she said, “you don’t fill in the hole.” ♦

By Nina Mesfin

By Samantha Henig

By Patricia Marx

By Barry Blitt

[Wind On Capitol Hill](#)

Robert Menendez's Golden Pipes

The Senator, who's been indicted for bribery, may have a fallback option if Congress boots him: singing, though not like the Feds may be envisioning.

By [Charles Bethea](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

“Bob is someone who sings all the time,” Senator Robert Menendez’s wife, Nadine, told the *Times* in 2021. “He sings every morning, every night, and in-between while he smokes his after-dinner cigar.” Menendez, the senior senator from New Jersey, chose to sing “Never Enough,” the anthem from the P. T. Barnum bio-pic “The Greatest Showman,” when he proposed to Nadine in front of the Taj Mahal. A video of the moment is the sole post on the couple’s public YouTube channel. The Senator stands behind his soon-to-be wife, a leg propped on the bench where she sits, one hand holding hers while the other points toward the heavens. “All the stars we steal from the night sky,” he sings, in a sonorous tenor, “will never be enough for me.”

Federal prosecutors allege that Menendez, the Democrat who formerly chaired the Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, and his wife, who has

also been indicted, received around half a million dollars in cash, along with some gold bars and a Mercedes-Benz C-300 convertible, in exchange for acting on behalf of the government of Egypt. Between 2018 and 2022, the Senator reportedly provided “sensitive, non-public” U.S. government information to Egyptian officials; one key player apparently referred to Menendez as “our man.” Prosecutors say that after a visit to Egypt, in 2021, Menendez Googled “How much is one kilo of gold worth?”

What might Menendez, who denies any wrongdoing, have sung while he and his wife drove the Mercedes around with the top down? “He’s probably better suited to Perry Como than Benny Moré,” Jim Fusilli, the *Wall Street Journal*’s former music critic, said the other day. Fusilli was a year ahead of Menendez at Saint Peter’s College, where Fusilli edited the music section of the school paper, the *Pauw Wow*, in the mid-seventies. Menendez majored in political science. After reviewing some of the Senator’s vocalizing on YouTube, Fusilli offered his professional opinion. “He’s a gentle crooner,” he said. “His voice lacks any distinguishing characteristics. But he won’t offend the ear at a niece’s wedding or in a karaoke bar.”

Another fellow-student, Tom Calvanico, who plays bass in a Rumson cover band called the No Commitments (Dylan, Petty, the Stones, but no Springsteen—too cliché), took a similar view. “We might let him do a Dylan song, because no one expects great vocals,” Calvanico said. He added that he thought Menendez could manage “You Ain’t Goin’ Nowhere” or “Knockin’ on Heaven’s Door.”



"Sometimes I just wish you could see I want a curveball without me pointing two fingers down."
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Music appreciation runs in the Menendez family. In September, the Senator's son, the New Jersey congressman Rob Menendez, introduced a resolution to create National Bruce Springsteen Day. The last time Senator Menendez faced federal bribery charges—in 2017, for allegedly accepting free rides on a private jet—the prosecutor invoked the Boss. “Arguing that those flights can’t be bribes because Senator Menendez flew himself to West Palm Beach” before taking the free ride to the Dominican Republic, the prosecutor reportedly said, is like arguing that “front-row tickets to a Springsteen concert can’t be a bribe because the public official drove himself to the concert.” Menendez got off.

The Senator, who sings in both English and Spanish, has performed in a variety of venues. During a 2019 Univision interview at a restaurant in Union City, he launched into “El Son Se Fue de Cuba,” a ballad about music leaving his parents’ birthplace. Two years later, in the Senate chamber, he sang “Happy Birthday” to Maryland’s senior senator, Ben Cardin, before questioning State Department nominees. “Senator Menendez’s Senate career is his second career,” Cardin noted afterward. (Recently, Cardin has advised Menendez’s critics to “allow the legal process to move forward.” In a show of bipartisanship, Congressman George Santos agreed.)

Congress has seen its share of crooners. In the nineties, four Republicans, including the senators Trent Lott and John Ashcroft, formed a barbershop quartet: the Singing Senators. They played the Kennedy Center and the Republican National Convention before putting out a fourteen-song album, in 1998, called “Let Freedom Sing!” (The “very rare” CD can be purchased on eBay for eight dollars.) After a hiatus, the senators got back together in 2006, only to disband again a year later, following the arrest of the Idaho senator Larry Craig, who sang lead, for lewd conduct and solicitation in a men’s restroom. (Craig pleaded guilty to disorderly conduct and paid a fine.) Around the same time, four members of the House of Representatives put together a bipartisan rock band called the Second Amendments. Among their staples was the Eagles hit “Already Gone.” ♦

By Sue Halpern

By Hugh Morris

By John Cassidy

By Ali Fitzgerald

Vroom Vroom Dept.

Ladies, Start Your Engines!

The Iron Dames, the champion four-woman team of European endurance racers (one of whom is barely old enough for a driver's license), try their luck with New Jersey go-karts.

By [Vera Carothers](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

Recently, four European race-car drivers were squeezed into the back of a New York taxi headed to an unofficial race event in New Jersey—a showdown at a suburban go-kart track. Their first test of endurance? American traffic. “They’re using their horn a lot, but it’s not helping,” Michelle Gatting, of Denmark, said. Sarah Bovy, of Belgium, chuckled. Doriane Pin, who hails from France, said nothing. Pin, nineteen, is a rabbitlike five feet two with dirty-blond hair. Despite being barely old enough for a driver’s license in most European countries, she was last year’s Ferrari Challenge Europe champion.

Pin races with Gatting, Bovy, and Rahel Frey, of Switzerland, as the Iron Dames, the only all-female endurance-racing team in the world. Race-car

driving is one of the few sports in which men and women compete professionally side by side. In this year's Le Mans, the crème de la crème of endurance events, their hot-pink car came in fourth. (They would have taken third if not for a weary brake.)

As they traversed the Lincoln Tunnel, the Iron Dames were peppered with questions by a novice racer. Team mascot? "I vote for a topless Abercrombie model," Bovy said. "For years, *years*, it was just female models standing there and being cute." Celebrity run-ins? "I mean, Dory met LeBron," Bovy said.

Pin nodded. "He was so big," she said. Favorite pro racers? Someone mentioned Lella Lombardi, the only woman ever to have scored in a Formula 1 world championship. (She scored half a point in 1975.)

The conversation turned to go-karting. Pin explained that, because she was so tiny as a kid, she had to wait until she was nine years old to start racing. By twelve, she was competing in national championships; at fifteen, she won the French national in the female category. Frey started "late," at the age of twelve, and immediately fell in love with the sport, which she claims is harder than endurance racing. "It's more aggressive—everything happens quicker," she said.

The cab pulled up to a gray hangar, outside Jersey City. "It's funny how a go-kart track looks the same everywhere in the world," Bovy said. Inside, the racers took in the two-story course, amid the flashing lights and clangs of a jumbo arcade. It was smaller than they'd expected.

"Dory's going to have an advantage because she's light," Gatting proclaimed.

"Oh, come on!" Pin shot back. There was talk of walking the track to survey the route, but then Gatting found a leather recliner and sank into it.

"Sarah, do you want to mentally prepare a bit more?" she said.

Bovy was distracted. "We have to wear *seat belts*," she moaned. After the team watched a mandatory safety video, they grabbed the bespoke helmets

that they'd brought along, decorated with inspirational quotes. ("Go fast and never ever give up!") The novice joined them for the race (previous experience: a 2006 birthday party), in her own go-kart. "You can follow me for the first loop," Pin offered. Frey's advice was to cut inside the curves and then out again. She mimicked a wavy line with her hands.

The pros shot ahead, an elegant fleet skidding in tandem like Santa's reindeer. The novice lagged behind, on empty track. After the first round, Gatting approached a track mechanic and asked the question on everyone's mind: "Can it go any faster?" (The Dames race at a hundred and ninety miles per hour.) He gave a firm headshake: No.

The next round began. Several dizzying minutes later, the final scores showed an upset: Pin wasn't in the top three. "I had some problems with the go-kart," she mumbled.

Nonetheless, the mechanic was impressed. "I haven't raced in a while, but when I saw you guys dicing it up . . . !" he said. He held out his phone to show old pictures of himself in a racing suit. A group of boys under the age of ten replaced the Dames in the karts. Nearby, Gatting and Bovy, who'd taken first and second place, mounted kid-size motorbikes affixed to a stationary rumble strip. Bovy eagerly pushed forward and cast a side glance at Gatting: "I'm not finishing another race behind Michi."

Frey had found a leather couch to sprawl on. "We feel the jet lag," she said.

A quiet fell over the team on the ride back to town. Bovy observed that rental go-karting is tamer in America than in Europe. "It's really a leisure activity," she said. She noted that their fastest times that day had been about thirty-two seconds per lap. "The go-kart track I raced at when I was thirteen was twenty-three seconds." Gatting chimed in to say that in Europe they use real tarmac.

As they exited the West Side Highway, a loud crunch was heard outside. Pin craned her neck to look: one vehicle had scraped another. The racers groaned. "Good contact," someone said. ♦

By Ted Geltner

By Lauren Collins

By Paige Williams

By Margaret Talbot

[Manhattan Transfer Dept.](#)

Barry Manilow Digs New York

To mark the opening of “Harmony,” his musical about the Weimar-era sextet the Comedian Harmonists, the singer went back home to Williamsburg and poked around.

By [Sarah Larson](#)



Illustration by João Fazenda

In his youth, Barry Manilow lived on a street called Broadway in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and though he’s lived in Palm Springs for decades, he’s always considered himself a New Yorker. (“The city rhythms all undo me / So sue me!” he sings in “I Dig New York,” on his 2017 album, “This Is My Town.”) This month, his musical “Harmony,” co-written with Bruce Sussman, opens at the Barrymore—on the other Broadway. On a recent rainy Tuesday, Manilow took a spin around the old neighborhood, peering at the strange and the familiar from the back of an S.U.V.

“We didn’t know we were poor,” Manilow, a youthful-looking eighty, said. He wore a black coat, spoke in a quiet, raspy voice, and took occasional drags from a vape pen. He waved it toward a young Orthodox woman who

was opening the front door of a bustling prewar building where his family had lived. “The Mayflower—that’s where I hung out most of the time.” (He released “Here at the Mayflower,” an album imagining the lives of the building’s residents, in 2001.) He lived in an apartment with his grandparents and his divorced mother. As his 1983 memoir, “Sweet Life,” begins, he’s a shy eleven-year-old glumly returning from the orthodontist, passing Sal’s Shoe Repair and Kleiner’s Grocery and despairing about his braces. At home, his grandmother comforts him, saying, “Hello tatteleh, have some milk and cookies and then you’ll practice your accordion.” He didn’t mind the accordion: “I wasn’t bad at it, and I learned to read music.” Then his mother remarried, to a music enthusiast. “He changed my life,” Manilow said. “We moved to the Keap Street apartment, and he threw out the accordion and got me a spinet piano. Everything changed.” He addressed the chauffeur: “Mark, take us to Keap Street.”

Mark drove to Keap Street and stopped in front of a small tenement. “The family that owned the building—to get to the top floor, you would go through their living room,” Manilow said. “See that air-conditioner on the very top window? There’s my old room. It was an old closet. So I was in the closet for all those years.” (Manilow married his longtime partner and business manager, Garry Kief, in 2014; they have been together since 1978.) Manilow mastered the spinet, then taught himself arranging: “Arranging is the thing that I love—taking the song, slipping out a facet, finding a different facet.” Mark drove by a Satmar girls’ school, the former Eastern District High School. “This is my old high school,” Manilow said. Any memories? “Horror,” he said. “Nothing but terror. I did have good friends. And I was part of the band—first clarinet. Can you imagine the second clarinet? I wasn’t very good. But I kept getting better and better at the piano.” He went on to the New York College of Music, jingle writing (“Like a Good Neighbor,” “Stuck on Band-Aid”), and pop megastardom (“Mandy,” “Copacabana”), which has endured.

“This has been the biggest year of my career, I think,” he said. “They did a tribute to me at Carnegie Hall—wonderful Broadway singers, the New York Pops.” That was in May. “Then five nights at Radio City, sold out.” In September, in Las Vegas, he was given the key to the Strip after breaking Elvis Presley’s record for most performances at the International Theatre (six hundred and thirty-seven). “Now ‘Harmony.’ ”

“Harmony” tells the story of the Comedian Harmonists, a real-life Weimar-era vocal sextet in Berlin, whose fizzy performances of close-harmonizing comedic songs (“Der Onkel Bumba aus Kalumba Tanzt Nur Rumba,” “Mein Kleiner Grüner Kaktus”) made them an international sensation. “They were the Manhattan Transfer of their day,” Manilow said. “But they were the Marx Brothers, too—slapstick comics who did complicated harmonies. The Nazis destroyed everything they had done, because three of them were Jews.” (The group dispersed before the war; all six survived.) Harry Frommermann, the founder, “was the arranger. He came up with some of the most inventive part-writing and ideas. So Harry’s the guy that I connect with the most.” Composing the score, “I was in heaven.” In the Comedian Harmonists’ repertoire, “every song was a different style of music, and I love that. All of *my* albums have different styles of music—there’s either a big-band cut or a novelty cut or big ballads or little jazz songs—and the same thing with this musical.”

Sussman and Manilow wrote an early version of “Harmony” in 1997. Regional productions followed; a big one fell through; time passed. Last year, the National Yiddish Theatre Folksbiene, at the Museum of Jewish Heritage, in Manhattan, mounted this new production, directed and choreographed by Warren Carlyle. “I mean, can you think of a more perfect place?” Manilow said. It has transferred intact. “Bruce and I never gave up on this show. We just wanted people to remember these people. We didn’t want them to disappear. These six geniuses.”

He’d thought about popping over to Carnegie Hall, where his grandfather started Manilow’s first standing ovation in 1971, and where a key scene in “Harmony” takes place, but pivoted toward lunch: “Mark, take us to Peter Luger.” Any final local observations? “No,” he said, laughing. “Get me out of here!” ♦

By Mina Tavakoli

By Bruce Handy

By Adam Iscoe

By Fergus McIntosh

Shouts & Murmurs

- [Thanksgiving Rider](#)

By [Simon Rich](#)

This document acknowledges that Lauren (“Talent”) has agreed to appear for a MAXIMUM of THREE (3) days and TWO (2) nights at the residence of her mother (“Venue”) during the Thanksgiving holiday, pursuant to the terms of this agreement.

ACCOMMODATIONS

Venue will provide Talent with complete, private access to her childhood bedroom (a.k.a. “the Pilates room”) for the duration of her appearance. It is additionally agreed that, during Talent’s visit, Venue’s New Husband (“VNH”) will abstain completely from the use of Talent’s bathroom. Venue is responsible for communicating this deal point to VNH and monitoring him daily after breakfast to insure that this stipulation is enforced. Furthermore, if this agreement is broken, and VNH uses Talent’s bathroom, Venue will not tell Talent that it’s “no big deal,” or laugh when VNH makes his usual joke to Talent about air fresheners. Venue is aware that Talent’s bathroom has no ventilation, and is situated right next to Talent’s bed, and that by using Talent’s bathroom VNH is effectively going to the bathroom in her bed. Venue understands that VNH’s use of Talent’s bathroom is a major violation of her space and so disrespectful that it is basically on par with assault. Venue will not gaslight Talent into thinking she is crazy for being furious that VNH has used her bathroom.

CANCELIATION POLICY

Honestly, if VNH uses Talent’s bathroom, Talent will just fly back to San Francisco. She will literally just walk right out of the house without saying goodbye to anyone and take an Uber to the airport and that will be that. There are THREE (3) other bathrooms in the house; just tell VNH to use one of the MANY OTHER BATHROOMS.

ALCOHOL

Venue shall provide Talent with unlimited, unmonitored access to a fully stocked bar for the duration of her appearance, featuring a MINIMUM of:

ONE (1) gallon-size handle of vodka.

An adequate supply of orange juice, Diet Coke, and other mixers to enable Talent to consume vodka discreetly.

FIVE (5) bottles of drinkable white wine.

Sundry beers.

Venue will not comment on the quantity of Talent's drinking during her appearance, or monitor the "level" of vodka in the bottle. Talent will be drinking, and that's just going to be what it is. Talent will also go outside sometimes to smoke weed, and that's not going to be a thing, either; that's just going to be treated as a normal thing.

RECENT LAYOFF

Talent will perform ONE (1) five-minute summary of her recent layoff from her startup, including a GENERAL description of what the startup did, and a BRIEF explanation of its failure. Talent will not answer questions about the current state of her finances, health-insurance status, or job prospects.

Venue agrees not to make reference to the article she read titled "Top Ten High-Paying Jobs That Literally Anyone Can Do with Zero Experience." Venue will recall that she has already e-mailed and texted the article to Talent THREE (3) times. Venue is additionally aware that said article is not a real article but a clickbait advertisement generated by CareerMonkey.com, designed to trick people into buying a subscription to that site. Venue will not debate this fact by pointing at the article's "byline" as "proof" that it's a "real article." Venue will accept the reality that many online ads are given bylines now, in order to make them look like real articles. If Venue insists that "this one looks real," Talent will zoom in on the "article" and show Venue where it says "Paid Post," and the debate will be settled. Venue will not read the words "Paid Post" out loud, in a suspicious tone of voice, and then shrug at VNH in a way that implies that there is still some ambiguity about whether it is a real article. Venue will just admit, for once in her life, that she was wrong about one thing. Jesus.

TRANSPORTATION

Venue agrees to reimburse Talent \$432 for the cost of her round-trip plane ticket, but will not tell anyone that she had to do that, especially not Talent's Perfect Doctor Brother with His Perfect Wife and Perfect Children ("TPDBHPWPC").

KLONOPIN

On the night before TPDBHPWPC arrives, Talent will take Klonopin.

LIGHTING REQUIREMENTS

The following morning (a.k.a. "Thanksgiving"), Venue will refrain from entering Talent's bedroom and opening Talent's blinds in a passive-aggressive attempt to wake her up. If Venue breaks this stipulation, she will ADMIT that her intention was to wake up Talent. Venue will not make up an insane lie about wanting to "let air in." Venue is aware that opening blinds does not let air in. Opening WINDOWS lets air in. Opening blinds just lets in bright, punishing light, right into Talent's face.

REHEARSAL TIME

When TPDBHPWPC pulls in with his station wagon, Talent requires FIVE (5) minutes to drink some coffee and just mentally prepare for all those fucking kids and all the questions about her getting fired and the goddam dance with her perfect sister-in-law Jenn about who's going to do the stupid pie.

MEET AND GREET

After drinking a MINIMUM of TWO (2) cups of coffee, Talent agrees to participate in a meet-and-greet session with TPDBHPWPC's latest perfect baby and pose for a MAXIMUM of THREE (3) photographs holding said baby.

CANCELIATION POLICY

If VNH makes ANY kind of comment implying that Talent should have a baby by this point in her life, even if it is said in the most lighthearted, innocuous way (e.g., "You look pretty good holding one of those!"), it is

Uber, airport, tearing through the sky to S.F. What fucking right does VNH have to say shit? He has been in the picture for a MAXIMUM of FOUR (4) years (unless he and Venue met while Dad was STILL ALIVE, which is math we'll get into if this kind of shit keeps happening).

THANKSGIVING MEAL REQUIREMENTS

Talent shall be seated as far as possible from VNH, on the “wine side” of the table. Talent will not be required to initiate conversation during the meal. Talent agrees to politely listen to a MAXIMUM of TWO (2) dry updates about her high-school classmates’ parents who still live in town, provided they are of reasonable length and do not contain digressions about local real-estate developments. Talent will not point out each time Venue repeats a story but will internally keep track of the repetitions.

In between dinner and dessert, Talent will corner TPDBHPWPC in the kitchen and ask him his medical opinion about Venue’s fading memory. Talent will be surprised to hear from TPDBHPWPC that Venue’s senility is “age appropriate.” When Talent pushes back, TPDBHPWPC will tell Talent that Venue’s mental deterioration would be less of a shock if she had observed it more gradually, over the course of several visits, the implication being that she should visit Venue more. Talent will remind TPDBHPWPC that she works in San Francisco, and TPDBHPWPC will point out that she “doesn’t work there anymore.” Talent will be fucking devastated. Talent will catch sight of a faded family photo of a half-remembered trip to Sarasota, of Venue posing with Talent and TPDBHPWPC in some low-rent water park. Talent will try to mentally calculate Venue’s age in the picture, but be too drunk to do the math, and make TPDBHPWPC do it for her. Talent will be stunned to learn that Venue is TWO (2) years YOUNGER in the picture than Talent is now. Talent just won’t be able to believe that. It will almost be too crazy to process. Talent will be rocked by the sense that she is hurtling toward death with nothing to show for her FORTY (40) years on the planet but wasted potential. TPDBHPWPC will tell Talent that he needs to get back to the living room because his two-year-old is missing and probably making a mess. Talent will grip TPDBHPWPC’s wrist and ask him if he thinks Dad was proud of her before he died, even though she never paid him back for her ill-conceived master’s in museum studies. Talent will start to cry and not understand why she is crying. Jenn will come in to check on her pie, and

quickly back out of the room. TPDBHPWPC will reiterate to Talent that he needs to search for his missing two-year-old. Talent will grip TPDBHPWPC's wrist even harder and ask him if he thinks she's too old to apply to law school, or business school, and if he thinks she should get back together with Dane, even though they had zero sexual connection. TPDBHPWPC will suggest that Talent drink ONE (1) glass of water.

When TPDBHPWPC is gone, Talent will stand alone in the dim kitchen for a MINIMUM of FIVE (5) minutes just completely spiralling, thinking about the darkest, most fucked-up shit. Talent will inwardly acknowledge that it was a mistake to use her loss of health insurance as an excuse to pause therapy.

Talent will feel a tug on her jeans. Talent will look down and see that TPDBHPWPC's Missing Two-Year-Old ("M2YO") has wandered into the kitchen at some point, because he smelled pie. M2YO will ask Talent for pie. Talent will realize that M2YO probably doesn't know her name, or even how they're related, because they've only met a MAXIMUM of THREE (3) times, and she forgot to mail him a birthday present this year because she is a worthless piece of shit. Talent will tearfully tell him that she is his Aunt Lauren, and that she is sorry for forgetting his birthday, and M2YO will shrug with absolute indifference, because he has no conception of time or genetic relatedness, and he will ask again for pie, in as loud a voice as he can muster, and all at once Talent will see herself through the eyes of M2YO, not as a failure, or a monster, or even as a human, really, just a physical barrier to pie, and she will temporarily reframe the weekend as a saga about pie, and a two-year-old's quest to obtain it, and she'll cut him a slice, and watch him shove it in his crusty mouth, surprised by how relieved she is to cede the stage, to give in to somebody—*anybody*—else's demands, and she will laugh out loud for the first time in recent memory, feeling free and for one miraculous moment even slightly thankful.

At any moment, and without prior warning, all terms and conditions are subject to change. ♦

By Patricia Marx

By Ivan Ehlers

By Alison Myers

Fiction

- [The Ghosts of Gloria Lara](#)

[Fiction](#)

The Ghosts of Gloria Lara

By [Junot Diaz](#)



Photograph by Paul Thulin-Jimenez for The New Yorker

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Junot Diaz reads.

Before that year, I knew nothing about Colombia—nothing real. I was eleven and too focussed on the Dominican Republic I'd left behind and on my own immigrant bullshit to worry about anywhere else. If I'd had my way, I wouldn't ever have thought about the D.R., but in my household there was no escaping it. Those were the early years of our immigration, when my mother still kept up with the news back home. Every morning without fail, before I even had a chance to brush my teeth, she had me tune my father's beloved radio to the Spanish stations. And, because I was the curious kid I was, I listened, and, because I couldn't help myself, I learned.

Maybe it was the stations we were tuning in to, but they made it sound like the D.R. was on a rocket to hell. Nothing was going right: nobody had jobs and there were strikes every day and food shortages and super-sensational murders and politicians accusing one another of all sorts of lunacies. As if

that weren't apocalypse enough, this was a few months after Hurricane David more or less dropped the island on its fucking head, leaving thousands dead, hundreds of thousands homeless, and entire neighborhoods blown to splinters. Forty-plus years later and you still have Domos who can't hear the name David without breaking out in hives.

Here was the weirdness: it didn't matter whether the radio was talking about the annihilation of David or some grisly-ass twenty-person bus collision, my mother never reacted. Not with her face or with her words. Just kept folding clothes or washing peas, her thin I-starved-throughout-my-childhood face pinched inward. It was a kind of passivity that I didn't understand. Why was she listening to the news if she wasn't going to react?

[Junot Díaz on writing as an act of faith.](#)

My father, for example, was more prototypically Dominican. When he listened to the radio or watched the news or read the paper—or breathed—he always let the world know what he was thinking. A horrible traffic accident? Dominicans drive like monkeys. Political malfeasance? Dominicans are corrupt por naturaleza. Hurricane David? Trujillo would have cleaned that up in two weeks tops. Ex-President Balaguer? The greatest intellectual in the entire history of the Dominican Republic.

The other contenders? He never said.

Your average Dominican eleven-year-old wouldn't have known Balaguer from a hole in the ground, but my father was an avowed balaguerista and often preached the gospel of Balaguer to me and my older brother—how, after our dictator-for-life Trujillo was assassinated by traitors and maricones, it was Balaguer who restored order. Balaguer was the only reason, he explained, that we weren't all comunistas or maricones, which seemed interchangeable to him.

Here's what was interesting: on the many occasions when my father waxed nostalgic about Balaguer and his mano dura against the subversives, you would have thought my mom didn't even speak Spanish, that's how indifferent she was. But God forbid the radio mentioned Balaguer's name when my father wasn't around—then it was *on*. Her mask cracked. She'd

shake whatever she was holding, her eyes would flash, and she'd invariably hiss a variation of Ese pedazo de mierda.

My mother was a conservative woman—Dominican-campesina conservative—and by rights should have been pulling for both Trujillo and Balaguer, but she hated Balaguer, a hatred that extended backward to Trujillo, who'd trained him and taught him his dictatorial ways. Her loathing was not some partisan abstraction, either; it was profoundly *personal*. A few months after we left the D.R., her favorite cousin was murdered, gunned down on the street, and she blamed Balaguer.

This was my uncle Renato, who for as long as I can remember had been our family's one and only comunista. (You already see where this is going.) I'd never met him in person, knew him only through photographs; when we were still in the D.R., he was always either in hiding or in exile abroad. But all us kids knew one thing about Uncle Renato: that my mother adored him. He'd been something of an older brother to her, the one she never had, an ultra-Catholic, too, until he'd gone to the capital to study—where instead of becoming an engineer he became a Communist.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Junot Díaz read “The Ghosts of Gloria Lara.”](#)

I knew from the stories I'd overheard that Renato had fought against the Americans when they invaded—my military father had fought *for* them—had gone to prison for agitating against Balaguer and been tortured there something horrible, and in 1970 he'd washed up in Romania, part of that movement of Latin American radicals who found shelter in the Soviet bloc.

He should have stayed in Romania, but he was too much the revolutionary, and in 1975, the year we finally secured our visas to join our father in the U.S., he returned to the D.R. My mother begged him to stay in Romania, find a nice girl; he wouldn't listen. He was committed to overthrowing Balaguer and turning the D.R. into the next Cuba.

Overthrow Balaguer? Maybe during his first year in office, when he was on shaky ground, but in his ninth? Like the egg trying to fight the rock. By 1975, President Balaguer had the military, the élites, the police, the

campesinos, the Church, and even the U.S. secret services under his little heel. 1975 was just about the worst year for this kind of thing. A couple of years earlier, some of Renato's comrades had attempted to overthrow Balaguer and got themselves massacred, and ever since the old lich had turned up the heat. He had the Trujillo apparatus running around the clock and anyone with the slightest whiff of red on them was getting bodied by the death squads.

My uncle lasted seven months, most of it on the run, darting from one safe house to the next. My mother went to see him twice during that time, right before we left the country. She didn't take us kids because it was too dangerous. Both times she brought him his favorite food, a pastelón; he ate, asked about the family, and then sent her on her way before anything happened. She didn't tell him that we were going to the U.S. The only thing he hated more than Balaguer was the U.S.

Why don't you go back to Romania? she asked.

He smiled—she remembered that smile. *Because the future is for the revolutionaries.*

The day he died he was waiting in the Parque Independencia to board a bus bound for Azua and then the border. Maybe planning to visit relatives or maybe heading into exile via Haiti. No one really knows. My mother hadn't heard from him in weeks.

Before he could set foot on the bus, a never described or identified man walked up, levelled a revolver, and shot him clean out of his left Florsheim.

A murder in broad daylight at a crowded bus stop, and no one saw anything, heard anything, thought anything, but somehow everyone knew it was Balaguer's totally not official death squad, the Banda Colorá, that had done it. One bystander was kind enough to place my uncle's loose shoe on his birdlike chest. A foto of the murder scene was printed in a newspaper (I never found out which one) and a worn clipping of said foto found its way to my mother in the U.S.

No matter how hard I try I'll never fully capture my mother in words, but know this, at least: she was the sort of woman who kept a torn-out newspaper foto of her dead cousin in the drawer where she stored all our passports.

It was a cruel thing that they did. Killing him and then taking that foto. For a long time that was my vision of the Dominican Republic: a Florsheim stamping down on the breastplate of my uncle—forever.

So that was the scene—me, my mother, my dead uncle folded up in a passport, my dad's radio, an occasional mention of Balaguer—when February 27, 1980, rolled around. February 27th was Dominican Independence Day, which we didn't celebrate in my household. My father loved himself some dictator types, but national holidays? Couldn't be bothered and neither, really, could my mother, but for different reasons, I'm sure.

On that particular Independence Day, a group of Colombian guerrillas seized the Dominican Embassy in Bogotá, of all places (which I had to look up in our school's atlas). At the time of the attack, the Embassy was hosting a big ol' Independence celebration for the entire diplomatic community, which meant the guerrillas not only captured the Dominican Ambassador, they also bagged the Austrian, Brazilian, Costa Rican, Egyptian, Guatemalan, Haitian, Israeli, Mexican, Swiss, Uruguayan, Venezuelan, and U.S. Ambassadors as well! Plus the papal nuncio, whoever the fuck that was.

Must have been quite a party—until it wasn't.

Compared with the Iranian hostage crisis—day a hundred and fifteen!—it seemed like no big deal to me, but my mother had a very different reaction. From the moment she heard the first report, she tuned in like a woman obsessed. And because I wanted my mother to like me, and because I didn't have any real friends at the time, I started following along, too. She not only listened to the news on the regular radio, she had me messing around with my dad's shortwave to see if we could pick up any broadcasts direct from Bogotá (we couldn't), and every day she sent me up to the Parlin Pathmark to check both the English and the Spanish newspapers and if I found any mention of the siege I had to buy the papers and bring them home.

The Spanish articles she read very slowly, two fingers pressing down on each word as though it might up and bolt, but the English articles I had to translate word for word out loud. At school, I started looking up Colombia in the encyclopedias to try and understand what in the world was going on. Not a lot of information in our elementary-school library, but there was more down at Sayreville Public Library. Before long, I knew more about Colombia and the Movimiento 19 de Abril than I did about the Dominican Republic. It was exactly the kind of outfit my uncle would have approved of. A guerrilla movement fighting an oppressive government.

My mother was entranced—her version of entranced. She still listened passively, mutely, but there was a shift, something in the quality of listening that was different; she didn't busy herself with chores, held herself immobile, almost as though she had family in that mess.

My father wasn't fixated in the same way, but he followed the coverage like probably every other Dominican was doing, and, as a former military officer of the pro-Trujillo variety, he shared his opinions, of course. He couldn't believe that the Colombians were negotiating with the guerrillas, whose demands included money to continue their revolution and the release of hundreds of their comrades. My father screamed at the TV, Give them hot juicy bullets! During our meals, he offered expert advice on how the Colombians might retake the Embassy, with helpful diagrams on the back of my notebooks, bringing out his various firearms to lend his argument extra authority. My older brother watched this all with open amusement, encouraged him with questions like: How exactly would you kill a terrorist through a locked door? My mother never responded to these planning sessions, but as the weeks went on I noticed something in her expression that baffled me. Until it dawned on me that—duh—she was, in fact, rooting *for* the guerrillas, something that at the time made no sense to me, reared as I was to think of revolutionaries and Communists as Satans of a lesser order.

The siege lasted sixty-one days and my mother followed every little turn, every release, every near-settlement. By the end, the M-19 leaders—Comandante Uno, Comandante María, and La Chiqui (the female guerrilla negotiator I fell in love with and whose real name was Carmenza Cardona Londoño)—had become part of our idiolect, the secret language that my mother and I shared.

Not that anyone else in the family noticed. My father was oblivious of how closely we were following the Colombian crisis—he had his girlfriends to worry about—and my brother was even more indifferent. My mother and I could have been on fire and I doubt my brother would have given a flying fuck, much less thrown us a wet towel.

The Colombian siege was our thing, really, the one and only time my mother and I had ever done anything *together* as a unit. We were never close, you see. My mother preferred my brother, openly, flagrantly; me she just tolerated. It took many years for me to realize that it wasn’t personal. That was the way she was. She just didn’t have it in her heart to love more than she was already loving. She had loved the two almost-sons, the ones she had miscarried before we were born—the first in a sugarcane field and the second during the American invasion, in the back of a burning truck—and the fact that she had any love for anyone after all she’d gone through was pretty miraculous.

At the time I didn’t brood on it. Every parent I knew up close had their favorites; figured that was the way shit was. Didn’t mean I wasn’t hungry for her affection. Which was why I fetched the newspapers without complaint and turned on the radio when she commanded, looked up what I could about Colombia to share with her, and tried to chat up our one Colombian neighbor in London Terrace, Mr. Longo, without much success—but more than anything I just sat with her and we listened to the radio together.

And then on day sixty-one it all ended. The guerrillas left the Embassy shielded by the last of their hostages (the Dominican Ambassador had already been released, but not the American one) and flew to Cuba, where Fidel was waiting for them with open arms. My father watched the recap on the news that night with almost comical fury. Just shoot them already! he cried. When the news played a clip of La Chiqui’s *fuego* speech in Havana, my father couldn’t take it; he left the apartment without a word, off to visit one of his other women, no doubt.

My mother watched him go, waved for me to turn off the TV. But, if it wasn’t triumph I sensed radiating through the heartbreak, I don’t know what it was.

When you're poor or a Colombian revolutionary, triumphs don't last. A year later, La Chiqui was dead. Like my uncle Renato, she had refused to stay on the sidelines in Cuba and had returned to Colombia to continue la guerra revolucionaria and this time the military finished her.

My father, alas, wasn't around to celebrate. Not long after the Embassy siege, he had run off with one of his girlfriends—the ugly one, my mother called her, with her usual incisiveness—and not two months after that bit of ridiculousness my brother was diagnosed with the cancer that would eat him up. He'd spend the final years of his life pretending that he was fine and absolutely nothing was wrong—an act of such sustained bald-faced denial that even now, four decades later, I have trouble grokking.

As for me and my mother, the end of the Colombian siege was a goodbye of sorts for us as well. Last time we ever did anything like that, anything together. Also: the last time I cared about what was happening to Dominicans for years and years.

And yet, in spite of everything, something of that Colombia moment remained alive in me, remained alive in my mother, too. Lingered the way the radioactivity from my brother's treatments lingered in his bones.

A shadow, you might say—an echo. Whenever Colombia got mentioned, even in the depths of my Turn White obsession, I noticed. And anytime I saw Mr. Longo, who lived across the parking lot, I was reminded of those sixty-one days. If Mr. Longo and I happened to be waiting on line together at the Pathmark, for example, I always asked him how it was going in Colombia. The motherfucker answered the same way every time: Jodido.

Sometimes I still found myself looking at books in the library, or staring at the country in atlases.

All of this explains, at least to me, what happened in 1985.



"Just give me something to help me forget my troubles."
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

That was the year that Mr. Longo's brother, Wilson, arrived in our neighborhood, straight from Colombia, with his son, Alberto, in tow. The year Wilson Longo fell in love with my mother and the year I got my second huge dose of true terror (the first dose I'll get to later).

If I'm going to talk about Wilson Longo, first I need to say something about his older brother.

The elder Longo had moved into Building 4 a few years before the Embassy fiasco, and about the only thing that made him stand out—besides the fact that he was Colombian—was that he had a massive Charles Bronson mustache and drove a 1970 Charger that everyone whistled over. That was it, nothing else to report. Elder Longo was semi-invisible and didn't talk to anyone, his apartment so quiet you could never tell when he was home and when he wasn't. Dude was all work or all Charger. On nights that I couldn't sleep, I caught sight of him in his coveralls heading off to whatever garage he worked at. Even though we were the only ones up and about at 5 a.m., I didn't wave at him and he didn't wave at me. He didn't seem like a top-of-the-morning type.

As for Wilson and his son, Alberto—one day they weren't, the next day they were. Typical shit in my neighborhood. Folks appeared and disappeared

without warning all the time; families doubled in size, immigrant mitosis, or whittled down to nothing, like it was the most normal thing in the world. Or someone you thought was just visiting was actually staying, or at least trying to stay—which was the case with Wilson Longo and his son.

Wilson Longo—or Mr. Wilson, as my mother called him—was neither handsome nor ugly, wasn’t anything, really. A bland tan face with a wide nose and wavy Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., hair. As anonymous as his brother except that Mr. Wilson was the hairiest man I’d ever seen, some straight Chewbacca shit, hair bursting up from his collar like follicle flame, one half-moon away from werewolf. Even when he shaved he looked beard-imminent. I guess the other thing was that he had giant fucking calves—the kind of calves you climb the Matterhorn with.

He arrived from Colombia looking rough, like he’d got a beating on the flight and then another one at immigration, and that whaled-on look never left him the whole time he lived among us.

We followed his progress, less out of curiosity than out of habit—newcomers were always objects of suspicion until they weren’t. He joined his brother at the garage for a few weeks but that didn’t take. He had a fistfight with another worker, and that became the pattern for him. He had trouble keeping any gig for long; there was always some blowup or another. Ended up at home a lot, drinking and playing Colombian music—Lucho Bermúdez and the rest—and listening to soccer matches non-fucking-stop. On certain weekend days, he’d chase a soccer ball around the parking lot, drunkenly. Which seemed to me one of the most embarrassing things an adult could do.

Under normal circumstances, I doubt I would have paid too much attention to either Mr. Wilson or his son, but these were definitely not normal circumstances. 1985 was my family’s annus horribilis, the last year of my brother’s life. He had entered his final gyre and was talking to none of us, just sprawled his skeletal ass in his room, waiting for the inevitable end. He had visitors, mostly girls, and not just from around the way, caballotas from all over New Jersey, even some gringas. Don’t know how in the world he had met them all, this was way before the Internet, but good-looking brothers have their ways, I guess. All beautiful, all magnificently teary-eyed,

they would sit with him for hours, watching TV or doing whatever they did in that closed room, before heading out. My mother never said a word about the visitors and never offered these girls more than water, either, unless they spoke to her in Spanish. De donde tu eres? she'd ask, and if they answered respectfully she'd offer them coffee and pan caliente and wait to see if they washed their own saucer or not.

My mother had lost nearly as much weight as my brother and gone just as quiet. Her eyes, so Mesopotamian, now overwhelmed her famished face. She no longer cried over my nowhere-in-sight father. She no longer cried over my brother, either. Every ounce of her seemed bent on holding back the tides of reality, keeping the cancer at bay.

Dios doesn't want tears, I heard her telling our neighbor Doña Agpangan. He wants devotion.

She gave Him plenty of that. Went to Mass every single morning, which was a big change from her old secular days; beseeching Dios, San Lazaro, and la Virgen de la Altagracia for the miracle that never came. When she wasn't praying, she worked cleaning houses in the Brunswicks (some of her customers would soon be my professors at Rutgers), and spent the rest of her time taking care of my brother at home or in the hospital.

By then all her friends had pulled back. I've said it before and I'll say it again: cancer is a planet that no one wants to visit for long. Only Doña Agpangan, our short cigarette-addicted Pinay neighbor, still came around, praying with my mother and bringing over empanadas that I always ended up eating.

None of us in the family talked much anymore, but when my mother did open her mouth it was only ever to tear chunks out of me over whatever I'd done wrong at school or at home. And, because I was no longer the mamito I'd been, I'd tear chunks out of her right back. Tu si eres bruto, she'd spit, and I would say, Hijo de bruta.

She wasn't wrong to get at me. By our annus horribilis I was so depressed I had trouble doing much of anything at school. Even multiple-choice quizzes were too much and a lot of the time I didn't bother going to school, just

walked to the library and pretended to read books until it was time to walk home. My depression had me thinking some typically dark shit. We had a lot of firearms in our house (Chekhov alert) which my father had left behind, and about the only thing that my brother could bring himself to do in those hideous months was to keep them all clean and ready to rock. In the midst of those funereal days, I took to sleeping with my father's monstrous Astra .44 under my bed, fully fucking loaded. My reason? Just in case my brother decided in his last days to go for me. Once or twice he had mentioned something about shooting me in the face before he went, a farewell makeover. And also just in case I had the sudden urge to put a bullet right up through my nasal cavity.

Such were my thoughts.

I don't know if it was my mother's unhappiness or Wilson Longo's unhappiness or just the gravity of two lost Latin types in proximity, but the pair of them ended up connecting. He'd wave to her every chance he got, and when she saw him sitting out on his front stoop alone she'd invite him for a cup of coffee. They were both old school and talked to each other decorously, usted this usted that, and he had a gentle two-handed way of handing back the mug as though he feared for its safety.

Anyway, that's how it started. Over coffee, usually while my brother was at the hospital and she had nothing else to do.

And Mr. Wilson, happy to find a sympathetic soul in an alien country, started coming around a lot. Stood on the stoop and talked to her in that beautiful Colombian accent of his. And my mother talked back. A lot. I don't think my mother had ever talked so much in her life—the neighborhood, her first year in the States, who might have a job for him, the news of the day. Maybe that was who she'd been before my father and all those miscarriages changed her. Mr. Wilson started walking her to daily Mass, would wait outside smoking cigarettes until she'd finished with her prayers, and then walk her back from St. Bernadette.

Church is for fools, he liked to say, teasing her, but she never took the bait.

Church is for the hopeful.

Some immigrants-slash-refugees hold on to their secrets for life, but whether it was in Mr. Wilson's nature to be forthcoming or whether something about my mother encouraged him, he opened up to her really quickly. Explained that in Colombia he'd been a teacher who'd had the misfortune to get caught up completely por casualidad in a horrendous case involving the kidnapping and murder of a prominent política for which the authorities had arrested him.

This was, of course, the notorious Gloria Lara de Echeverri case, which I didn't learn about until years later, and it was only thanks to dumb luck that Mr. Wilson had got out of jail alive. Not knowing if he'd be rearrested, he'd done the smart thing and gone into exile, dragging his son with him. As for the boy's mother, she was in Europe, remarried; not much help there.

What's the difference between immigration and exile? I asked my brother.

What's the difference between assholes? my brother said.

When I asked my mother, she gave a weary look. Isn't that what you have your teachers for?

I had never seen anyone so into my mother. Mr. Wilson would talk to her for as long as she'd have him, sometimes letting night fall around them, until even his son had to call him home in embarrassment. He even tried to help her improve her English—he was far from fluent but compared with Mom he was a veritable Herman Melville.

It was some wild Romeo shit. My own father had never shown my mother an ounce of affection, so this was a brand-new experience for me.

My brother seemed to think the whole thing was a hoot.

Maybe you can bring my coffin to the wedding, he said to my mother.

Don't be ridiculous. Es un amigo. Nada mas.

Un amigo. That word has so many resonances in English and in Spanish, especially when it's one's mother uttering it.

Truth is, I never could decide if my mother liked Mr. Wilson or not. I'm not sure she knew herself, not at that point. So what was it between them?

Basic loneliness? Pity? Her need to fix something, anything?

She'd catch sight of him lumbering after the soccer ball in the parking lot, going until he was tripping and sagging over himself, and she would shake her head. She took to sending meals over to the Longo household, heaping plates of locrio or Dominican lasagna that I had to deliver, and it always pissed me off, but what could I do?

What is it? Alberto would always say when he answered the door. If there was anyone in the world more unhappy than I was, it was Alberto.

Poison, I'd say, and leave him to it.

If my mother wanted to feel sorry for anybody, it should have been Mr. Wilson's son. Alberto had a rough time of it in London Terrace.

First off, you never wanted to be any kind of immigrant in a neighborhood like mine. Tolerant and open-armed we were not. Second, that was about the worst time to be Colombian. "Scarface" was out, so everyone asked Alberto where he was keeping the cocaine and called him Tony Montana, which was stupid since Tony Montana was Cuban not Colombian, but when has geographical accuracy ever got in the way of cruelty?

Alberto was a tall kid—Pentecostal-looking, if you know what I mean—with bags under his eyes that looked eerie on a ninth grader. Dude hunched and had a square box haircut so of course his other nickname was Lurch. I like to think that had any kids known what he had endured before arriving—the arrest of his father, the full-out media demonization of all the suspects in the case, the months of terror wondering whether he'd be arrested and tortured, too—they might have gone easier on him, but I seriously doubt they would have fucking cared.

He was an awkward-looking doof who didn't speak English and whose clothes and haircut were extra corny, who showed up at the bus stop that first month with a soccer ball under one of his long arms. Probably hoping

the ball would help him make friends. Didn't work. He was, as they say, scheduled for destruction. After the first week the idiots asked to see the ball and like a dope he let one hold it, and Idiot No. 1 kicked said ball over into the next parking lot just as the bus pulled up and I watched Alberto trying to decide: bus or ball, bus or ball. In the end, the bus won.

Don't worry, Tony, Idiot No. 1 said. It will be there when you get back.

Of course it wasn't.

Any sane person would expect the bullshit to stop after a month or two, but a sane person didn't know neighborhoods like ours. Kids just never let up. *The oppressed, instead of striving for liberation, tend themselves to become oppressors.* Freire didn't know the half of it.

I remember the one time I made friendly with Alberto. This was early on. After school I showed him around the neighborhood—nothing much to see. I took him up to Honda Hill and down to the landfill. I showed him where the sanitation workers piled discarded books—it was from these castoffs that I had built my little library. He looked at everything without the slightest trace of interest and the more indifferent he seemed the harder I tried to sell —what, precisely? Our shitty neighborhood? Our stinking landfill? Me?

It wasn't until I showed him the issue of *Dragon* magazine I'd recently bought that he brightened up.

I have those magazines, he said in Spanish.

You do?

He nodded.

Which ones? I asked.

All of them, he said proudly.

Now, you have to understand that in those days I was into Dungeons and Dragons the way Americans are into money, had stacks of modules and cans full of dice. Role-playing games kept me alive when everything else was

telling me to shoot myself. So when Alberto said he had all the *Dragon* magazines, I could barely contain myself.

Could I see them? I asked.

Of course, he said.

I waited a day, a week, a month, but he never showed them to me. The excuses were endless—claimed he was reading them (“All of them?” I asked incredulously); claimed no one was allowed into his apartment; claimed his father wouldn’t let him take the magazines out of the house. What was funny was that even though I knew better I kept holding out hope that Alberto was telling the truth, that he really had all those *Dragon* back issues. I kept waiting and waiting and such was the nature of my hope, of my longing, that it was only after he left for Europe that I finally allowed myself to accept that I had been had.

Alberto and the States ended just about how you would expect. One day the craziest of the local kids said some shit to Alberto in half-Spanish and Alberto said some shit back in full-Spanish, and when the kid tried to knock Alberto down, Alberto punched him straight in the mouth, so the kid pulled a knife. At that point, any other motherfucker would have run, but Alberto must have had enough of all the bullshit because he made a play for the blade. I wasn’t there, but from what I hear the cuts on his palms were ghastly as fuck. There was still blood on the sidewalk the next day, everyone pointing it out to me. Looked like a murder scene.

Alberto stayed out of school for the rest of the quarter; I saw him kicking his soccer ball around with his bandaged hand, and then, without warning, he was gone. He had wanted to return to Colombia but that was impossible, so he went off to live with his moms in Austria. All this my mother learned from Mr. Wilson, who kept her up past her bedtime talking on the porch. He wanted Alberto with him, his only son, but what could he do? He’d already made the boy suffer enough.

It wasn’t you, my mother said. It was them.

He sighed so loudly I could hear him from the couch.

Later that night my mother asked me to show her Austria on a map.

She ran a finger over the strange names. And what do they speak there?

Hitler, my brother offered from the sofa.

At the end of April, my brother collapsed at a slot machine in Atlantic City and ended up back in Beth Israel and my mother went with him. I think she came home twice that month, and both times I was either in school or out. Left me a note with my name misspelled and a huge pot of moro.

Mr. Wilson often stopped by to ask after her and then he'd sit on our stoop smoking cigarette after cigarette, as though hoping she might suddenly show up.

On one of those nights, I cadged a cigarette and we smoked quietly for a while.

My mother says you are a teacher.

I was a teacher. He pretended to write on a chalkboard with great flourish.

Was it a good school?

He nodded. My son was really happy there.

I can't imagine you as a teacher.

He said something to me. Do you recognize the language?

I shook my head.

He spelled out the words: Aegrescit medendo.

After a while he threw his cigarette away and walked back to his apartment.

When my brother and mother finally returned to London Terrace, my brother looked like a very handsome cadaver; he had nasty open sores on his arms from where the chemo had leaked out and burned him and I could have

circled his wrist with my thumb and index finger. Ready for my closeup or what? my brother said.

You don't look so good.

He laughed. I'm going to look a whole lot worse.

My mother had changed, too. She came back from that final round of chemo with zero patience—everything was wrong, from the water pressure to the noise outside, and she blew up at me at the slightest thing, called me a malcriado, a malparido, a desgraciado. She started attending Mass twice a day and invited some of the local women over at bizarre hours to pray for my brother's eternal soul. A couple of them even tried to pray over me but by then I didn't give a fuck about anything and walked right on by.

Mr. Wilson still came around but things weren't the same as before. My mother never talked to him for long, as though afraid that any shift in her attention might send my brother's health spiralling.

How's your English? he asked in English.

It good, she replied in an exaggerated way that made them both laugh.

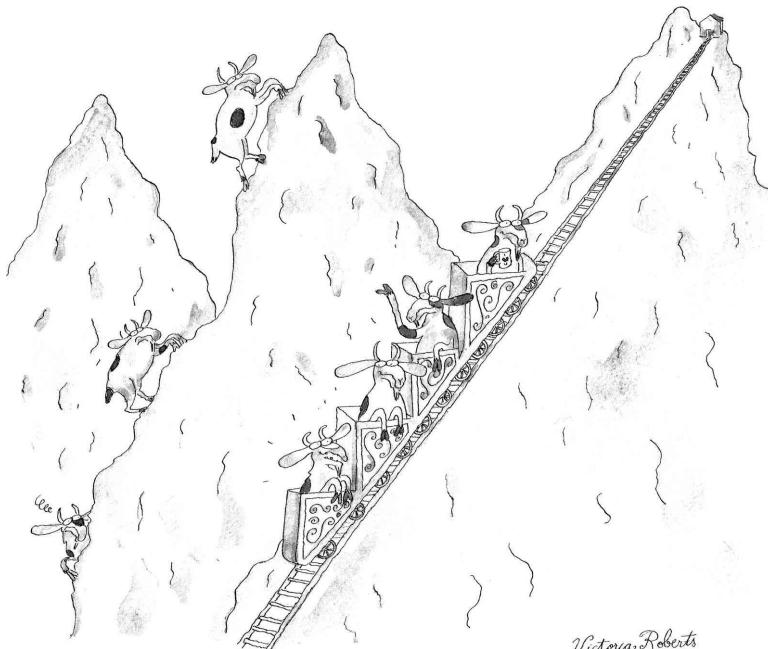
We all should learn the universal language, he said. El ingles mal hablado.

Mr. Wilson had never been very grounded, but without his son or my mother around he seemed to flounder. Stopped looking for real work altogether, and when he needed money he'd wash dishes at the Peter Pan diner or pump gas up on Route 9 for a few hours. He and his brother were arguing, too, real intense; you could hear them across the parking lot and whether it was because of these spats or everything else, Mr. Wilson started running off to N.Y.C. a lot, visiting some Colombians he'd met, staying on their couches until they had enough of him and sent his ass back to N.J.

It was on one of those nights that Mr. Wilson broke into our apartment.

It was, I guess, an honest mistake. Our apartments were mirrors of each other, just on opposite sides of the parking lot. It was three in the morning and dude was mas borracho que el diablo and he tried his key in our door

and when that didn't work he must have decided in a fit of inebriated industry to slide open our kitchen window and wriggle through head first and because he was drunk out of his mind and no ninja, dude face-planted on some dishes and then crashed on the floor, with broken dishes in pursuit.



"We thought we lived to climb, then Ralph put in the funicular."
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

The noise brought my whole family running. My dying brother with his CZ 75, me in my tighty-whities with a baseball bat, and my mother in her bata fumbling with her glasses.

When we realized that the mumbling mess on the linoleum was Mr. Wilson, relief all around. He's drunk, my mother announced, and my brother snapped, Se nota.

Come on, let's go, my brother said. Let's go.

But Mr. Wilson refused to budge. This is my house. *You* get out.

Listen to this motherfucker, my brother said. Pick him up.

I put the bat down, hesitated, and that's when the whole thing went fucking sideways. One second Mr. Wilson was wallowing on the floor amid the broken dishes and the next second he leaped up like a fucking cobra.

Smashed his entire weight against my skeletal brother, pinning him against the fridge, trying to grab at the CZ 75. If you've been to the firing range as often as me and my brother had, you know exactly how dangerous that was. I didn't have time to think; all I could see was my mother's big eyes and my brother's bald head, and I jumped in and grabbed Mr. Wilson's arm and he fell back, classic judo move, and brought us all down onto the floor.

We landed on my brother hard, which sucked, but what really sucked was that my brother had his hand on the pistol, Mr. Wilson had his hand on the pistol, I had my hand on the pistol, and somehow in that lucha libre the barrel ended up pointed straight at my eye and no matter how hard I tried I couldn't pull away or redirect it. Everyone was fighting wildly for the pistol, my brother included, with no regard for my face, and the barrel just got bigger and bigger and everything in me went cold because I knew, in a prophetic out-of-body way, that the CZ 75 was about to cavitate my brains all over the kitchen.

I figured that was it for me, bye-bye, but then my mother shouted *Wilson, estop, estop, estop* and it was the craziest shit I ever heard, my mom trying to speak English, but he must have heard her because I felt him loosen his grip and with one final twist my brother wrenched the gun away and the black devouring eye of the barrel released me and I dropped back to the real world, to life, in a huge heart-bursting rush.

Put that away, my mother whispered. The police are here.

Our upstairs neighbors, hearing all the commotion, had called them.

At first it looked like everything was O.K. The cops didn't charge in with weapons drawn or shoot my mother or anything crazy like that, but when they tried to herd Mr. Wilson out of our apartment, it was round fucking two. Dude started another fight, but this was even more berserk than the first. Where the fuck did he find the energy? Shouting and kicking and contorting and crying for his son and even those two massive white cops had a hard time controlling him and they all broke just about everything in the kitchen.

The cops finally pinned him to the ground and the older one jammed the cuffs on, and that was when Mr. Wilson started really screaming. And when

I say screaming, I mean *screaming*. A scream that must have reached to Madison Park, to South Amboy, to New York fucking City. The kind of scream that I never want to hear again as long as I live. You would have thought that someone had plunged a red-hot dagger straight into Mr. Wilson's heart. My mother, who had been watching the battle in stunned silence, crumpled like she'd been poleaxed.

Remember how I said I experienced my second blast of pure terror because of Mr. Wilson? You might have thought it was the whole pistol-in-the-face moment, which was fucking scary—but it was that scream. That horrible, horrible scream.

Real story: During my first year in the U.S., my first year with my father, he liked to take my brother and me down to the basement and make us look at a collection of fotos he had. In order to toughen us up, to make us dique soldiers. These were from his good old days back on the island: fotos of men and women handcuffed naked to the same metal chair in what must have been a cuartel, probably the one he'd been assigned to. Some of the people were alive; some of them weren't. During these toughening-up sessions, if either my brother or I looked away my father slapped us, hard, so of course we didn't look away. We saw.

My mother must have found out, because a short time later those sessions ended. Still, those fotos and the whole ghoulish ritual of being summoned to the basement became once and forever the definition of terror for me, and I still have nightmares even now that I'm in my fifties and live a cosseted middle-class immigrant life.

Foto after foto of young dead Dominicans. But you know what? Mr. Wilson's scream, if you can believe it, was worse.

In Colombia he'd been tortured for seven weeks straight. They beat him with clubs, water-tortured him until his lungs just about burst, put electric shocks on his legs, arms, chest, and, of course, genitals—and forced him to watch others being tortured. The brigada, into whose hands he had fallen, were convinced that he had something to do with the kidnapping and murder of Gloria Lara—who was from una familia muy rica y poderosa, a política so important she had represented Colombia at the U.N.—but Mr. Wilson's

only crime had been to support a campesino group when he was a young teacher, and since they were the ones who supposedly killed Gloria Lara, the military bashed down his door one night while he was having a beer with his parents.

All of this he told my mother many years later on the phone.

This was after he left London Terrace without saying goodbye.

After he kicked around in N.Y.C. for a few years and then immigrated to Austria to be closer to his son.

After he left Austria because he hated Austria, hated its racism, and because his son barely talked to him anymore, and migrated to Copenhagen at the suggestion of a Colombian acquaintance.

After he decided that Copenhagen wasn't for him, either, what with the police stopping him on the tram every day to check his I.D. to the point where there were days when he could barely leave his apartment.

He was thinking maybe of returning to Colombia, if he could find the courage, or maybe moving in with a Danish woman he knew who lived in Sweden up near the border with Finland.

Next time I call it might be from the North Pole, he joked.

New Jersey is warmer, she said, and that was the closest she came, I think, to asking him to return.

That was the last time he and my mother spoke.

By then my mother's hair was all white and she visited my brother's grave only twice a month as opposed to three or four times a week. She lived in Ridgefield Park, in a house I'd helped her buy.

Do you think he went back to Colombia? I asked her. We were watching one of the Colombian crime dramas that were all the rage on the Spanish-language channels.

I don't know, she said.

Did you love him?

She removed her glasses, rubbed her eyes. Don't be ridiculous.

My mother who hadn't dated anyone after my father left.

Did you at least *like* him?

Yes, I *liked* him, but I never had luck with men.

Do you even remember what he looks like? she asked.

Of course I do, I said.

But the truth was, I didn't. There were no photographs of him and no one else in the neighborhood remembered Wilson and Alberto Longo and of course my brother wasn't around to corroborate.

Sometimes I dream about him, she offered.

Really?

She nodded. In the dreams he speaks to me in English and I understand.

When I dreamed of Mr. Wilson, he often looked like my father or my brother. The dreams didn't change much. We were in a cuartel or my basement or a classroom and Mr. Wilson would stare at me with an impossible distress until I couldn't take it anymore and then I'd beg him, in Spanish, Please don't.

He never listened. He opened his mouth as wide as you can imagine.

And I'd brace myself for the scream that never came. ♦

By Cressida Leyshon

By Mary Costello

By David Remnick

By Graciela Mochkofsky

Puzzles & Games Dept.

- [The Crossword: Monday, October 30, 2023](#)

By [Will Nediger](#)

By [Rebecca Goldstein](#)

By [Robyn Weintraub](#)

By [Stella Zawistowski](#)

Poems

- “[Prayer for My Daughter](#)”
- “[The Future Anterior](#)”

By [David St. John](#)

Read by the author.

What prayer becomes me now
As these times darken daily
Until sons & daughters grow as
Fragile as the wind along these
Ever-altering surfaces of a world
Ripping apart—& whose
Fault really this sorrowing
Of fathers drawing only maps
Of their own fears as whole
Cities begin darkening in ash
Shadows as uncertain as Blake's
Own wild consumptive city by
The Thames & as Vivienne
& I walked those mornings
By the Pacific along
The Venice boardwalk talking
Looking past the ocean beyond
Waves barely holding the horizon
& I knew I could never make clear
My thanks for how she'd stood
Her ground those times I dragged
My wreckage through the house
As she with forbearance & humor
Helped me take my time to find
Safe harbor she who'd lived
Those impossible years twelve
To seventeen in a town of
Old & new angels
Their drugs & nightmares—
The friend who'd slashed herself
& bled out or the boy who'd stepped
Onto his family's fifth-story terrace
& a few steps beyond embracing
An ending of a life he felt already

Past repair & soon across her body
New tattoos like elegant illuminations
Of some Victorian screen unfolding
Inscriptions of inked cursive
Words like fire walking
Flaring as she began turning away
From old friends who'd
Defined the closing perimeter
Of a vortex she'd left refusing to
Acquiesce to a killing dark as she rose
Free & I think how
Young she is to know & how long
It took her father to choose light
Over dark & one night
Listening to her d.j. her radio show
At midnight I heard her play Leadbelly
Singing "Where Did You Sleep Last Night"
A song I'd once thought she'd known
Only from Nirvana & then a Hendrix
Twelve-string acoustic bootleg
Then Bessie Smith songs I had no idea
She knew & loved living up in Arcata
Between the redwoods & the sea
Where she'd grown singular & strong
In the solace of herself
While building her own Arcadia
As the prayer I might once have hoped
To send into the storm became
This belated song owing its life
To her grace & tolerance arising
Now as simply as then with music
Playing between the redwoods & the sea

By David Baker

By Taras Shevchenko

By Melissa Ginsburg

By Carmen Maria Machado

By [Melissa Ginsburg](#)

Read by the author.

By then we will have known one another for quite some time;
the trees will have grown up, branches long intertwined;
they will have crowded one another through the long decades,
floss of spiders woven across them;

by such time our husbandry will have shown results;
will have grown a forest; will have canopied the road;
we will have spent so much time waiting to leave this place;
will have crowded one another;

we will have endured a cracking open
of the structures that protect, we will have wandered distraught outdoors,
will have reached out and stripped
the redbud's limb of mature seedpods to spread in hidden shade;

we will have stuffed our pockets;
will have filled the wheelbarrow with black walnuts and emptied it again
over the hill;
will have tended and dropped;
the narrow quadrilateral of light will have emerged again from the window's
eclipse;

we will have wiped a sponge over the chipped slab of stone;
will have chipped it and wept;
will have cracked open;
will have endured so much numbness and longing;
will have indulged it and quelled it;

will have awakened early in the morning and paced and held the new baby;
we will have come again
to the old photographs
from the time before I knew you, before I knew any of you.

We will have been the eclipse; will have been
the window; been linear; been bent

by light again by then.

By David Baker

By Carmen Maria Machado

By Taras Shevchenko

By Traci Brimhall

Goings On About Town

- [Goings On: Sampha's Ornate Neo-Soul](#)
- [Killer Carbonara, Straight from the Source](#)

[Alex Barasch](#)

Culture editor

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

Since [Stephen Sondheim's](#) death, in 2021, the legendary composer has remained a steady presence on Broadway: a gender-flipped “[Company](#)” was succeeded by a spare but magnificent “[Into the Woods](#),” a baroque “[Sweeney Todd](#),” and, most recently, a transfer of “[Merrily We Roll Along](#),” starring Jonathan Groff, Daniel Radcliffe, and Lindsay Mendez. This latest—a revival of Sondheim’s notoriously troubled work from 1981—is a triumph of chemistry and empathy. The show follows a trio of friends in reverse, from lonely middle-aged successes back to the tight-knit strivers they were in their twenties. Franklin Shepard (Groff) has the farthest to fall: he’s the one who abandoned his friends to make his fortune in Hollywood. But [Maria Friedman's](#) production takes seriously the competing desires and compromises that got him there, capturing something real about the way a life sneaks up on you. The rapport between the leads makes the dissolution of their bond as wrenching as it is believable.



Photograph by Emilio Madrid

Friedman had known Sondheim for decades, first as an actor in and then as a director of his shows; another longtime collaborator, Joe Mantello, midwifed “**Here We Are**” ([reviewed this week by Helen Shaw](#)), Sondheim’s final musical, which opened this week, at the Shed, in a state that might generously be called unfinished. The first act follows a group of wealthy friends who are continually stymied in their efforts to eat brunch; the second, which bears almost no trace of Sondheim, finds them all at a meal they’re mysteriously unable to leave. Light satire is supplanted by a descent into Hell: infidelities are uncovered, a man confesses to a murder, and the world outside, it’s implied, has literally ended. None of these plot machinations matter—the characters emerge cheerfully unchanged—and, with no songs to smooth the tonal whiplash or to distract from David Ives’s disjointed book, I started to feel trapped, too. (By the time someone decides a human sacrifice is required to get them out of the room, I was prepared to volunteer.) Seeing this uneven experiment on the heels of “Merrily,” whose problems were solved by years of tinkering, only underscored the loss. I couldn’t help wishing that Sondheim had had more time.

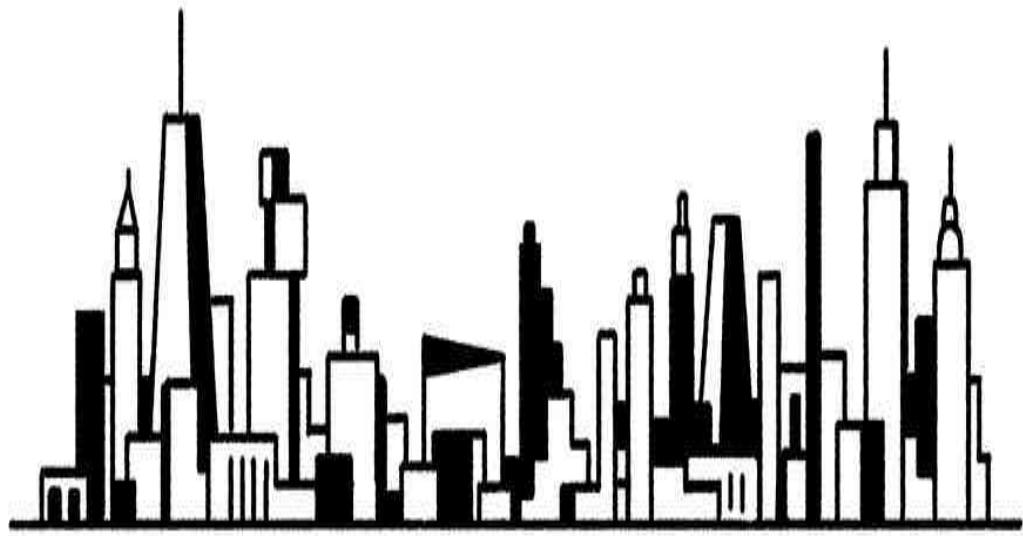
Spotlight



Illustration by Jamiel Law

Neo-Soul

Sampha loves to take his time, making him a special commodity in an age of instant gratification. The English singer-songwriter’s early collaborations—with an impressive list of auteurs, including Beyoncé, Drake, and Frank Ocean—treated his vocals like ornate flourishes to upgrade a song’s architecture. Some of his outsourcing felt like a personal delay: Sampha tinkering with and trying to perfect his own sound. His stunning, experimental début, “Process,” from 2017, rewarded those waiting with a methodical album that blended electronic music with neo-soul as the singer grappled with losing his parents. After another extended hiatus, Sampha returns with the even more deeply considered “Lahai,” finding inspiration in new fatherhood for vital music that ruminates on progress.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*Webster Hall; Nov. 7-9.*)



About Town

Opera

Anthony Davis’s “**X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X**” had its première in 1986, but, despite favorable reviews, it went largely unrevived for decades. Now this poetic musical biography of one of the twentieth century’s great civil-rights orators arrives at the Met for the first time. With a

mix of minimalism, atonality, and jazz, the opera transforms Malcolm's confrontational declamations into something more mesmeric, like incantations, as in a potent Act I aria in which Malcolm (Will Liverman) sings, "You want the truth, but you don't want to know." Robert O'Hara's production, originally staged in Detroit, has stops in Seattle and Chicago—so it seems that companies are finally ready to listen.—*[Oussama Zahr](#)* (*Metropolitan Opera House; select dates Nov. 3-Dec. 2.*)

Dance

With its lists of compliments and come-ons, the Song of Songs is one of the most sensually suggestive parts of the Bible. "Song of Songs," a dance-theatre work by **Pam Tanowitz** and **David Lang**, is ardent but chaste. Lang's compositions analyze fragments of the scriptural text in limpid vocal harmony. Tanowitz's choreography is classical and largely indirect, with touches of folk dance and only hints of erotic pursuit and longing. In its formal beauty, "Song of Songs" resembles her earlier pieces "New Work for Goldberg Variations" and "Four Quartets," though it's a little paler. Here, both music and dance, refined in their repetitions, emphasize choral expression, communal love.—*Brian Seibert (New York City Center; Nov. 9-11.)*

Off Broadway



Photograph by Chelcie Parry

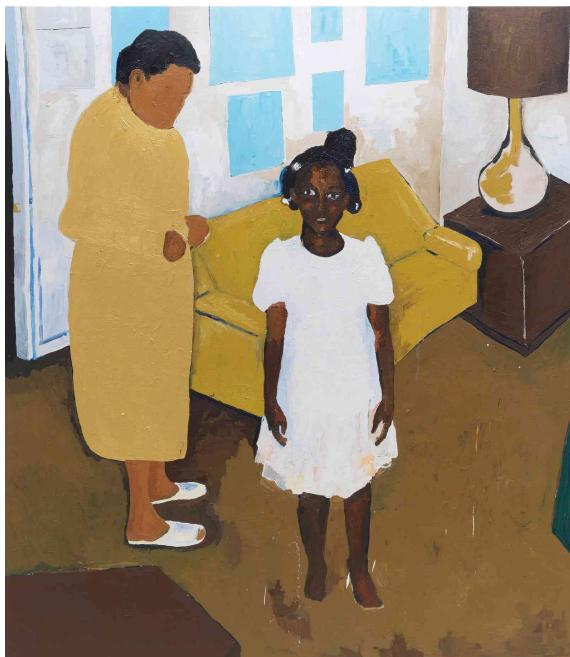
The exquisitely designed world-première production of David Adjmi's "**Stereophonic**" plunks viewers into a nineteen-seventies California recording studio, where, between snorts of cocaine and screaming matches, an up-and-coming rock band grinds away at an album. Seated behind the mixing board, the audience gazes into a glass-walled booth where the band lays down tracks (written—though you'd never guess it from how period-perfect they sound—by Will Butler, formerly of Arcade Fire). Sessions are continually delayed by Peter (Tom Pecinka), the band's perfectionist guitarist, who offers nonstop ideas (sometimes good) and feedback (never good), usually to the lead singer, Diana (Sarah Pidgeon, a standout in a strong ensemble), his long-suffering girlfriend. Adjmi and the director, Daniel Aukin, never soft-pedal the electric drama, but, as with some seventies rock classics, you may wish that it had been trimmed.—[Dan Stahl](#) (*Playwrights Horizons*; through Nov. 26.)

Indie Rock

The Chicago-based indie-rock band **Slow Pulp** exists in a near-constant state of dazed soul-searching. Across its two albums, the group has made a fuzzy kind of dream pop that scratches the brain with its muted textures. Emily Massey, the lead singer, has a gauzy voice that dissolves into quietly lush

guitar beds, and Slow Pulp's clouded sound is mirrored by her lyrics, which navigate self-doubt. The band's 2020 début, "Moveys," proceeds briskly through its songs; this year's follow-up, "Yard," is mellower in its pursuit of introspection and fulfillment. Its closer, "Fishes," marks an important turn in Slow Pulp's evolution: toward greater trust in the self.—*Sheldon Pearce* (*Bowery Ballroom on Nov. 1 and Nov. 4; Le Poisson Rouge on Nov. 2.*)

Art

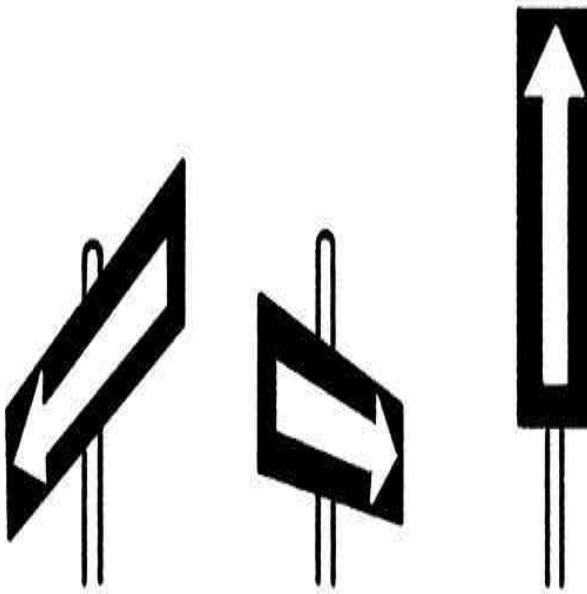


"the dress, ain't me," 2011 Art work © Henry Taylor / Courtesy the artist / Hauser & Wirth; Photograph by Serge Hasenböhler

Henry Taylor, the sixty-five-year-old subject of "**Henry Taylor: B Side**," has lived in Los Angeles for years, and sometimes seems to have painted everyone who's spent any time there at all, from panhandlers and music moguls to his siblings and the Obamas. The richness of Black American community and the indignities of Black American life, in particular the violence of law enforcement, are his recurring themes. There's also an undeniable strain of impishness and amoral weirdness in his images: after a friend of his, the artist Noah Davis, died of cancer, Taylor painted the man as an adolescent (or a man trapped in an adolescent's body). Works like these may strike you as almost impolite—but, then, art has no obligation to behave itself.—*Jackson Arn* ([Reviewed in our issue of 10/30/23.](#)) (*Whitney Museum of American Art; through Jan. 28.*)

Movies

Among the many movies being released soon after their New York Film Festival screenings is one of the most accomplished recent débuts: “**All Dirt Roads Taste of Salt**,” the writer and director Raven Jackson’s first feature. It spans decades in the life of a Black woman named Mackenzie, who grows up in rural Mississippi in the nineteen-sixties and seventies. As a teen-ager, she’s pried away from her home town after her mother’s death; she also has to leave behind the young man she loves, a wrenching separation that leads to passionately dramatic twists and a legacy of secrets. Deftly intertwining time frames and paying rapt attention to faces and landscapes, Jackson—aided by the four actors who portray Mackenzie at different ages, and by the richly textured cinematography of Jomo Fray—unfolds the multigenerational saga with quiet, steadfast exaltation.—*[Richard Brody](#)* (*In limited release Nov. 3.*)



Pick Three

The staff writer [*Inkoo Kang*](#) shares current obsessions:

1. In 1988, an American mathematician named Scott Johnson was found dead, at the age of twenty-seven, off a seaside cliff in Australia. The police quickly closed the case, deeming it the suicide of a gay man amid the *AIDS* crisis, but his family had trouble believing that narrative, especially after the bodies of other gay men turned up at the bottoms of other cliffs. The Hulu docuseries “**Never Let Him Go**” poignantly chronicles the three-decade journey toward justice that the deep-pocketed Johnson family undertook to find Scott’s killer at any price, while asking urgent questions about which types of families get to have their pain and loss recognized by officials.
2. Martin Scorsese adds another American epic to his storied filmography with “**Killers of the Flower Moon**,” based on the *New Yorker* writer David Grann’s 2017 book about the murders of dozens, if not hundreds, of oil-rich Native Americans in Oklahoma—an early-twentieth-century reprise of Manifest Destiny. The stakes and the spectacles are as grand as the evil is chillingly banal.



Photograph by James Stack / Courtesy Channel 4

3. The small but pernicious ways in which a pompous patriarch (played by Simon Bird) allows a local doomsday cult to slowly corrode his marriage and his relationships with his teen-age daughter and young son make up the dryly hilarious core of “**Everyone Else Burns**,” a modest but incisive British comedy that’s now airing on the CW. The characterizations deepen

satisfyingly in the course of the six-part season, as each family member is forced to confront the costs of habitually denying their true desires, especially the young people who are still finding themselves.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [The Best Little Magazine in Texas](#)
- [Bob Newhart and Johnny Carson interrupt each other](#)
- [A jazzy autumn playlist](#)

By Vinson Cunningham

By Zoe Si

By [Helen Rosner](#)

You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. Sign up to receive it in your in-box.

If you've ever been a tourist in Rome, odds are that someone has exhorted you to visit Roscioli. The family of businesses includes the original Antico Forno Roscioli, situated in a two-hundred-year-old bakery; Salumeria Roscioli, a deli-style-grocery-cum-restaurant; Roscioli Caffe e Pasticceria, home to the TikTok-famous *maritzzi* cream bun; and Rimessa Roscioli, a sleek, wine-focussed dining room. If you've made the pilgrimage to any of these locations, you're likely to have been confronted with a horde of other tourists following similar advice. All of you have lined up together, in pursuit of what has been described as the best pizza in Rome, the best salumeria, the best pasta. I've never been to Rome, so I can't weigh in on the worthiness of that endeavor, but now Roscioli has come to New York. There are no lines down the block just yet, though competition for tables on Resy is fierce.

Roscioli

43 MacDougal St.

Tasting menu \$130; à-la-carte dishes \$8-\$60

The New York Roscioli is a collaboration between Alessandro Pepe, the head sommelier of Rimessa Roscioli, and Ariel Arce, a New York City restaurateur who has a knack for serving wine—an act that, even at its most scintillating, is always at least thirty per cent tedious—in a way that feels urgent and alive. At her now-closed SoHo restaurant Niche Niche, which occupied the space that now houses Roscioli, Arce adhered to a “dinner party” format, with diners served nightly set menus of food-and-wine pairings, at strikingly affordable all-inclusive prices, that showed off a particular producer or region or theme. Famous sommeliers would come through to show off rare selections, legendary cellars would be raided for no better reason than it was a Wednesday, and it was New York, and why the hell not. The wine was great, but, more important, it was selected for you, which robbed it of its powers of intimidation—all that was left was pure enjoyment. In 2021, Niche Niche played host to Rimessa Roscioli for a week of Rome-themed suppers, and from there a partnership was born.

The downstairs dining room at the new Roscioli continues that whole wine-soaked-dinner-party vibe. You arrive at your table and are immediately handed a drink, which gives way to a parade of predetermined courses, and a parallel parade of Italian wines to match. (At a hundred and thirty dollars per person, it remains an almost disorientingly good bargain.) On a recent visit, the opening course was panzanella—the tomatoes semi-roasted, to condense their flavor into a reminder of the Dionysian sweetenesses of late summer. It landed on the table along with a heap of mortadella, sliced whisper-thin, and a plate bearing a milky blob of burrata, doused in golden olive oil and studded with more of those concentrated tomatoes. “We fly the burrata in from Puglia,” my server said, as he set down the plate of cheese, and then laughed. “No, seriously, could you imagine the carbon footprint?” The Roman location of Roscioli is a temple to the abundance of Italy; in New York, thanks to import restrictions and logistical impracticalities, the focus has to be on quality rather than provenance. The burrata, warm as breath, bloomed against my knife into a river of sweet cream. The wine, a leaf-yellow Asprinio di Aversa, was frizzy and sharp—like the best pairings, it made everything on the table taste better, brighter, more alive.



Downstairs is a tasting room offering a set menu of dishes and a parade of Italian wines to match.



The shelves upstairs are lined with jarred sauces and vegetables preserved sott'olio.

The rhythm of a restaurant changes when everyone in the dining room is eating the same things simultaneously. The kitchen moves quickly, in a practiced choreography, and there are none of the lags or pauses necessitated by a dozen different orders coming in at different times, as in a standard à-la-carte dining room. It's exhilarating and energetic, at first—a propulsive rat-a-tat of activity as the appetizers are swapped out for an impossibly buttery saffron risotto, then an all-time tremendous rendition of pasta carbonara, in which fried slivers of guanciale crackled like tiny morsels of chicharron in the funky-rich emulsion of the sauce. And then, all at once—maybe it was the mood, maybe it was the wine, maybe the pasta was *so* wonderful that all my circuits blew out—it all seemed like too much, too fast. I craved the pause of a kitchen in the weeds, the welcome breather of a lull between courses. When the next dish came—a meatball (soft, mild) atop a dollop of polenta (mild, soft)—I could hardly bring myself to take a second bite. I wanted to close my eyes. I wanted to hide in the bathroom and do a crossword puzzle on my phone. In a way, it's a testament to the success of the dinner-party model: this is exactly how I feel after about ninety minutes at the table in someone else's home. I wanted to skip dessert completely (tiramisu and a lovely little cannoli, with a perfectly silly glass of Moscato) and slip into the kitchen to eat more carbonara straight from the stove.



The Roman pastas on the menu include a superior version of carbonara.

In early October, Roscioli opened its “upstairs”—a street-level space—where meals adhere to a more familiar rhythm. There’s an à-la-carte menu, and a shop-the-pantry conceit that harks back to the whole dinner-in-a-deli vibe of its Roman progenitor. The walls are lined with shelves bearing packages of dried pasta, bottles of vinegars and oils, and jars of honey and prepared sauces and Italian vegetables preserved *sott’olio*. Customers eating at a long counter in the back face a glass case of cheeses, meats, breads, and condiments. Everything is for sale, grocery store-style; almost everything is also available to order as components of a wide-ranging menu. That molten puddle of honey in which you dipped a piece of salt-flecked focaccia; those oil-cured heads of puntarelle, with their ghostly bitterness and alien curls; even the caciocavallo, a cheese aged in a clay pot that must be dramatically shattered to get to the pleasures within, are all available to take home, as souvenirs, or trophies. Even without a reservation, you can walk in and shop the provisions of the *alimentari* (or order online, with in-person pickup). The contents of Alessandro Pepe’s extensive Italian wine list (from which the downstairs pairings are drawn) are not for sale directly, though you can get a few bottles by joining the Roscioli Wine Club, a work-around for restrictive retail-spirits laws.

That unreal carbonara is available upstairs, thank God, as are other holy Roman pastas. All’amatriciana (with guanciale and tomatoes) is tart and

bright. Cacio e pepe (cheese and pepper) is saved from predictability, and mac-and-cheese adjacency, with the use of springy fresh tagliolini in lieu of more conventional dried noodles. The menu, a wide-ranging tour of Roman classics and modern Romanesque creations, seems designed for grazing: a bite of oxtail-stuffed *supplì* (fried balls of arborio rice—like arancini, except oblong, and from Rome rather than Sicily); a forkful of paper-thin zucchini fried with mint; a bit of cheese; a bit of prosciutto. I was especially enchanted by a tasting of tunas—crudos of belly and loin, paired with two different oil-cured versions, each form of the fish enhancing the preciousness of every other.



Homemade pasta makes a surprising appearance in Roscioli's cacio e pepe.



Even without a reservation, you can walk in and shop for provisions.

There was something ineffable—not quite a *je ne sais quoi*, more like *non so che cosa*—about the offhand elegance of the place. The tables in the upstairs space are awkwardly cramped, and the room is glaringly loud, with conversations seeming to ricochet off the jars on the walls. But it's an energizing, convivial cacophony. Servers hand out samples of interesting sausages, or climb onto a banquette to reach a particular bottle of oil from a high shelf. Dishes like lamb tartare, with crispy fried capers and an earthy artichoke aioli, or fried *baccalà* (fresh cod), over a swirl of ultra-floral red-pepper cream, have the easy, sexy lightness of an unplanned meal eaten late: lunch at four, or dinner at eleven, too many glasses of wine, a taxi home. Is it just like being in Rome? I couldn't tell you. But it's absolutely just like being in New York. ♦

By Helen Rosner

By Helen Rosner

By Jiayang Fan

Mail

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The Nudge

Reading Gideon Lewis-Kraus's article about the allegations surrounding the researchers Dan Ariely and Francesca Gino, I was reminded of the wider culture begetting academic dishonesty ("Big Little Lies," October 9th). The key to a successful academic career in the social sciences has long been to conduct clever, headline-grabbing, laboratory-based experiments. This type of research—especially when its results support popular theories—has near-total dominance in academic publishing, not to mention in tenure and promotion decisions. Unfortunately, as the article points out, it has little relevance to the real world. Until the academy reckons with its overvaluation of celebrity status and its elevation of certain kinds of knowledge production over others, the data-analysis group Data Colada will be plenty busy.

*Elizabeth Soliday
Vancouver, Wash.*

Lewis-Kraus's piece was a brilliant testament to why people like me and many of my colleagues avoid the hypercompetitive world of academic publishing. I did, however, want to quibble with his contention that "one of the confounding things about the social sciences is that observational evidence can produce only correlations." Research based on correlational results from observational data is not unique to the social sciences. In fact, many of the physical sciences—such as astronomy and particle physics—rely on it as well, and can also suffer from replication difficulties. Observation and description are the bases of all scientific inquiry; they are, for example, how we know that the Earth orbits the sun and that smoking causes cancer in humans.

*Lorin Mueller
Arlington, Va.*

As the editor of a scientific journal, I was mortified to read the claims laid out in Lewis-Kraus's article. But readers should know that some areas of the behavioral and cognitive sciences have been instituting concrete reforms to make our research as transparent as possible. For example, the *Journal of Memory & Language*, which I edit, requires that both raw data and analysis

code be made publicly available at the time that a manuscript is submitted, and remain available in perpetuity. We encourage replication studies, and last year devoted an entire special issue to evaluating the replicability of influential findings in the areas we cover. Other journals in cognitive science have moved in the same direction in recent years.

*Adrian Staub
Leeds, Mass.*

Woman of Science?

Discussing C. E. McGill's "Our Hideous Progeny," Ruth Franklin notes that the novel's protagonist, a British woman interested in fossils, feels out of place because her "world has no language for a female scientist" (Books, October 9th). A word did exist, however, to describe a woman with an interest in fossils, or chemistry, or astronomy. In 1834, William Whewell, of Cambridge University, wrote about Mary Somerville, a Scottish-born researcher who brought together mathematics, astronomy, geology, chemistry, and physics into texts that became the foundation of the university's science curriculum, and he coined the word "scientist" to refer to a cultivator of science in general. Whewell noted that the phrase "man of science" seemed inappropriate in Somerville's case, not only because she was a woman but because her work was interdisciplinary in nature. Whewell wanted a word that actively celebrated what he described as "the peculiar illumination of the female mind"—the ability to synthesize separate fields into a single discipline.

*Henry H. Wortis
Cambridge, Mass.*

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By Rebecca Mead

By Anthony Lane

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