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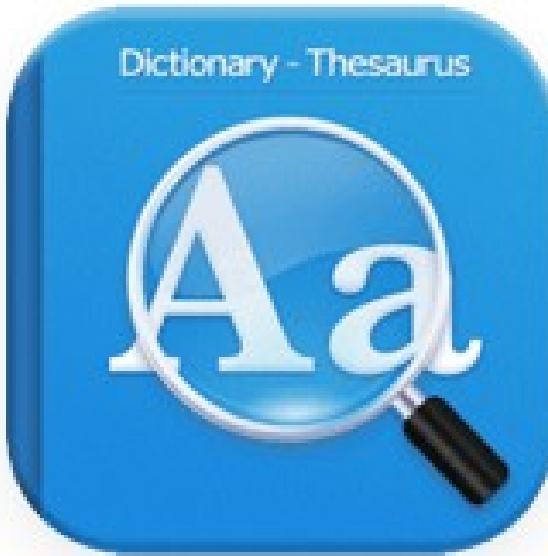
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Goings On

- [The Brooklyn Museum Celebrates Two Hundred Years](#)
- [A Tiny Brooklyn Restaurant with Big \(and Bewitching\) Ideas About Dinner](#)

Goings On

The Brooklyn Museum Celebrates Two Hundred Years

Also: The new piano bar So and So's; Robert Downey, Jr., in "McNeal"; the Philly soul singer Bilal; and more.

October 04, 2024



Jackson Arn

Art critic

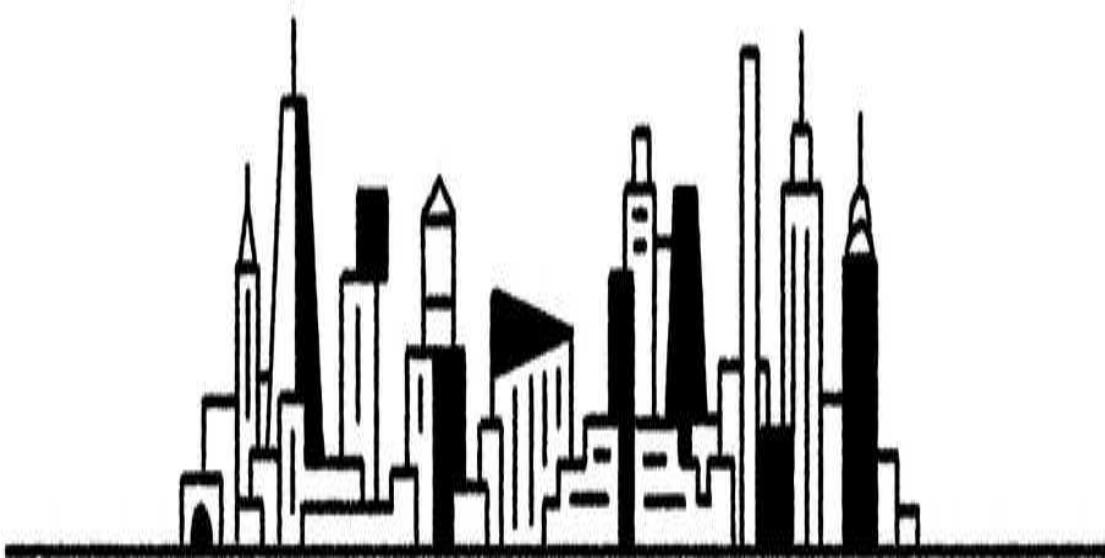


Two hundred years ago, Brooklyn's population was somewhere around ten thousand, double what it had been a generation earlier but still not enough to sell out a show at Barclays Center. The Brooklyn Bridge didn't exist. Nor did *BAM*, Prospect Park, Grand Army Plaza, or the Coney Island Cyclone. In a winter landscape painted by Francis Guy around this time, the territory has more in common with a medieval village than with the place it's about to become.

The Brooklyn Museum, where that art work and around a hundred and forty thousand others now reside, is one of the few institutions to have survived Brooklyn's journey from village to metropolis. Today, it is a lovely Frankenstein's monster of different eras and aesthetics, but in 1824 it was a newly incorporated public library, the first free, circulating one that the borough ever had. Its earliest art exhibitions date back to the eighteen-forties, though the west wing, designed by McKim, Mead & White, wasn't finished until 1897, less than a year before the formation of the modern City of New York. In 2004, the main entrance was replaced with a shiny glass-and-metal lobby that, today, gushes out from the Beaux-Arts slab above it like cream cheese from a bagel.

This month, the Brooklyn Museum celebrates its bicentennial with "**The Brooklyn Artists Exhibition**" (through Jan. 26), a group show featuring the

installations, drawings, paintings, sculptures, videos, and collages of some two hundred artists. The selection committee, which includes the likes of Mickalene Thomas and Jeffrey Gibson, has kept its criteria nicely indifferent to credentials: you must have lived or maintained a studio in Brooklyn at some time in the past five years, and you must be good. I wasn't familiar with the work of Rodney Ewing, but now that I've had the sinister pleasure of "Bad Blood," I will be looking for more. Here's to him, and many others, and to the institution giving them a boost.



About Town

Broadway

In "**McNeal**," Ayad Akhtar's nerveless new drama about a morally suspect author, the titular character (Robert Downey, Jr.) uses ChatGPT to generate a novel. It's an interesting premise, but McNeal, mixing booze with medication, seems to be suffering hallucinations, a dramaturgical dodge that permits a kind of arid, reality-be-damned unbelievability. McNeal wins a Nobel Prize, derides his own sexually abused son—a plot point that's batted around as idly as a cat toy—and asks a *Times* reporter if she's a diversity

hire. She then describes him, approvingly, as “ruthless with the truth.” C’mモン。Such glib slackness is occasionally counterbalanced by tension in the director Bartlett Sher’s production: the set glows with Jake Barton’s iPhone-on-acid projections, and Downey, an opaque presence, manifests a watchful, syncopated rigidity.—[Helen Shaw](#) (*Lincoln Center Theatre; through Nov. 24.*)

Dance

The British hip-hop company **Far from the Norm**, led by Botis Seva, made its name with “BLKDOG,” a dark and imagistic work that disturbingly mingles associations of childhood with intimations of violence and abuse. Now the troupe makes its U.S. début with that piece, which resembles flashes in the mind of a patient during a therapy session, with buried trauma fitfully surfacing. The movement vocabulary—rooted in popping, locking, and krump—expands into novel images, clear in form but ambiguous in meaning and emotional impact. The dancers, shuddering and collapsing and beetling around, might be children, or a child’s worst nightmare.—[Brian Seibert](#) (*Joyce Theatre; Oct. 9-13.*)

Off Broadway



James Ijames has three genres in mind for “**Good Bones**,” directed by Saheem Ali. First, it’s a haunted-house thriller: Aisha (Susan Kelechi Watson) walks around her new home—a restored manse shrouded in construction plastic—disturbed by unearthly laughter. Second, it’s a relationship drama: Aisha flirts with her contractor, Earl (Khris Davis), and quarrels with her wealthy husband, Travis (Mamoudou Athie). Last, it’s a play of ideas, in which Earl and Aisha argue about gentrification. Strangely, Ijames toggles among genres, rather than blending them, so a revelation in one mode (Aisha desires Earl, say) has no impact on the next. The handsome set, designed by Maruti Evans, cannot disguise the fact that significant renovation is still necessary.—H.S. (*Public Theatre; through Oct. 27.*)

Classical

For Mahler, to write a symphony was to “construct a world.” His Third Symphony, the longest of nine completed, is not only its own world but an examination of creation itself. The piece flirts with themes of nature—bacchanalian horns, rumbles of summer thunder, floral harp flourishes—but extends past the physical. Existential questions resound with a setting from Nietzsche’s “Thus Spoke Zarathustra” and musings on angels, love, and the cyclical nature of life. **The Philadelphia Orchestra** returns to Carnegie for this

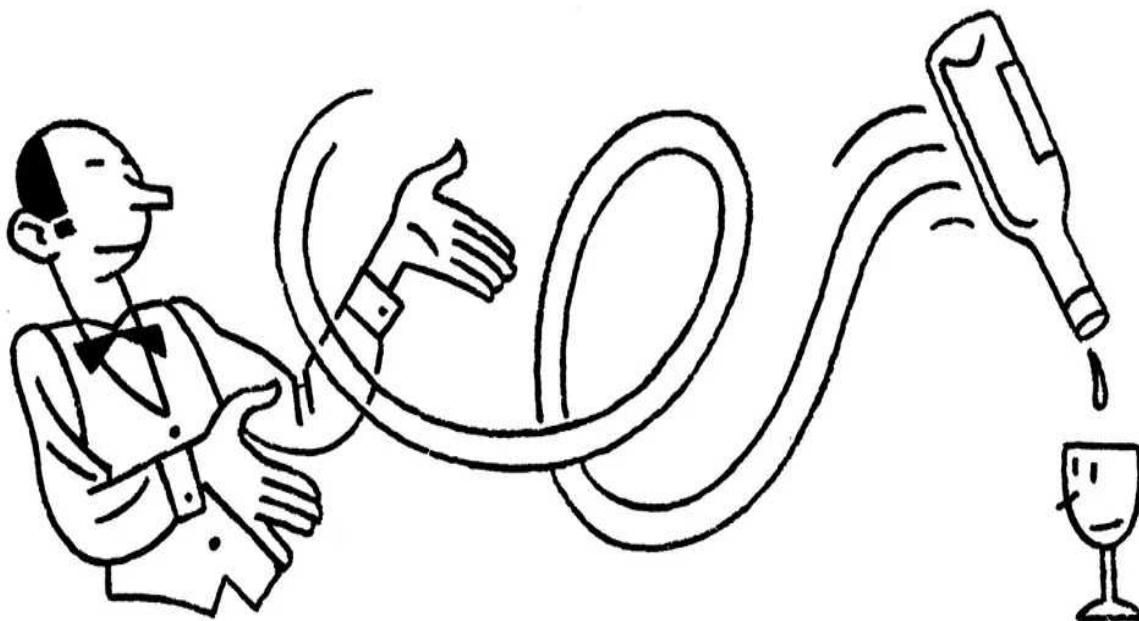
meta masterpiece. Yannick Nézet-Séguin conducts, with vocals from the mezzo-soprano Joyce DiDonato and members of three Philadelphian choirs: the Girls Choir, the Boys Choir, and the Symphonic Choir. Audience members will sit, without intermission, for more than an hour and a half. It'll likely still feel too short.—*Jane Bua (Carnegie Hall; Oct. 15.)*

Movies



The letter in the title of Charles Belmont and Marielle Issartel's 1973 documentary, "**Stories of A**," stands for *avortement*, the French word for abortion, which was then illegal in France. The film—which was then also banned in France—is an exploration of activism on behalf of the procedure's legalization. Clandestine groups of medical volunteers performed abortions nonetheless, and some worked with the filmmakers to publicize their activities—as in a scene of a woman receiving an abortion in an apartment. Belmont and Issartel interview women who were planning to terminate pregnancies or were unable to do so, and film contentious meetings in which activists debate strategies. Above all, the filmmakers put abortion into the wider context of social and economic change—of women's control over not just their bodies but their lives.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on OVID.tv.)*

In the late nineties, the Philly vocalist **Bilal** was pulled into the orbit of the neo-soul collective the Soulquarians, leaving the New School's jazz conservatory to pursue a major-label career under the stewardship of Spin Doctors' Aaron Comess. Bilal's début LP, "1st Born Second" (2001), an overlooked classic in modern R. & B., bridged hip-hop and blues with assists from Dr. Dre, J Dilla, and Raphael Saadiq; its equally hyped follow-up, the funk-fusionist fever dream "Love for Sale," didn't have a proper release, but leaked to a cult following in 2006. Ever the experimentalist, the singer has remained a groundbreaker in the margins, and his atmospheric new album, "Adjust Brightness," his first in eight years, once again puts his nasally yowl at the forefront of soul music's endless expansion.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*Music Hall of Williamsburg; Oct. 10.*)



Bar Tab

[Rachel Syme](#) lounges around a new piano bar.



The best thing a piano bar can be is well worn. The room should feel creaky, sticky with spilled vodka stingers; the walls should thrum with the ghosts of chanteuses past. Still, someone has to open new cabaret clubs if we are to ever have old ones, and the owners of **So & So's**, tucked behind a plain blue door on West Fifty-second Street—with an additional entrance in the Romer hotel lobby—have done just that. The room was designed as a spot for “show people” to gather, to listen to and belt out tunes; it’s a little bit 54 Below, a little bit Marie’s Crisis, a little bit cheesy cruise-ship bar. (The venue books Broadway performers and jazz trios to keep the keys tinkling.) The look is seventies louche, with velvet banquettes and swirly carpeting, the drink menu eccentric. (One twist on a Martini features blood-red beet juice.) The cocktail list was created by Phil Collins, a former backup dancer for Rihanna and Lady Gaga who is now charging ahead with a second career in mixology; one standout drink is the Bodega Cat, an opaque tequila concoction made with coconut milk, cherry, and cinnamon which comes in a classic “We Are Happy to Serve You” coffee cup. It’s gimmicky and oversweet, but it does conjure olde Manhattan. When I visited, one recent Friday night, an affable lounge singer, Jacob Khalil, plunked out sunny pop covers—“. . . Baby One More Time,” “Wonderwall”—on an upright piano. A woman called out for a song about the city; she had moved “upstate” to Westchester, she said, and was feeling homesick. Khalil launched into Billy

Joel's "New York State of Mind," and, perhaps despite themselves, everyone sang along, becoming, at least for a song, old friends in a new place.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Selena Gomez interviews Mariska Hargitay](#)
- [The world's favorite raccoon](#)
- [Sally Rooney's hungry characters](#)

An earlier version of this article misstated a detail of the 2004 renovation to the Brooklyn Museum's main lobby entrance.

The Food Scene

A Tiny Brooklyn Restaurant with Big (and Bewitching) Ideas About Dinner

Cafe Kestrel, in Red Hook, offers cooking that is highly idiosyncratic but not confrontational, from applesauce sundaes to Sunday-night curry.

By Helen Rosner

September 29, 2024



I knew I was going to be in for something special at Cafe Kestrel, a tiny slip of a restaurant that opened in Red Hook at the end of June, when I noticed a mysterious quotation on the online menu, next to a somewhat Gothic architectural sketch of churches: “Silflay hraka, u embleer rah.” If you happen to have read the 1972 novel “[Watership Down](#),” a brutal epic about warring tribes of rabbits written by the British author Richard Adams, as I quite coincidentally had recently done, you might recognize the quote as Lapine, a language Adams invented for his rabbit society, whose vocabulary and grammar an attentive reader begins to pick up as the story progresses. The sentence on Cafe Kestrel’s menu is the battle cry of the heroic rabbit Bigwig, shouted in righteous rage at the leader of the enemy tribe of rabbits,

at the acme of the story's great climactic battle. It means, roughly, "Eat shit, you fox-stinking king."

Cafe Kestrel is housed in a former catering storefront on one of Red Hook's more commercial drags—which, given the peninsular Brooklyn neighborhood's relative dearth of public-transit, is still pretty quiet and laid-back. The restaurant belongs to the chef Dennis Spina, formerly of the Metrograph Commissary and before that the quirky River Styx, in partnership with Amanda McMillan, a general manager at [The Four Horsemen](#), in Williamsburg, who handles business operations. The dining room is small by any standard; it's white-walled and softly lit, with an earnest, New England-ish chair rail running the perimeter, above which hangs an idiosyncratic hodgepodge of fine art, knickknacks, and a framed B. Kliban cat poster. (McMillan told me that she and Spina named the restaurant after "Kes," a beautiful and horribly depressing 1969 film about a working-class English boy who adopts a fledgling kestrel and develops an interest in falconry.) Even when full of people and furniture, the space feels austere, an effect enhanced by the servers' uniform of tidy white button-up smocks. There are just six tables inside, plus one out on the sidewalk, and four barstools at a desk-size bar. There's no host or host stand, and dinner at Cafe Kestrel is the sort of meal a person is inclined to linger over, so even if you're on time for your reservation you'll probably spend a few minutes hovering on the sidewalk or sitting on the brightly painted bench outside the closed safety gate of the children's art studio next door.





Once you're tucked into your table, sipping a nice glass of pink wine or a vermouth-forward cocktail, dinner unfolds with the easy, off-the-cuff elegance of a weeknight dinner party. A golden wedge of farinata, a sort of savory chickpea-flour pancake, arrives buried under a riot of marinated whole olives and punchy cloves of garlic; a creamy slice of Caerphilly cheese is plated next to a thick, bloody-magenta blob of rose-petal jam and a few store-bought crackers. (You might, as I did, begin to think wistfully of Prune, the legendary, now-closed restaurant, where the chef Gabrielle Hamilton famously served sardines and mustard with Triscuits.) An order of chilled shrimp consists of two small bowls, one bearing the crustaceans, peeled and plump, and the other, scoops of mayonnaise and pickle relish side by side—an offhand yin-yang of fridge-door condiments that, on a white tablecloth, in candlelight, seems almost unfathomably cool. We're fully in Hamilton territory now: this is the sort of dish that throws out any normative notions of “fancy” or “restaurant food”; it's the kind of confident swing that only works if what lands on the table is absolutely right and true. Say what you want about the merits of cocktail sauce, or a spritz of lemon; I now believe that nothing brings out the sweetness and salinity of a big, beautiful, cold shrimp quite like the tartar-sauce-ish combo of mayonnaise and pickle relish, and it's awfully exciting to realize you've found a chef who understands that.

Spina's menu, over all, evokes both a relaxed English modernism (with notes of the London gems Cafe Deco and Rochelle Canteen) and the earnest global-pantry bohemia of potluck night in the comp-lit department. A slice of scallop terrine, velvet-sweet meat loosely bound with chunks of potato in a gently briny aspic, is dolloped with crème fraîche and draped in a cilantro salsa verde. A standout entrée of boneless chicken cutlet brings together briny capers, sweet and deep roasted lemon, an orange confetti of tender cooked carrots, and sticky smeared dates, creating something that feels like a hybrid of Italian piccata and Moroccan tagine. A beef carpaccio features the edges of the tender meat seared tataki-style and an aromatic accompaniment of green leeks and toasty pine nuts; it's buried under a crispy pile of what the menu called *pommes gaufrette*, but which I, Fanny Brice-ishly, consider to be waffle-cut potato chips. The kitchen makes striking use of herbs, especially (and somewhat surprisingly) those of the dried variety. An appetizer of petal-pink, barely cooked yellowfin tuna, strewn with pickled onions and slivers of cucumber, was dusted with dried oregano, sweet and incense-like. A composed salad of crisp green beans, thinly sliced fennel, and walnuts was made strange and almost wondrous with the pine-needle greenness of dried sage. On one of my visits, I spotted another table rejoicing over the grilled steak of the day, a New York strip piled with hunks of raw, juicy heirloom tomatoes, served with crispy cubes of potato pavé, each intricately layered like an ultra-fine gratin. When I ordered the steak myself, a few days later, Spina had dropped the tomato in favor of gorgeous marinated sweet peppers, including a velvety, lipstick-red Jimmy Nardello. (It's currently served with braised Romano beans, though by the time you read this it's likely to be something else entirely.) The meat was rubbed down with a seasoning blend that made judicious, almost artistic use of caraway seed, whose dark, licorice-tinged intensity lingered like the drone note of a bagpipe.

Helen, Help Me!

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

Despite the forcefulness of that quote on the menu, Cafe Kestrel isn't rough or confrontational, except in its striking sense of specificity. Spina, who has a background in fine arts, seems to be cooking for his own enjoyment, rather than trying to pander to yours and mine. In a city of largely interchangeable

Little Gem salads and cacio-e-pepe carbs, it's a pleasure to encounter an utterly self-assured, highly personal point of view. The idiosyncratic charm of the place is enough to smooth out any of the rough spots (like a "v. cold Martini" that was, more than once, not v. cold at all). There's a weekly special of vegetable curry on Sunday nights; when I went, it was a pleasingly unpretentious zucchini mush that a server described as "sort of Sri Lankan." A somewhat incongruous side order of macaroni and cheese was excellent, made with enormous, curvaceous noodles liberally bathed in bechamel. The signature dessert, on a brief sweets menu featuring nothing but hits, is a towering sundae of vanilla ice cream and applesauce under a mountain of whipped cream, inspired by an East German specialty of dubiously Swedish origin. On each of my visits, I had a moment of feeling overjoyed by my meal, by the room, by the tactile sense that this was food cooked by a person who had big, bewitching ideas about dinner and how to serve it. In the mood for soup? Spina only makes it, per the menu, "when it's storming." ♦

The Talk of the Town

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- [Etiquette Makes Kate McKinnon Sad](#)
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- [A Play About a Bar, on a Barge Next to the Bar](#)

Comment

Trump's Dangerous Immigration Obsession

The daily stream of racism and mendacity has had a numbing effect. But the question of what Trump might actually do is a prospect that voters cannot afford to ignore.

By Jonathan Blitzer

October 07, 2024



Donald Trump's most outrageous pronouncements on immigration are rarely shocking for long; they're usually eclipsed within days, if not hours, by even more grotesque claims. Last year, in what should have been an enduring political scandal, Trump blamed immigrants for "poisoning the blood of our country." He has repeated his solution—mass deportation—so often that it's become a campaign slogan. In a national Scripps News/Ipsos poll last month, fifty-four per cent of those asked agreed, either "strongly" or "somewhat," with Trump's call, including a quarter of Democrats. Maybe people can't imagine what an action like that would entail; or, worse, maybe they can.

Either way, the acceptance of such hostile thinking is, at least in part, a function of how relentlessly Trump and his running mate, J. D. Vance, lay all America's problems at immigrants' feet. Mass deportation isn't just their immigration platform; it's their response to questions about affordable housing, the economy, and inflation. Last month, Trump said of undocumented immigrants that "getting them out will be a bloody story." There was hardly time to parse his meaning before he was standing on a Presidential-debate stage, in Philadelphia, lying about Haitians in Springfield, Ohio. Those remarks, compounded by Vance, were followed by a period of local terror that has included bomb scares, classroom evacuations, and pleas for sanity from the state's Republican governor. All the while, Trump continued to fulminate on the stump. "These migrants," he said at a rally in Wisconsin, "are stone-cold killers. They'll walk into your kitchen, they'll cut your throat." Last Thursday, in Michigan, he claimed that the government wasn't providing relief after Hurricane Helene, because Kamala Harris and the Democrats "stole the *fema* money" so that they "could give it to their illegal immigrants that they want to have vote for them."

The daily stream of racism and mendacity has had a numbing effect. What *hasn't* Trump said at this point? But the question of what he might actually do, should he win, is a prospect that voters cannot afford to ignore. Trump's top immigration adviser, Stephen Miller, has announced that, if the former President is reelected, the government will deport a million people a year. Given the expense and the bureaucratic complexity alone, this projection appears unrealistic, yet that scarcely makes it less dangerous.

Last summer, Jason Houser, who served as a senior official at Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the Biden Administration, tried to map out what, logically, a mass-deportation program might look like. His main focus was on the early days, when Trump wouldn't have nearly enough detention space to hold those apprehended in nationwide sweeps. While the Administration ramped up its capabilities, it could compensate by instilling fear. If enough people were intimidated, some might feel that they had no choice but to leave the country. The guiding idea, as Houser saw it, would be to weaponize ICE against families in order to inflict maximum pain in the most conspicuous way. "This won't just be something at the border," he

said. “It’ll be boys and girls in your kid’s classes at school who just stop showing up.”

There are more than eleven million undocumented immigrants living in the United States, and government agents have enormous latitude in whom they decide to arrest. Current policy discourages *ICE* from apprehending anyone at hospitals, schools, or places of worship. As a top adviser at the White House during Trump’s Presidency, Miller wanted *ICE*, in the words of someone present at a meeting with him, “to pull children out of school.” Career officials at the Department of Homeland Security opposed Miller’s plans, but Trump has since vowed to rid the government of such people in a second term. Enforcement would be indiscriminate and unpredictable, turning anyone who is undocumented into a potential target.

In the final years of the Obama Presidency, immigration authorities developed a policing strategy designed to spare from arrest millions of undocumented immigrants who hadn’t been convicted of crimes. When Trump took office, in 2017, he immediately ended that approach. The primary reason that there weren’t more deportations was the considerable resistance of local and state officials to coöperate with *ICE*. Joe Biden revived the Obama-era strategy. But, if Trump gets back into the White House, it’s reasonable to expect that he will launch raids in Democratic cities and penalize recalcitrant jurisdictions by cutting off federal funds.

Of all the repugnant statements that Trump and his allies have made, the most revealing may have come from Vance. At a campaign event in North Carolina, he explained why he kept referring to Haitians in Springfield as “illegal” when, in fact, they are here legally, as a result of two federal policies that have been upheld in court, despite Republican efforts to dismantle them. “If Kamala Harris waves the wand illegally and says these people are now here legally, I’m still going to call them an illegal alien,” Vance said. “An illegal action from Kamala Harris does not make an alien legal.”

By that logic, existing legal protections and court judgments would be moot. After the Trump Administration separated some five thousand children from their parents at the border, in 2017 and 2018, a federal judge ordered the government to reunite them, and forbade further separations for the next

eight years as part of a federal settlement signed in December. If reëlected, will Trump simply ignore that? Hundreds of parents who were reunited with their children under the court order, but still lack permanent status, might well be deported.

They're just one group among many that are especially vulnerable. Since Biden has been in office, the federal government has allowed more than a million people fleeing persecution and extreme hardship to enter the country legally, under an executive power known as parole, including seventy-seven thousand Afghans and more than five hundred thousand Venezuelans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, and Cubans. Trump has already said that he'd revoke their status and that they should "get ready to leave." There are nearly a million other people who have Temporary Protected Status, which allows them to work legally while renewing their papers every eighteen months; a large share of them have lived in the U.S. for more than two decades. Several hundred thousand immigrants who came here as children also have a provisional legal status: Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or *DACA*.

What all these individuals have in common is that they willingly shared information with the U.S. government. Because of the deadlock in Congress, there's nothing they can do to gain permanent status, so, when Obama and Biden created a legal opportunity, they took it. The outcome of the election may now determine whether such trust in the Presidency was misplaced. ♦

Do's and Don'ts Dept.

Etiquette Makes Kate McKinnon Sad

Over high tea, the former “S.N.L.” star puzzles over whether good manners are antithetical to humor.

By Emma Allen

October 07, 2024



On a recent afternoon, Mariah Grumet, an etiquette coach, and Kate McKinnon, the “S.N.L.” alum and actress (hi, Weird Barbie!)—whose middlegrade novel, “The Millicent Quibb School of Etiquette for Young Ladies of Mad Science,” came out last week—convened at Tea & Sympathy, in the Village, to partake of a little of both.

“I truly am a judgment-free zone,” Grumet, who is twenty-seven and wore a navy dress and a tennis bracelet, reassured a skeptical-looking McKinnon, forty, who had on Converse and lugged an L. L. Bean backpack. “What I’m so passionate about doing is making etiquette really modern and approachable.”

In McKinnon's book, three orphaned sisters ("gnarly nerds") get kicked out of Mrs. Wintermacher's School of Etiquette for Girls (a "factory of insidious conformism"), and find themselves instead under the tutelage of the local mad scientist. Their expulsion stems from not being able to sit correctly on a velvet fainting couch.

"Well, of course your posture would be very important," Grumet advised, as McKinnon slouched. "We want to put our bottoms slightly forward."

"Does good posture actually help your back stay functional throughout . . . the *life span*?" McKinnon asked, conspiratorially. "Or is that just *them* trying to get to us?" She poured water for Grumet, then for herself, and chugged.

"Yes, it helps the oxygen get to our brains, helps us digest our food," Grumet said. "It's a nice way to trick our audience into thinking we're a little bit more self-assured."

"These are fake glasses," McKinnon revealed, removing tortoiseshell frames. "If I want to feel like I look like I have my shit together, then I wear these." She has five pairs, all from acting gigs. She went on, "I'm going to tell you the truth—etiquette makes me sad. It hurts my heart that there is a way you're supposed to do something and, if you don't do it that way, people think you're worthless."

"What if you looked at it not necessarily as a rule book but more as a road map, to show others kindness and respect?" Grumet countered.

"Do you see a difference between etiquette and warmth? I love warmth and holding people," McKinnon said, touching Grumet's elbow, "and oversharing. And I think of that as separate from etiquette, which makes me think of 1890 and which fork you're using."

"Shall we chat napkins?" Grumet asked. "Do you know the difference in when you put your napkin on your lap when you're at a restaurant versus someone's home?"

"Christ, no," McKinnon said.

“So, at a restaurant, we put it on our lap as soon as we sit down. It’s a way to signal to our servers that they can approach the table,” Grumet explained. “At someone’s home, we wait until the host or hostess puts their napkin on their lap, as a way to show respect.”

“In *my* home, growing up, we had a rule that no one could take a bite of anything until my mother, who had prepared the meal, was seated,” McKinnon said. “And then we held hands and said, ‘Happy dinner.’”

A waitress brought a pot of Earl Grey. McKinnon asked, “Am I to pour your tea? Or would that be weird?”

Debate resumed. “The thing that rubs me wrong about etiquette is, like, it’s sort of antithetical to humor,” McKinnon posited. (In her book, the evil Mrs. Wintermacher tells her pupils that “humor is for the ugly.”) “As I was coming here today, I thought, I’m going to be judged.”

“I understand,” Grumet said. “A lot of people have etiquette trauma from the way that they grew up.”

“I grew up in a real loosey-goosey household,” McKinnon said. “My mom”—a social worker—“upon my menarche, wanted to throw me a party where we would dance around under the moon and she would make me a crown of tampons.” She added, “To me, the essence of humor is in the juxtaposition between what is and what ought to be, and, if etiquette is what ought to be, then I always wanted to provide a sense of what is.”

“But, if you look at it as using humor to make people feel valued in your presence, don’t you think that’s its *own* type of etiquette?” Grumet asked. “Because we never know what we inspire in others by showing up as ourselves.”

McKinnon took Grumet’s hand and kissed it, murmuring, “You’ve turned me.” She let go. Then she burped. “I’ve always liked to create what I think of as closeness by demonstrating my own willingness to humiliate myself or be very open about the fact that I don’t feel like I have anything together. Even though, technically, I do!”

“You do!” Grumet exclaimed.

McKinnon proceeded to balance a spoon on her nose. “How bad is this?” she asked. “Because I *can’t not*.”

“Would you feel accomplished if I did it, too?” Grumet said.

“Then I will have turned *you*,” McKinnon replied. Grumet struggled.

“Did you spit on your nose?” McKinnon asked. Spit was successfully applied, and class was dismissed. ♦

Little Weasels Dept.

Can America Handle a Petless Presidency?

In an election season dominated by dead dogs, childless cat ladies, pets for dinner, and dumped bear cubs, the ferret lobby has some advice.

By Zach Helfand

October 07, 2024



It's a strange relief that this Presidential election is the first in American history without a pet owner as a major-party candidate. Every week, it seems, comes a disturbing animal story: childless cat ladies, Biden's biting dog, the eating-the-cats-and-the-dogs hoax. Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., endured two animal-related scandals—his dumping of a dead bear cub in Central Park and his chainsaw mutilation of a whale carcass, whose decapitated head he strapped atop his minivan. ("Every time we accelerated on the highway, whale juice would pour into the windows of the car," his daughter Kathleen recalled.) And this was the animal-rights candidate. Kristi Noem, formerly Trump's Vice-Presidential front-runner, wrote proudly about shooting her troublemaking dog Cricket. The *Guardian* recently reported that the Project

2025 architect, Kevin Roberts, had bragged to colleagues about bludgeoning a neighbor's dog to death with a shovel. (Roberts denied the incident.)

Given these allies, it's not surprising that Trump isn't an animal guy, though the language of the "Access Hollywood" tape—"moved on her like a bitch," "grab them by the pussy"—could suggest a latent fixation with dogs and cats. Trump has described antagonists sweating like a dog, choking like a dog, getting fired like a dog, getting thrown off ABC like a dog, getting thrown off "The View" like a dog, begging for money like a dog, lying like a dog, dying like a dog, and getting dumped like a dog. "Robert Pattinson should not take back Kristen Stewart," he once advised. "She cheated on him like a dog & will do it again—just watch."

During his Presidency, Trump said of dogs, "I wouldn't mind having one, honestly, but I don't have any time." One can imagine that a simpering creature that submits to an alpha would hold some Ted Cruz-esque appeal for Trump. Then again, dogs can sense fear. Also: germs. "Donald was not a dog fan," Ivana Trump wrote in her memoir. Her black poodle Chappy barked incessantly at him. As for cats, Trump has had almost nothing to say about them, though his Presidential coterie reportedly included an aide who followed him around with soothing music to prevent temper tantrums: "Memory," from the musical "Cats."

A lot can be learned about a political era from the way it treats its household animals. Only three Presidents failed to keep pets; two of them were impeached. Aside from Trump, every President since Reconstruction has had one. Ronald Reagan gave his Cavalier King Charles spaniel Rex a doghouse decorated with framed portraits of him and Nancy, in a ceremony presided over by Zsa Zsa Gabor and her dog Macho. George W. Bush's dogs Barney and Spot came to his aid when he choked on a pretzel. These were relatively bipartisan eras. The time of the Tea Party, whose symbol was a snake, begat stories of Mitt Romney strapping the family dog Seamus to the roof of his car, and an adolescent Obama sampling dog meat while living in Indonesia.



CLAIRE REALIZED AT ONCE THAT IT WAS THE BIGGEST MISTAKE OF HER LIFE TO HAVE ASKED EARL TO EXPLAIN THE BALK RULE.

Almost two-thirds of Americans own a pet. In a poll last year, given the choice to save their drowning pet or a drowning human, respondents were just about evenly split. It's a curious failure that animal groups haven't harnessed the power of this potential voting bloc. But there have been a few victories. When Rudy Giuliani was mayor, he prohibited ferret ownership and infamously berated David Guthartz, the executive president of New York Ferret's Rights Advocacy, who'd called in to his radio show to protest the ban. "There is something deranged about you," Giuliani said. "This excessive concern with little weasels is a sickness."

"As I understand it, when he decided to run for President, in 2008, that's the only thing the press wanted to talk to him about," Guthartz said of Giuliani recently, when reached by phone. He was feeding his three ferrets, Butch Cassidy Thief of Hearts III, Mademoiselle Katie Mini Mitts, and Pure White as the Driven Snow Ferret. "That's why he dropped out."

Thanks to Guthartz's pressure campaign, the ban is virtually unenforced, and, Guthartz said, it's unenforceable: "They bother you because you have a ferret? That's harassment. They can be arrested." His next target? Airlines. "None of them are allowing the ferrets to be in the cabin," he said. "A lot of them are saying, 'Oh, it's a rat.' Ferrets are *not* a member of the Rodentia order. They're a much higher order—nothing against rats."

Guthartz suggested that animal-rights groups could learn from the ferrets' successes. "If Trump had mentioned ferrets along with the eating of the dogs and cats, yeah, there would've been a definite uproar," he said. "The thing you have to understand for the dog groups is you have the different breeds, so there's no coördination there, which is a problem. In the bird community, I don't know of anybody who's outspoken for the parrots and whatnot. I don't know anybody who's outspoken in regards to reptiles and amphibians. You have various exotics out there—nobody's stepping up. So I have to open my mouth for everybody." ♦

Being There

Bob Marley's Accidental Photographer

Lee Jaffe, the musician's friend, fixer, and collaborator, recalls falling in with the Wailers and compiling his new book, "Hit Me with Music."

By Nick Paumgarten

October 07, 2024



Maybe you've seen the shot, from 1971, of the photographer Gordon Matta-Clark and a few friends—including the composers Philip Glass and Dickie Landry, with a carving knife—arrayed around a fire pit, under the Brooklyn Bridge, with a whole pig roasting on a spit. This was art, as well as nourishment and, in retrospect, an apt representation of a more feral time. At looker's left, in the photo, is a long-haired conceptual artist from the Bronx named Lee Jaffe, then twenty-three, a Lower East Side loft mate of Matta-Clark's. Jaffe made a film of the stunt, called "Pig Roast." Soon, Clark wrote Jaffe a letter suggesting that Jaffe, in a crowning gesture of artistic self-sacrifice, offer up his own body to be eaten in a restaurant.

A couple of years later, Jaffe was in a midtown hotel room with his friend Jim Capaldi, of the band Traffic, when he was introduced to a quiet but

assured Jamaican named Bob Marley. Marley had a cassette with him of his forthcoming album with the Wailers, called “Catch a Fire.” The music bowled Jaffe over. He started hanging out with Marley, helping him to procure equipment, and ganja, for an American tour.



Marley invited Jaffe to Jamaica, and he ended up living with Marley and the Wailers at their house in Kingston for the next three years, serving as road manager, booking agent, P.R. man, travel fixer, and eventual harmonica player—the “white Wailer.” Jaffe and Marley remained close until Marley’s death, in 1981, from melanoma. “I was with Bob when his dreadlocks fell out,” Jaffe said.

Along the way, he took photos, compiling what is probably the most intimate visual chronicle of the Wailers and their world. Last month, Rizzoli published a book of his pictures, along with some of his impressionistic reminiscences, titled “Hit Me with Music.”

“My job was to get the music out, not take pictures,” Jaffe said the other day. “But I was seeing things that I thought would be iconic and historically important.” He was sitting on the patio of an apartment tower in Fort Lee, New Jersey, where he lives with his girlfriend, a nurse practitioner from

Korea. Jaffe, now seventy-seven, had on green track pants, a green sweatshirt, and a green Mets cap.

Backed by a sweeping view of Manhattan, all the way down to the Statue of Liberty, Jaffe told his Marley tales. Of playing the harmonica onstage in Kingston in 1975, when the Wailers warmed up for Marvin Gaye; of the Wailers' first New York appearance, in 1973, at Max's Kansas City, opening for an up-and-comer named Bruce Springsteen; of smoking a spliff with Marley's mother, in Delaware. (Marley, seeing Jaffe and his mom hit it off, asked her, "How come you like white men so much?" Marley's father, whom Marley never met, was white.)



"Bob had this amazing sense of irony," Jaffe said. "In his songs, he could make something so tragic sound funny, without diminishing the tragedy of it." Jaffe turned Marley on to old American blues recordings—Muddy Waters, Little Walter, Son House—to make the case that the rock-and-roll sound that Chris Blackwell, the founder of Island, the Wailers' label, was urging on the band (the opening guitar solo on "Catch a Fire" 's first track, "Concrete Jungle," was played by a white studio whiz from Alabama) actually had a deep connection to Black music, and therefore to Africa and to what Rastafarians called "the sufferers."

"I said, 'You shouldn't feel like you're selling out,'" Jaffe went on. "They got criticized for it. Chris has been criticized." But Blackwell never suggested that they soften their lyrics. "He encouraged them to make it as radical as they knew it should be. The production values just made it possible to expand their audience."

Jaffe got into a battered Volvo and drove down the Palisades to the edge of the Hudson, under the George Washington Bridge. He stood on the shore, looking across the river, under the squeak and clatter of the bridge. He had grown up a mile east, in the Bronx—his father a foreman at a clothing factory, his mother a nurse. "My family were all Communists," he said. The soundtrack of his youth was the demolition of buildings to make way for the Cross Bronx Expressway. Across the street was 1520 Sedgwick Avenue, where, the same year Jaffe moved in with the Wailers, a Jamaican immigrant named DJ Kool Herc, drawing on dancehall raps from Kingston, invented hip-hop.



Ten years ago, while living on Riverside Drive, Jaffe began photographing the bridge from his apartment every day, in its various moods. When he moved over to the Jersey side, he had a new view of the bridge, and he kept taking pictures, until he had thousands of images. What to do with these? He got back in touch with Dickie Landry, from the pig-roast photo, and asked

him to contribute music for a multimedia installation, and then enlisted James Thomas Stevens, a writer of Mohawk descent, whose grandfather had been an ironworker on the bridge, to compose a poem. “Of course, George Washington pretty much hated the Indians,” Jaffe said, with a grin. ♦

The Boards

A Play About a Bar, on a Barge Next to the Bar

In “The Wind and the Rain,” which is staged in the harbor and begins during Hurricane Sandy, Sunny’s Bar, in Red Hook, Brooklyn, is the subject of and the actual location for the final act.

By Ben McGrath

October 07, 2024



“The Wind and the Rain,” a play about Sunny’s Bar, in Red Hook, Brooklyn, begins in the fall of 2012, as floodwaters from Hurricane Sandy rise through the floorboards, laying waste to a gentrifying neighborhood and its most beloved institution. The play is staged on a railroad barge—the Waterfront Museum, a long fly ball from Sunny’s—and, if a recent rehearsal is any indication, audience members will have little trouble reckoning with the persistent threat posed by the harbor. “I could be a witch!” one cast member recited, in the middle of a flirtation scene, and the barge lurched, as if on cue from Poseidon. (More likely: wake from a passing ferry.) Bells clanged. Actors swayed. Laughter.

Not long afterward, in the barge's southeastern corner, a professional juggler in bare feet opened a refrigerator and retrieved a drink, not because the script called for it but because he lives on board, and it was Friday. "It's like college has let out, and a huge group of kids has come home," he said, gesturing at the cast and crew. His name was David Sharps, and he met Sunny Balzano, the eponymous barkeep, in 1994, after Sharps and the barge, which he bought for five hundred dollars, had moved from Hoboken to a new berth in Brooklyn, on the edge of a lapsed Mob stronghold that had been colonized by wild dogs and drag racers. "There was nobody down here," Sharps recalled. "My kids would come home from school, and we didn't have neighbors, except for Sunny's Bar. So we'd go across the street." The bar—then a speakeasy, open only on Fridays—had been in the Balzano family since 1917. A scene in the play features a Sunny Special—a colorful non-alcoholic drink invented for the benefit of Sharps's daughters, who are now grown.

"Sunny was in the first play that we did," Sharps went on, explaining that he had always envisioned the barge as a kind of showboat. It was "Waiting for Godot." Balzano played Lucky. Years later, in the weeks before Sandy struck, the barge hosted a production of "Anna Christie," by Eugene O'Neill, which features a barge captain. "He doesn't want his daughter to marry this guy that comes off of a ship," Sharps said. "And he's, like, 'That old devil sea!' He's always shaking his fist at the 'old devil sea.' And I remember thinking, Oh, man. You got to be careful who you shake your fist at these days. You're angering the gods! In that spell of time, about three years, we had two hurricanes, a tornado, and an earthquake."

Sharps was talking to a former resident of the neighborhood who had dropped by the rehearsal out of nostalgia. Sandy, with its extended blackout, had marked the beginning of the end of the nostalgist's own Red Hook days. The mention of the tornado, long since forgotten, stirred a vivid flashback: an image of an irredeemably inverted umbrella. He'd been on his way to the ninetieth birthday party of a revered colleague, on the Upper West Side, and making the interminable trek to the subway when the storm spun up the Gowanus. No one else at the party looked rattled, let alone dishevelled, when he arrived. Red Hook could make you feel like an alien.

And Sunny's, you might say, was its mother ship. Balzano died in 2016. His funeral included a jazz-band procession through the neighborhood. "The Wind and the Rain," which runs through the end of the month, concludes with a procession of its own, off the barge and across the street—to Sunny's, which is now owned by Tone Johansen, who was married to Balzano. She grew up Pentecostal on a remote Norwegian island and found herself pulled back to the water's edge. Disembarking audience members are given headphones and invited to imagine that the ground beneath their feet will inevitably be reclaimed by rising tides. "It'll happen again," Sharps said, fatalistic, as the rehearsal wrapped.

It had been twelve years since the nostalgist visited Sunny's, and he decided to replicate the procession, accompanied by Johansen and by Sarah Gancher, the playwright, whom for years Johansen knew only as a participant in the bar's weekly bluegrass jam. "It's funny with the jam, because it's, like, I don't know what people do," Johansen said. "I never really asked about that. I know them by instrument."

"I remember being out with a group of friends and taking a wrong turn and being, like, 'Where the fuck are we? This feels like where they drop the bodies,'" Gancher recalled of her first visit to Sunny's. That night, she spotted a fiddle lying on the bar, unattended, and asked if she could play it.

"We were a strange and hardy bunch," Johansen said. ♦

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Personal History

Growing Up with the Writer Ved Mehta

My father, who was blind, was obsessed with the way things looked—sometimes it felt like the British Raj was alive and well in our New York apartment.

By Sage Mehta

October 07, 2024



My parents' apartment had never looked better than on the day it was photographed to sell. As I walked through the rooms, the only thing that seemed out of place was the Statesman, which was the name of the wooden cube that my mother had selected from a catalogue to hold my father's ashes. (He had been a writer, not a statesman, but somehow the name had stuck.) It wasn't just that the Statesman looked incongruously modern amid the English antiques and Persian carpets; it was the four plastic bags of gray dust inside. Even though I knew they were proof that my father was gone, I couldn't shake the feeling that if I just quickened my step I would find him in the next room.

Growing up, I'd always known where in the apartment he would be. The path my father traced through the rooms was highly consistent. He sat on the right side of the sofa, not the left; on the near chair, not the far. He could often be found in the grand canopy bed that he and my mother shared, lying down with the phone, a landline, at his ear. He had memorized hundreds of numbers, and when he left a voice mail he dictated it with warmth and also a certain formality. I can still hear his voice on the machine: "Sage, it's your father here."

He was often on the phone with one of the auction houses. He liked to find out what was coming up for sale, hunting for the items that would make each room complete. When a carpet arrived, it would be attached to the parquet floor with hidden Velcro strips at the corners so that they wouldn't lift up and trip anyone. Certain walls had mirrors, others had paintings. Everything in the apartment had its place, except for a pair of George III "floating chairs," upholstered in pale-pink silk, which usually flanked the French doors in the dining room but got pulled out for big parties.

"Fuck," I would hear my father curse when he bumped into something—maybe one of those pink chairs, marooned in the middle of the living room after the guests had left. There was a particular insult to hitting something at home; it was the place where, surrounded by objects and furniture he had chosen, he was supposed to be safe. My father was blind, but we didn't use that word. If we had to, we said, "He lost his sight." Mostly we avoided the topic entirely. And, as if to test the boundaries of our credulity, he liked to say in conversation, "I see."

My father, who was born in Lahore in 1934, could see for the first few years of his life. But just shy of his fourth birthday he contracted cerebrospinal meningitis, which permanently damaged his optic nerves. Throughout my life, he was at work on an all-encompassing autobiographical project, "Continents of Exile," much of which was serialized in this magazine and subsequently published in twelve books. If blindness was the first exile, Partition was the second. In 1947, his family, along with millions of other Hindu refugees, was forced by sectarian violence to leave Lahore when the city became part of Pakistan, and resettle in a new India. Only one object from 11 Temple Road, their house in Lahore, made it to our apartment on

East Seventy-ninth Street: a carved mahogany lamp that never moved from its place next to the piano.

As a child, I had no doubt about my father's ability to navigate his surroundings. I took for granted that he could walk into a room and know where everything was. He relied on a prodigious memory and something he called "sound-shadows," a type of echolocation based on the way that sound waves change with the shape and distance of objects.

There was a circle of people who marvelled at his ability, and an inner circle who knew not to comment. And then there were those who disapproved of the way he passed as sighted. They wanted to know why, as he moved around New York City on his own, he didn't use a white cane or a Seeing Eye dog. The most skeptical of these acquaintances didn't believe that he was blind, and I was often asked, "He can see, just a little bit, right?" I would answer quickly, "No, not at all," unconsciously mimicking his own mixture of defensiveness and pride. I was baffled when I came across pity, usually expressed by women who liked to say, "I'm sorry your father can't see you." I wasn't sorry.

And yet, even at home, the stakes were high. No drawer was supposed to be left open, no door ajar. Once, I found him sitting at the dining-room table, stonily quiet after he had run into a closet door, using one of his white handkerchiefs to dab at a small vertical cut on his forehead. His silence communicated anger more effectively than words. Finally, he said coolly, "Your mother is trying to kill me." He usually ascribed fault to someone, and even though it wasn't me that time, I felt a pang of guilt.

When I was a baby, I am told by my mother, my father would ferry me from my crib to their bed at night, saving her the trouble of getting up to nurse. As I grew older, I would instinctively move close to him when I sat down on the sofa, or take his hand when we were outside. His fingers would sometimes reach out, flutteringly, to touch my face.

His careful movements were at odds with the way my younger sister, Natasha, and I were allowed to race around. We would tear from room to room in a loop that took us from one end of the apartment to the other. Our father would sometimes plant himself in the middle of the track to play a

game we called Daddy Monster, in which we would try to dart past him. I would shriek with delight when he invariably caught me, both surprised and comforted not to be able to sneak by. I wonder now if he used the game to train himself to know where our small, fast-moving bodies were. He was forever gathering information, clues to help him piece together what he called the “sighted world.”

By the time I was eight, I was tall enough for my father to put his hand on my shoulder with an even pressure when we went out. This was not a game, or a casually affectionate touch. It was a physical manifestation of trust and a sign that I had to start paying attention. He hated to be overdirected; all I had to do to signal a crooked step or a crack in the sidewalk was to pause briefly and exaggerate my step.

For a long time, my father had an office on West Forty-third Street, at *The New Yorker*, where, under the editorship of William Shawn, he was a staff writer. One rainy day when he came home later than usual, I remember my mother running to the door and passionately kissing him, as people did in the movies. He still had his wet raincoat on. Was she relieved that he had made it home safely? We never spoke about the dangers of his solo commute up Madison Avenue on the bus from Forty-third Street to Seventy-ninth, his walk two avenues east. Just as blindness was never mentioned, neither was bravery.

In 1994, a couple of years after Tina Brown took over as editor, my father’s contract as a staff writer was terminated, though, under what he acknowledged was “a long-standing agreement,” he was allowed to keep his office. The scope of the magazine had changed; it had become more current and was making room for newer voices. He was a staff writer for thirty-three years, a period he covered in “Remembering Mr. Shawn’s *New Yorker*. ” (Growing up, I didn’t know Mr. Shawn’s first name. I only knew that it was thanks to Mr. Shawn that my father was able to work as a writer, publishing personal histories and stories that later became the material for his books.) But when the magazine moved to a new location, in Times Square, in 1999, he was told that there would not be room for him, and so his writing life moved home.

“Linn!” my father would often call out in the apartment. If my mother didn’t respond right away, he would pick up line one and dial line two until she answered his call from a few rooms away. When I went to the grocery store with her, sometimes the loudspeaker would boom, “Mrs. Mehta, your husband is on the phone.” It was only while running around the reservoir in Central Park or walking home from Columbia University—where she was first a Ph.D. student in comparative literature and later an adjunct lecturer—that my mother was truly unreachable. She preferred to go about the city in her jogging clothes, carrying a backpack instead of a handbag as other mothers did. She needed her hands, to help us and to help him. “Your mother is a ragamuffin,” my father would say. And then every January: “My New Year’s resolution is not to criticize your mother.”

Twenty-one years his junior, she met my father at a party when she was eleven. By the time I was eleven, I blushed at this anecdote, but my parents didn’t seem shy about it. My father liked to shock, and he didn’t mind waiting a beat before assuring anyone who was listening that they had only become romantically involved sixteen years later. In the intervening time, he had been in the background, a guest brought to parties by my mother’s uncle, Henry S. F. Cooper, Jr., a friend and colleague of his. My father was an eccentric whom my mother’s grandparents were happy to entertain at their Park Avenue apartment, an interesting extra man for dinner. Muriel Spark had inscribed her book “The Bachelors” to him: “For Ved, my favorite bachelor.” But he was not the type meant to marry into my mother’s Wasp family. That he did says less about his perseverance than about her free spirit.

She accepted my father’s proposal while sitting at a desk in a hotel room in Bombay, looking out the window past the Colaba reef to the Arabian Sea. She was learning Sanskrit, and had eagerly connected with his family, who had been based in New Delhi since Partition. But there was no question of where they would live. “I can never live in India,” my father used to say, even though writing about the country was at the center of his life’s work. He had left in 1949, when he was fifteen, arriving in New York City after a forty-seven-hour trip from New Delhi and then making his way on to the Arkansas School for the Blind, which would prepare him for college. I remember walking down the street with him in New Delhi while children my age, begging, swarmed around him. As he handed out rupees, more

children came forward until we were surrounded. “But for the grace of God, there go I,” he said, when we made it back to the quiet of the hotel.



Although he treated my mother as an intellectual equal and a trusted first reader, it was clear what he wanted her priorities to be. He was forty-nine when they married, and ready to settle down and start a family. I was born within a year, and my sister followed two and a half years later. My mother was not a housewife, and yet, almost every morning, she walked down the long hallway to the kitchen to make him bed tea, a remnant of the British Raj, which often seemed to be alive and well in our apartment.

“Belts and suspenders” was a phrase my father liked to use, though he wouldn’t have worn both at the same time. Belts were for casual corduroys, suspenders for the high-cut trousers of his Savile Row suits. My father dressed like an English gentleman. “It was Edwardian,” Kennedy Fraser, a colleague of his who wrote about fashion, told me recently. My grandfather, whom my father called Daddyji, had been born in a village in Punjab around 1895, when Queen Victoria was Empress of India. In all the formal pictures of the Mehta family, the men wear suits, the women saris.

My father had the right accoutrements for every occasion. In winter, he would sit on the ledge facing the elevator, swinging his feet boyishly, until

one of us bent down to stretch his rubber overshoes across his leather lace-ups. When he was ready, we were all supposed to be ready. But sometimes one of us would be missing. “Where is your mother?” he would often ask.

Every weekday, my mother was out of the kitchen by 9 A.M., and it became Maria’s domain. To call Maria our housekeeper does not begin to capture her role in our family, or her devotion to “Mr. Mehta,” as she called my father. She was cook, butler, laundress, maid, and something more. Caregiver is probably the right word, but he would have hated it, dismissing the idea that he needed caring for.

Maria was born near Rio and found her way to New York through a job at the Brazilian consulate. She did not know how old she was, because her birth had not been recorded, but she and my father were about the same age. The musical cadence of her Portuguese was a constant murmur in the background, while the equally foreign sound of his Punjabi could be heard only on the mornings when he called his sisters in India.

“Maria is a saint,” my father would say, and no one ever disagreed. She understood something about his need for order. One day—I must have been in my late teens by then—he announced, “I need an epergne!” When, soon afterward, a tiered silver centerpiece arrived for the dining-room table, Maria, without a word, took on the job of polishing it. My father ate at fixed times, with a sense of ceremony that the rest of us didn’t share. For breakfast, Maria served him freshly squeezed orange juice, a hard-boiled egg on dry toast, and fruit. They were such complete allies on the domestic front that for a short period I became convinced that they would get married. The reality was more complicated: together, she and my mother seemed to fulfill the role of an imaginary, all-doing wife.

My father was happiest when he was surrounded by women. Although he liked to talk about his mythical bachelorhood, the days when he took notes on a Braille typewriter and made his own cheese toast, by the time I came around he had decided it was far more efficient to delegate. Aside from our family and Maria, he had an assistant to open his mail, and another who came in to file medical claims; a reader who went through newspapers, opera libretti, and other material for him on evenings and weekends; and, separate from all the others, an amanuensis.

“Aman-you-en-sis”—the word was as familiar to me as “Wednesday.” From a young age, I was aware that Milton, Johnson, and Churchill had amanuenses, people to whom they dictated their work. Milton had three daughters who lived to adulthood, the youngest of whom, Deborah, was a sometime amanuensis for “Paradise Lost.” There is an 1877 oil painting by Mihály Munkácsy, at the New York Public Library, of the poet and his daughters around a table. “Why can’t you be like Milton’s daughters?” my father asked me on numerous occasions. Although he really meant like Deborah, who, I assumed, was the girl in the painting leaning forward, her quill poised over an open book. He wanted my complete and adoring attention. But he didn’t draft me into service, nor did I volunteer.

My father dictated every word he ever published, and he thanks thirty-seven amanuenses by name in the various acknowledgments of the twenty-seven books he wrote. “There is hardly a sentence in the text which did not benefit from her untiring scrutiny and alert, intuitive intelligence,” one reads; “in addition to helping me much as Milton’s daughters helped him, [they] provided inestimable editorial suggestions,” he writes in another.

Amanuenses came and went. The tenure was usually short—one to two years right out of college. I always felt that there was an aura of specialness around these women who called my father by his first name, Ved, like my mother did. At *The New Yorker*, they were sometimes referred to as “Vedettes,” a word that means “star” in French but which in the magazine’s precincts carried an element of scorn. They weren’t referred to by this sobriquet in our family.

Mr. Shawn had the magazine pay for his amanuenses, an expense that my father could not have afforded in the early years. Some of his colleagues thought the concession to my father’s handicap was unfair, but this kind of help, unlike a dog or a cane, was something he could not do without. I asked the writer Jamaica Kincaid, who knew my father at that time: “The whole atmosphere was very special—the atmosphere Shawn created for him, his charm created for him—almost hothouse.”

In 1989, soon after Mr. Shawn left, *Spy* magazine published an article cataloguing the insults and complications of the job of being one of Ved Mehta’s amanuenses. I didn’t read the article when it was published—I was

four years old at the time—but at some point in my teens I became aware of it. I knew that a copy of the issue was kept in a low cabinet under the TV, its negativity at odds with the silly colorful cover of Jay Leno feeding sushi to a goat.

During the summers, our family decamped from the apartment in New York to a house that my parents had built on an island in Maine, which my father had first visited as a bachelor. He could not have picked a social circle less interested in him than the denizens of Dark Harbor, a tightly knit, intergenerational community of families, whose island lives revolved around tennis, golf, and sailing. Our family managed socially thanks to my mother's gentle diplomacy, and to one man, a gregarious stockbroker and philanthropist, who offered my father his friendship. “Veggie,” he would call him, an irreverent Americanization of the respectful Hindi designation Vedji. My father was delighted by the affectionate teasing, and the acceptance it signalled.

Each July, we would head to the island, an awkward caravan made up of the four of us, Maria, a mother's helper, and an amanuensis. Although we often ate together, everyone was on different schedules during the day, and it wasn't until I was in my early twenties that I got to know one of my father's amanuenses, a young woman named Alex, with any degree of intimacy.

That summer, I felt caged in. I was in college and wanted to be in New York, where my friends were all working. But my father had insisted that I come to Maine. “I've just put a new roof on the house,” he said. Though he didn't say so, he had also stopped walking up and down the central island road alone on his evening constitutional, and he wanted company. I noticed that now he no longer walked upright behind me but leaned forward and put more of his weight on my shoulder. I remember one evening we were just approaching the house when he asked me what I wanted to do with my life. “I want to write,” I ventured.

“What do you have to write about?” he replied. It was hard to tell if he was being cutting or genuinely curious.

There were times when I could laugh off a casual pronouncement like that, and then there were times when I would be overcome by a helpless rage. I'd

have a sudden urge to leave, to get far enough away from him that his voice could not call me back to answer some small, irrelevant question. In Maine, this often meant walking down to the beach, to sit on the stairs looking east over Penobscot Bay.

One evening, I went down to those stairs and found Alex already there. I don't recall the details of our conversation, but I remember that I was angry at my father and that she was sympathetic—she knew what I was running away from. It was a tone that was familiar to everyone who knew my father. A manner of speaking that put you in your place—one far beneath him.

It was, I think now, related to a tone inherent to the Raj—the British ruled the subcontinent not only by strength but through an attitude of unassailable superiority. It might even have been the tone of the superior who dissuaded my father's father, Dr. Amolak Ram Mehta, a district health officer in the civil service, from testing his son for meningitis with a lumbar puncture when he fell sick at age three: "When have you heard of a meningitis patient sitting up and drinking milk? By this point he would be in a feverish coma. He couldn't possibly have meningitis."

My father wrote in detail about the events that led to his blindness in his biography of his father, "Daddyji," which came out in 1972. After the abandoned lumbar puncture, there was another delay because of the imminent arrival of a Mr. Cuthbert King, with whom Daddyji had arranged a tennis match. My grandfather, "whose promotion to an assistant directorship was still pending," my father notes, put off the trip to the hospital until the next morning. "He was furious with himself," my father wrote. "Yet had he ever had a choice in any of it? There were the children to raise and educate, and one's superiors were everything."

Recently, I contacted Alex through a mutual friend, asking if she would be willing to talk, and she replied immediately with an exclamation mark and a glasses emoji. I remembered that she had worn black glasses that sat on her small ski-jump nose, the sort of nose I had desperately wanted as a teen.

When we spoke on the phone, I asked right away, "Do you remember meeting down on the steps to the beach?" She was now living in South Africa. "Yes," she said. Her voice sounded exactly the same. I told her that I

was writing about my father, and “not just the good parts.” I had finally read the piece in *Spy*. The journalist’s tone was snarky, but there were some direct quotes from my father’s amanuenses. The women’s experiences were recognizable to me, from my father’s impatience (“*Faster! Faster!* Why are you so slow?”) to his inappropriateness: “Did you bathe?” he asked one; “Did you make love today?” he asked another.

I was reminded of the magician-like way my father could wield his heightened senses. He might compliment a woman on her earrings at a cocktail party, having heard them dangling. Sometimes he was playful, but more often there was another dynamic: he wanted to give an impression of omniscience, and the power it implied. Though I would never have called my father a “sexist, oppressive, manipulative son of a bitch,” as one amanuensis described him in the *Spy* piece, I did recognize what another said: “The guy could really get to you . . . he was like a human tuning fork.”

I asked Alex if she had ever read the story. “Well, O.K., I can tell you about that stuff,” she said. She hadn’t known that my father was blind when she interviewed for the job (he hadn’t mentioned it in the listing), nor had she known the term “amanuensis,” although she figured both out during their conversation. By the time she was hired, he was writing less, and the job required a slew of errands and administrative tasks. On her first day, she and my father were standing in line at the post office, she said, and “there was a moment when I felt his hand kind of on my back, up and down, and I remember feeling, like, weird.”

When Alex shifted her stance from his unwelcome hand, she remembered that my father had said, “Why are you gyrating away from me?” I flinched at the sexual innuendo. Then he asked her, “Why is touch more invasive than sight?”

It shouldn’t have been a question: touch *is* more invasive than sight. “It was uncomfortable,” Alex told me. How could my father have missed it, this fundamental tenet of the sighted world. He was obsessed with the way things looked. “You are my eyes,” he used to say to me as a child. I automatically learned to provide the specificity that he craved, but the details were largely superficial. I might have described a woman wearing “tomato-red lipstick”; I would not have said, “She looks hurt.”

Hearing about my father from the women who'd worked for him was like watching him hit his head against door after door after door, but now he was the one causing, not feeling, the pain.

I reached out to Madhur Jaffrey, the actress, writer, and cook, whom my father considered one of his closest friends, to ask her about him. Whenever he called her, he would say her initial, "Em," with a special affection, but they also fought. "We were never more than friends, sometimes much less," she wrote me in an e-mail. "My relationship with Ved was contradictory. He was funny, clever, bright, annoying, rude and ugly male all at the same time."

"Don't read me," my father would say to me. "Read the greats." He meant the great European novelists: Proust, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Dickens, Eliot. He said he couldn't afford to write fiction. He was a working writer, prolific in part because his words had always paid his bills, bills that added up as his taste became more bourgeois.

"Good girl" was often my father's highest praise, and I was good. I didn't read him until I was a young adult. When I did, I recognized the voice—his spoken and written voices were so close. And I also recognized the bedtime stories he used to tell us from his childhood in Punjab, the "jungly boy" stories of his high jinks jumping across the roofs of Lahore to chase kites, or secretly following his sisters to school on a bicycle he had fixed up.



Still, the man on the page was harder to map onto my father. His accounts of adult life do not shy away from humiliation and defeat. The final book of his autobiographical series reveals his father's love affair in the midst of married life; earlier, there is my father's crushing disappointment at not getting a first at Oxford, and, in "All for Love," published in 2001, an unsparing account of his failed relationships with women prior to marrying my mother.

A consummate stylist, my father usually put a simple dedication at the front of each book—just "To" and then the names. But "All for Love" starts with a paragraph, an expression of his love for my mother that includes the line "I trust [the book] will never give you one anxious moment, since, after all, its culmination was discovering you," and a dedication to me and my sister, acknowledging that if we read the book it might be hard "to imagine your father . . . as an ordinary human being, like yourselves."

The summer before I began seventh grade, we travelled to Greece on holiday. We were on a pier by the sea when my father stepped backward and fell, breaking his arm. The broken humerus didn't heal well; he began to lose proprioception—the ability to feel a body part in space—of the entire arm, from his shoulder to his hand. His arm, from his point of view, was vanishing. If you can't see a part of yourself, and can't feel it, how do you know it exists?

He was operated on and regained the use—and the feeling—of his arm, but I thought back to that summer when, some twenty years later, he became bedridden with Parkinson's. It was hard to grasp how the disease's constellation of physical and neurological symptoms fit together. More than anything, it felt like he was going blind.

The first time a hospice nurse came to see my father, he was propped up for bed tea, and I was keeping him company. “‘Masterpiece Theatre,’ ” the nurse said, glancing at the ornate canopy bed, the layers of rich blue drapery bordered in a golden brocade. She might have loved “Masterpiece Theatre,” but I bristled at the reference. She wasn’t playing along.

Over the next three years, my father went in and out of hospice. (“Failed,” the nurses said. “Graduated,” my mother replied.) We turned to my sister, a newly trained doctor, to try to understand what was happening, but there was no good medical diagnosis for his fitful decline. Perhaps he said it best, in a voice mail that my sister saved: “Oh, Natasha, it’s your distraught father . . . I-I seem to have got some kind of permanent chill in my soul—or in my body—I don’t know where it is, and it’s so cold.”

When it became too difficult for him to sit up, he was moved from the canopy bed to a hospital bed set up by the window. My mother and the nurses started using two lightweight, washable fleece blankets, free gifts that had arrived one day from the National Wildlife Federation. One had a bright-blue background with penguins on it, and the other featured polar bears on a black background. I knew that he would have hated the patterns, but I did not object. What was important was that the blankets were easy to wash, and to take on and off as needed.

When I visited, I noticed his hands on the colorful blankets. Hands that had never fidgeted were suddenly restless, moving back and forth. They looked so youthful, almond brown with large veins, unlined and unmarked, the strong nails he had always carefully cut now trimmed by a nurse. He had so often taken the measure of things with his hands. “Let me see your haircut,” he would say, and reach up to feel how much space there was above my shoulders. My sister, as a doctor, also has this ability, her hands touching and palpitating, gathering essential information.

Sometimes my father didn't remember where he was, and when he spoke he was in London, Delhi, Lahore—rarely in the present, rarely even occupying the period during which my life had overlapped with his. It was as if his mind were rewinding. Natasha hypothesized that, if he could see, his brain would have been getting visual stimulation that might have slowed his decline. And I wondered, If he could see, would he have known that he was in his apartment in New York? Would he have known who I was?

By that point, he was sleeping in the soft black cotton sports shirts he used to wear on weekends, and nothing else—the paper-thin skin of his lower body was prone to bedsores. He winced with pain sometimes when he was touched, but he didn't complain. He was patient, as his body under the thin blankets kept shrinking. His voice had become small, whispery, and the last time I visited him it wasn't there at all.

"I want to sell the bed," my mother said, a few months after my father died, before adding, "I want to sell the apartment." I was surprised. I remembered when I had described the new fabric for the living-room curtains to my father. He had replaced them just as he was beginning to get sick. "Your mother will never do it," he had said. He spoke as if the living room, and the curtains, would always be there.

In the end, I sold their marital bed. A friend who saw the listing photos of the apartment asked if she could buy it. ("Were you conceived there?" her husband wondered; I didn't want to know.) So I unmade it, finding layers of dust in the folds of the drapes. The movers unscrewed the bolts and separated the posts and frame and headboard. Once in the truck, one of the carved posts split in two. When I told my mother, she said that one of the posts had broken years earlier, but the hairline crack had been carefully repaired and was very hard to see. I had missed it. What else had I not seen?

I kept a stack of my father's handkerchiefs. He used to blot his eyes with them; one in particular would get watery. When I was a teen-ager and started wearing sunglasses, he asked if he should get a pair to hide his eyes. "Don't they look ugly?" he had asked. At the time, I didn't realize the question was a chink in his armor.

“No,” I replied. His eyes were different, but they were not ugly to me. One was an opaque blue-gray with a lid that opened halfway; the other, whose lid rarely opened, was sunken—this was the one that watered. Besides, sunglasses would hide his face. Emotion moved across it like weather: laughter, delight, and, sometimes, suffering. He didn’t make artificial expressions; he couldn’t mirror the people he was talking to. But he also couldn’t see their reactions, waiting instead on their words.

The Statesman now sits in my mother’s new apartment, on a shelf facing her bed. We have cast the ashes, in a reverse of his life’s trajectory, out onto the waters of Maine, Oxford, and India. But a quarter of them still reside in the Statesman. My mother sometimes talks about where those remaining ashes might go, but I’m not sure if the Statesman will ever be empty.

She is not the only one holding on. “Come home,” my father used to say to me, whether I was blocks or continents away. I think of the apartment. The rooms and objects have solidified into something like a memory palace, and I wonder if this is not how they had always existed in his mind. ♦

Onward and Upward with the Arts

The K-Pop King

Chairman Bang, the man behind BTS, is bringing his formula for creating K-pop idols to America.

By Alex Barasch

October 07, 2024



Scooter Braun was in a tailspin. It was February, 2021, and [the music manager](#), who had made his name launching the careers of Justin Bieber and Ariana Grande, was nearing forty and facing a brutal divorce. An equally nasty battle with Taylor Swift, over his ownership of her song catalogue, had sullied his public image. Rumors circulated that the future of Braun's company, Ithaca Holdings, was in doubt. Amid this tumult, he was surprised to receive an invitation to speak with someone who had long fascinated him: the South Korean producer Bang Si-hyuk—known to admirers as Hitman Bang.

Braun had first heard of Bang several years earlier, when a member of his social-media team told him about a boy band from South Korea whose online-engagement numbers had surpassed even Bieber's. Braun was

skeptical and asked her to check the figures again in a week. They'd gone up. [The group, BTS, became the biggest act in the world](#)—and the one with the most zealous fan community, which routinely mobilizes online to insure that their boys top the charts. Bang had handpicked the group's members and co-written many of its early hits.

Braun and Bang met on Zoom, and bonded over the fact that both had plucked young artists from obscurity and guided their meteoric ascents. "It was like finding a kindred spirit across the sea," Braun told me. "I've never been able to talk to anyone about this stuff." Soon, they were chatting three times a week. A month later, Braun sold his company to Bang's *hybe* Corporation, in a deal worth upward of a billion dollars.

hybe, founded in 2005, is part record label, part talent agency, part tech platform, part entertainment conglomerate. Bang is determined to extend the company's influence across the international pop landscape. To this end, he named Braun a C.E.O. of *hybe* America—and announced a ten-year partnership with Universal Music Group, whose head, [Sir Lucian Grainge](#), praised *hybe*'s "groundbreaking" model for "engaging the superfan." John Janick, the C.E.O. of the Universal division Interscope Geffen A&M, joined forces with Bang to create Katseye, a multiracial, English-language girl group modelled on the K-pop framework. The goal was to conject a juggernaut—or, failing that, at least to score a few hits.

Janick told me, "Bang wants to have No. 1s around the world, and the biggest artists globally. But the fans are the key." Other labels had chased fleeting TikTok sensations for short-term gain; the K-pop model, by contrast, is a long-term strategy that invests in years of training and development for each act. "Bang has helped the business continue to evolve," Janick said.

Braun, once the Svengali of America's biggest pop stars, now has a Svengali of his own. He told me, "The thing that made me believe that Spotify was going to work was Daniel Ek"—the service's co-founder. "The thing that makes me believe *hybe* is going to work is Bang."

Hybe's Seoul headquarters is a nineteen-story tower swarming with activity: each day, hundreds of pilgrims show up, hoping for a glimpse of their idols. The building has several recording and rehearsal studios, and security is

high. On floors where artists work and train, protective measures have included biometric scans.

By comparison, *hybe*'s L.A. outpost is deceptively modest: three floors in a building in Santa Monica. When I visited, this past spring, the office was almost empty. Bang was waiting for me in a spartan conference room, holding an acoustic guitar. He didn't play anything, though.

Bang is portly and good-humored. He was born in Seoul and was a solitary, bookish child until his parents, concerned about his shyness, encouraged him to take up the guitar as a hobby. "I went a little bit further than my parents intended," he said, wryly. He memorized the *Billboard* charts, got into Led Zeppelin and heavy metal, and formed a band, sometimes skipping classes to jam. He set music aside to secure entrance to Seoul National University, but he soon returned to the scene as a producer. Bang held off on telling his parents until he'd become successful enough to give them an envelope full of cash. "Musicians can make money, too," he said.

Three decades later, Bang is a billionaire. We spoke through a translator, whom he sometimes outpaced with references to such stars as [Kendrick Lamar](#) and Joey Bada\$\$; often, he became so animated that he switched to English. Bang got his start at JYP Entertainment, a Korean label. In 2005, he formed his own, calling it Big Hit Entertainment. (The company became *hybe* in 2021.) Other K-pop outfits policed their trainees' conduct, but Bang didn't set curfews or confiscate phones, allowing candidates to succeed or fail on the strength of their own talent and drive. Bang said, early on, "We tell them, 'Do whatever you want. But get out if there's no development.'"

He originally wanted BTS to be a hip-hop crew. "I didn't really believe in K-pop," he told me. But he began to see that the genre had an unusually strong "fandom culture," and suspected that he could leverage it more effectively than others had. He studied groups with diehard loyalists, noting a trend toward "tightly synchronized choreography" and "close, and frequent, fan communication," he said. He also realized that hard-core supporters "get angry very easily—offended and angry. So there were things that we were *not* to do as well."

Before BTS, K-pop idols were polished and often remote. When a group launched, its members went on television to promote their album, then retreated until the next release. Bang realized that the Internet was a better way to reach young people. For BTS, he didn't bother with TV appearances. His strategy, he said, was "trying to figure out the most fandom-friendly thing to do and then taking it to the extreme." He established a YouTube channel for BTS well before its first single was released, filling it with behind-the-scenes clips. The group's seven members ran their own Twitter account—unusual for a K-pop act—and kept up a lively dialogue with their followers, live-tweeting drunken nights on the town and publicly teasing one another about staged "candid" photographs. This breezy puncturing of their own mystique was central to their appeal.

The boys also stood out for writing many of their own lyrics, occasionally in a regional dialect. When BTS débuted, in 2013, the dominant K-pop group, BigBang, promoted an image of glamorous misbehavior. BTS's members foregrounded their uncertainties about the future, airing mental-health and personal struggles. ("Reflection," a song co-written by the group's leader, RM, ends with the refrain "I wish I could love myself.") To young listeners, the group was more accessible—thematically and literally—than its K-pop predecessors. "I didn't want them to be false idols," Bang has said. "I wanted to create a BTS that could become a close friend."

This cultivation of "authenticity" has been rewarded. BTS has sold more than forty million albums in South Korea alone, contributing an estimated five billion dollars a year to the national economy. When its eldest member, Kim Seok-jin, approached twenty-eight—then the mandatory age of enlistment—the country's Military Service Act was amended to offer him a reprieve: as "a pop-culture artist" who'd "greatly enhanced the image of Korea," he could defer for two years.

Katseye, the English-language girl group that Bang has developed with his American partners, reflects his international ambitions. "I feel lucky I've had the opportunity, since I was very young, to work in a lot of cross-cultural environments," Bang told me. The knowledge he'd gained would help drive *hybe*'s worldwide expansion. He compared his process, without irony, to A.I.: "You know how machine learning happens?" he asked. He studied local music industries and fan behavior across the globe in an attempt to

target listeners in various countries more precisely. “We don’t apply our methodologies uniformly in each region, but we don’t follow the practices of each region blindly, either,” he said. “We take what works.”

Before Braun joined *hybe*, Bang barely interacted with American music executives. “He’d come to the U.S. and then not meet with anybody,” Braun said. He traced this reluctance to a formative failure: when Bang was in his late twenties, he and a collaborator, J. Y. Park, rented a room outside L.A., where they’d been told they could become what Bang called “star producers.” In Korea, they were certified hitmakers; in the States, they couldn’t even get a meeting. Bang retreated to Seoul within months.

Braun calls Bang “a studiohead,” and Bang’s reputation is as a producer and a lyricist first, and an executive second. He’s adept at a wide variety of musical styles. Among the hits that he helped to create for BTS are “Spring Day,” an emotional anthem for lost loved ones, and “Idol,” a high-energy track that combines traditional Korean instruments with E.D.M. stylings.



Braun’s role at *hybe*, as he saw it, was “to be the cheerleader Bang deserved,” introducing Bang and his artists to potential Western collaborators. The greatest triumph of their partnership so far is the solo career of BTS’s Jung Kook, who, as Bang put it, had always wanted to

become “a U.S. pop superstar.” After becoming C.E.O., Braun played Jung Kook a track, “Seven,” which had been written for Justin Bieber. The chorus: “I’ll be fucking you right, seven days a week.” Jung Kook had been the baby of BTS, but Braun told him, “When Justin Timberlake did a solo record without ’NSync, he leaned in with edge.” Jung Kook’s album, “Golden,” on which “Seven” appeared, was the first by a BTS member entirely in English. Braun enlisted such guest artists as Jack Harlow and Usher, who joined Jung Kook on a remix of “Standing Next to You”—and invited him to perform it with him at the Super Bowl. (Jung Kook’s military service prevented him from accepting.) Last November, the album débuted at No. 2 on the *Billboard* 200.

In 2023, Bang bought himself a mansion in Bel Air. The house requires significant maintenance, and he told me that the contractors he’s hired have confirmed his suspicions about Americans’ work ethic. “Koreans, when they work on something, do it on time,” he said. “We’re the fastest people in the world. Here, they *say* they’re working on something, but they’re not.”

Joon Choi, a top *hybe* executive, sometimes stays at Bang’s house during business trips to L.A. He came to *hybe* from Pinkfong, best known in the U.S. for the kiddie sensation “[Baby Shark](#),” and had been hired to oversee Weverse, a “global superfan platform” on which artists would post exclusive content. When the pandemic hit, the app became a top priority. BTS postponed a world tour and live-streamed a show on Weverse instead. The event reportedly drew seven hundred and fifty thousand viewers, generating more than eighteen million dollars in ticket sales—and many fans bought merch mid-concert, also through Weverse.

Choi’s team has since pitched the platform to artists in South Korea, Japan, Mexico, and the U.S.; the company has recruited Ariana Grande and Blackpink, a major K-pop group from a rival company. The appeal for performers is straightforward: why be subjected to haters on the wider Internet when you can be surrounded exclusively by adoring fans? “Artists who use the platform feel safer than when they’re thrown into that wild, wild social-media world,” Choi told me.

Bang explained the business rationale behind Weverse: he’d come to feel that music-makers like *hybe* were merely furnishing “raw materials” for tech

companies like Spotify, which marshals its user data to recommend artist merchandise and concerts. “We had success with BTS, thanks to the fan intimacy,” he said. “But we didn’t know *who* our fans were, or *where* they were, because all the distribution was going through third parties.”

Weverse, a savvy amalgam of Instagram, YouTube, and Ticketmaster, is a one-stop shop. Data on demographics and consumption patterns flow back to *hybe* and help determine everything from tour destinations to what languages to sing in. Upon downloading the app, I became one of more than ten million monthly users—nine million of whom don’t speak Korean. After joining a group’s “community,” I could learn more about each member, read their posts, watch their streams, buy their merch, and vie for their individual attention.

The experience can be overwhelming. My phone buzzed whenever an artist I followed posted a photo or even replied to someone else’s comment; I came to know what time certain idols woke up, because of the deluge of notifications that ensued. (I also learned when they contracted *covid* or got injured during a rehearsal, thanks to push alerts.) The effect was the same as that of an overactive group chat, if it were populated by pop stars instead of friends. It occurred to me that, for a lonely teen-ager, Weverse might offer a substitute for the feeling of constant connection that such text threads provide. The app’s simulacrum of intimacy is unsubtle. One morning, a banner ad inviting me to try a paid feature, Weverse DM, read, “Miss you! How’s your day?” Weverse DM lets subscribers message idols directly. Choi told me that the feature would “accelerate the process of becoming *more* of a fan”—and encourage heavier spending on the app—but not necessarily bring in new ones. He’d been ambivalent about the idea, and Bang initially opposed it, but executives who supported it prevailed.

Choi approaches American labels with a disclaimer: “Weverse is not for everyone on your roster.” The unspoken reality is that hungry young artists willing to make themselves available to potential converts are preferable: publicists uploading stills on their clients’ behalf won’t cut it. Weverse is also a good fit for acts whose followers have come up with “their own fandom name,” like Taylor Swift’s devoted Swifties. Musicians who work with the app receive tips on how to deploy “authenticity” to convert mere

listeners into something more. As Choi once put it, “The thing we’re really digging into is the psychological mechanism of falling in love.”

Western executives have been seduced, too. *HYBE*’s deal with Universal, the world’s largest music company, came after the smash hits “Butter” and “Dynamite,” BTS’s first English-language singles. “It was kind of a religious thing,” Bang recalled, laughing. “They just believed in me without any doubt.”

When developing Katseye, *hybe* and Universal studied previous “idol bands” that had succeeded in America. “I was pretty sure the Spice Girls should be our role model,” Bang told me. He spent hours explaining to Grainge and Janick, the Interscope head, the art of “engineering” a K-pop band. Executives reviewed audition tapes and trawled TikTok and Instagram for candidates, then flew the most promising to L.A. for more than a year of rigorous training. Once twenty finalists had been chosen, fans entered the picture. “X-Factor”-style survival shows have become a K-pop staple, giving viewers a greater sense of loyalty to—and ownership of—the artists who emerge victorious.

For Katseye, voting took place on Weverse. After each “mission”—say, updating a Spice Girls tune with K-pop choreography—users voted for their favorite contestants. Some preferences aligned with executives’ expectations: Sophia Laforteza, a twenty-one-year-old from the Philippines with killer vocals, got huge support. A more surprising victor was Manon Bannerman, a twenty-two-year-old Ghanaian Swiss who had raw charisma but little experience as a singer or a dancer. “To be perfectly candid, I don’t like fan voting, because I think there are some areas where that kind of collective intellect works, and areas where it doesn’t work,” Bang told me. “But sometimes good promotion is as important as good content.” To reach a yet larger audience, *hybe* and Geffen Records devised “Pop Star Academy,” a Netflix docuseries charting the competition phase, which began streaming soon after Katseye’s début was released.

The executives honed the members’ images obsessively: one early concern was that Laforteza—all sweetness and diligence—was *too* K-pop to appeal to Americans, who expected something edgier. Humberto Leon, Katseye’s creative director, even reviewed the captions of the girls’ social-media posts.

“Everything that has their voice, I’m a part of it,” he said. While they trained, he constantly assessed what he called their “believability.” Could they really sell a gut-wrenching ballad or a joyful club track? They were also coached on facial expressions—like how to pull off a sly wink in the middle of a dance move. Katseye’s members, Leon said, needed “a certain amount of confidence, but also a certain amount of vulnerability. Part of being a pop star is the ability to transform.”

One afternoon this spring, Katseye assembled at a dance studio in North Hollywood for a promotional ritual depressingly referred to as a “social-content day.” The survival-show phase had left the group with a modest following; now, like BTS had, Katseye was trying to build hype before its all-important début. I arrived to find the girls teasing one another as they practiced lines that they’d just been given for a new video. They’d spent the weekend moving into a house that they’d share in L.A., and their friendship seemed real, even if label employees were determined to cannibalize it: a genuine moment in which the English phrase “crack open a book” was explained to Yoonchae Jeong, the group’s only Korean member, was swiftly restaged for a “behind the scenes” clip.

The girls gathered for a photo shoot. Shouted prompts cycled them through poses: “Cool!” was poised and unsmiling; “Cute!” prompted a flurry of kisses and peace signs. Despite their different backgrounds, they looked strangely alike: all had the same willowy build and practiced gestures. Laforteza slipped away to rehearse. “I have the most lines!” she said, fretfully, before reciting them: “Today is a huge day because—guess what? We finally got our official fandom name!”

While the announcement was being filmed, staffers crowded around the girls, brandishing four cameras and two phones; a laptop served as a makeshift teleprompter. In unison, the girls declared that their fans, in a rather tenuous pun, would be known as Eyekons. (One wonders what they would’ve been called had the company chosen another name for the band from its shortlist: *NewCrazy*.) “Going with ‘K,’ just like in Katseye—it just really highlights the close bond we have with you all,” one girl said. A handler corrected her: “The bond *between us and all of you*.” The script emphasized that the word “Eyekons” had come “directly” from fans. Later, a

hybe employee told me that she routinely monitored Weverse for hashtags and slogans that the company could appropriate.

Some *hybe* artists, including BTS, play an active role in their own promotional strategies, to insure that “their actual personalities” shine through. “People can’t really fake their friendships in most contexts,” the employee said. Superfans analyze body language to identify tensions among members: “K-pop fans *always* notice—and they usually guess correctly.”

hybe has figured out how to stoke genuine camaraderie through artificial means. The artists take trips together, which help members bond while generating valuable “getaway content.” The Katseye girls had flown to Seoul during the survival-show phase and documented excursions to theme parks and convenience stores. After the competition, their handlers deployed tactics from other *hybe* groups to build a fan base. Suga, a BTS member, had shared his musical tastes in online d.j. sessions; Katseye unveiled Katseye Radio, to showcase the girls’ favorite tracks. A group called Tomorrow x Together had written letters to fans; Katseye did the same. Every month, the girls were given letterhead and a theme, along with some basic parameters (“think about memories from when you were young,” “don’t specify too much personal information”). Initially, some members mentioned family members by name, but these details were later scrubbed, to deflect stalking.

At the end of Katseye’s day at the studio, the band had to film a dance cover of a track from another nascent *hybe* girl group, Illit. The clip would promote Illit and Katseye simultaneously. As the girls rehearsed, I was struck by both their skill and the emptiness of what they were being asked to do with it. The video for Illit’s new song, “Magnetic,” had just been released, and Katseye had had to memorize the choreography over the weekend, by scrutinizing an early cut whose digital watermarks had obscured Illit’s hand motions. Laforteza had stayed up until 4 a.m. to perfect her moves after the official video dropped. She told me this cheerfully, adding, “That’s the job!”

As artists within K-pop and beyond have discovered, fans’ obsessive love can tip quickly into entitlement. Taylor Swift, who once wrote directly to followers on Tumblr, making them feel like friends, has increasingly faced mutinies. Last year, she dumped [Matty Healy](#), the 1975’s front man, amid a

Swiftie-led pressure campaign. (An open letter accused him of “engaging in racist remarks,” “making offensive jokes,” and “watching degrading pornography.”) But her subsequent album was laced with disdain for both Healy and the outsiders who presumed to guide her love life. One review was headlined “Taylor Swift Really Hates Matty Healy, and Also Maybe Us.”

K-pop artists rarely lash out at their fans. Suk-Young Kim, a professor at U.C.L.A., believes that the dynamic goes beyond the conventional parasocial relationship between celebrity and civilian: K-pop stars, she writes in her book about the genre, are required to cultivate the sense of a “two-way love affair.” (It helps that most idols, including the members of BTS, do not openly date.) Kim told me that the artists are trained to see themselves as “public property,” adding that they are “on social media 24/7, living under the surveillance of cameras that are constantly following them.” Last year, Jung Kook fell asleep for twenty minutes on Weverse Live—while more than six million people watched.

This kind of self-exposure isn’t unique to K-pop. In 2011, *Billboard* introduced an annual Top Social Artist award, confirming that online followings had become as important as record sales. Bieber, who got his start on YouTube, received the award for the first six years; BTS won it for the next five. The group’s victories are partly attributable to its *army*—the international fandom that promotes BTS on social media, translates its content into more than a dozen languages, and raises millions of dollars for causes that reflect the group’s values. *army*, Kim told me, is “a labor of love—and it is *intense* labor.”

Even when an act has devoted fans, longevity is far from assured. Kim said, of the K-pop machine, “There’s no other music industry in the world targeting young people that systematically pushes out this volume of music. Nearly every day, there’s some teaser or music video or album coming out.” Because of the intensity of the competition, Kim noted, “the career of an idol tends to be very short.”

Bang has taken bold steps to prolong BTS’s life span. RM, the leader, has said that *hybe* “always told us about how important it is to make a world, like Star Wars or Marvel.” BTS’s music videos, Bang decided, should be

designed to deepen viewer immersion. He told me, “We thought, Instead of just having a plot for the music video itself, why not have some lore behind it? Wouldn’t that make it easier for fans to dive deep?” The experiment started in 2015 with the single “I Need U.” The accompanying music video was rife with allusions to a larger narrative. The tone was sombre, and the scenes cinematic in nature, with no bright colors or elaborate choreography. Images had dark subtext: one boy reached numbly for pills behind a bathroom mirror; another stared down at his own bloodied hands. It was the first entry in the so-called Bangtan Universe, in which alternate versions of the seven members are trapped in a cycle of tragedy, and struggle to break free.

This fantastical scenario energized a passionate subset of fans. As Bang had hoped, they generated countless artistic tributes and traded theories about the meaning of each installment. With BTS, *hybe* has it both ways: the boys themselves are relatable; their fictionalized selves are franchisable. The Bangtan Universe now spans twenty-seven official videos, and has been augmented by books, Web toons, and a video game. “Before, we just thought we were idols,” Jin, the group’s oldest member, has said. Now “it feels kind of like we’re playing the lead roles in a movie.”

Weverse Con Festival, a two-day affair, is an annual showcase of *hybe*’s power. This June, it was in Incheon. Eighteen thousand fans paid as much as sixty-six dollars each to watch a live stream, and when I logged in, early on a Sunday morning, users were comparing time zones as if they were battle scars. A woman named Jen, who’d stayed up all night to see her favorite group, confessed, “I am going to work with no sleep, and I work with machinery.”

In Incheon, K-pop luminaries were performing before an audience of twenty-two thousand. J. Y. Park, Bang’s ex-producing partner and a former idol himself, was about to begin a set, with the tantalizing promise of “special guests.” A platform rose to reveal Bang himself soulfully strumming an acoustic guitar. Park wore a tight purple top and shiny silver trousers; Bang looked staid in black as he head-banged to the beat.

Decades after he had relinquished his teen-age dream, Bang was finally playing to a packed arena. But the crowd went wild only once he’d left the

stage—when the members of the boy band Enhypen emerged from the floor in shredded clothes, as if coming out of their graves. Fake cobwebs and gothic arches formed a backdrop as the boys moved in perfect unison—a horde of improbably elegant zombies. “Vampire lords!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” someone enthused on Weverse.

Bang hit on Enhypen’s undead look when watching the boys as trainees. “There’s something really dark and sexy about them,” he said. Back then, they were “not part of the general public, but not celebrities yet. Being of two worlds, but not belonging to either, made me think of vampires.”

When Enhypen was formed, in 2020, a gothic aesthetic known as Dark Academia was dominating TikTok. Bang had tapped into the trend. *hybe* now has an entire “story division” that supplies acts with fictional narratives for promotional content; Enhypen’s vampire personae have appeared in a “Twilight”-like Web novel and on an EP called “Dark Blood.” (One track is titled “Bite Me.”) Bang told me, “The fan reaction was, I think, a big milestone for us. They didn’t say, ‘This is another way *hybe* is making money, by utilizing *our* Enhypen.’ They enjoyed it as its own content.”

Bang noted that “it’s important for the artists to *like* the story,” adding, “If the artists think about it as business and nothing else, we’ve seen that that lowers the chance of success for the endeavor.”

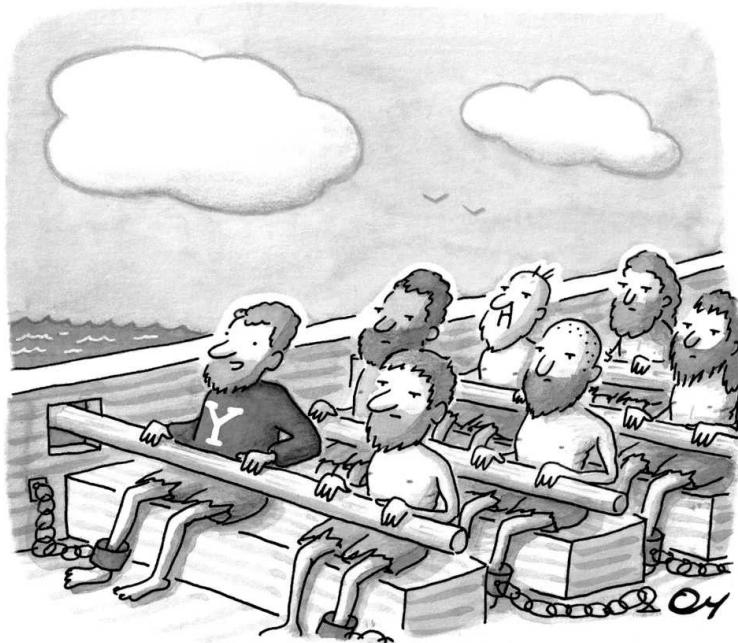
“The first thing we’re going to talk about is hair changes,” Humberto Leon, Katseye’s creative director, said, displaying a series of photographs of the girls on a screen. Executives had gathered in John Janick’s office at Interscope Geffen, down the road from *hybe* America, to review plans for the group’s début. Leon and Bang (Zoom handle: hitman) were attending remotely.

The most dramatic makeover was that of Daniela Avanzini, a twenty-year-old Cuban Venezuelan American, whose black ringlets had been dyed honey-blond. Leon explained, “It gives her Latin flavor—if we think of Shakira, I think this gives her that vibe.” Janick, wearing a baseball cap and perched in an Eames chair, said, “Good!”

Leon clicked on a slide labelled “*odd eye explore*,” and hesitated. “This is something Bang had talked to us about—‘odd eye’ is a Korean term that refers to people with two different-colored eyes,” he said. Onscreen, one of the Indian American member Lara Raj’s eyes, which are brown, had been turned ice blue. Carefully, Leon said, “I think it could look . . . a little alien-like?” Another skeptical executive deemed the vibe “James Bond villain.”

Bang is normally inquisitive in meetings (“What is the hero’s story?,” “What makes a fan love Yoonchae?”), but today he seemed preoccupied. Someone gently said, “Bang, this is an idea that you suggested.”

“I’ll give it some thought,” he said, vaguely. (Raj’s eyes remain brown.)



The group began discussing a treatment for Katseye’s first music video, outlining such themes as “overcoming fear and dreaming big” and “having fun with just the girls.” Bang suddenly interjected, “I’m really, really sorry—but I need to make an urgent phone call.”

An insurrection had broken out within *hybe*. Bang had come to believe that Min Hee-jin—the head of a sub-label responsible for the wildly popular girl group NewJeans—was trying to leave *hybe* and take the band with her. Earlier that day, Min had held a two-hour press conference in which she disputed the charge—and shared a text from Bang himself asking her to

“crush” a rival act. The event had aired on all three major Korean broadcasters and been live-streamed on YouTube. The NewJeans uproar would soon cause the company’s stock to plunge by hundreds of millions of dollars. *hybe* had been the first K-pop company big enough to implement a multi-label system; now the hydra that Bang had fed for a decade was threatening to eat itself.

Though the conflict underlined the perils of overextending one’s empire, Bang was forging ahead. A few weeks later, he told me, “Music delivers a very strong experience and emotions in an instant of listening. But we want to make it so that it can be part of a much longer and more sustained type of content consumption.” He continued, “I’ve read books about gamification and why people are addicted to games.” He was studying multiplayer online role-playing games and first-person shooters, and planned to develop games across multiple genres; some would feature alter egos of *hybe* artists, but others would have no connection with the idols. This turn felt at once arbitrary and revealing: increasingly, the company seemed to be losing interest in the musicians themselves.

Indeed, *hybe* has been quietly testing out VTubers—animated characters rendered via motion capture of human actors. In Japan, where the practice originated, these avatars bring in millions of dollars a month live-streaming and “performing” in concerts. Bang told me that *hybe*’s VTube projects don’t use the company’s name, adding that they are an experiment “to identify what it is that people find attractive in digital characters.” *hybe* has acquired Supertone, an A.I.-audio startup, and he anticipates débütting digital singers soon: “The expandability of nonhuman artists is unlimited.”

Not for the first time, I wondered if Bang’s mania for optimization had gone too far. *hybe*’s goal, it seems, is simply to get bigger—embracing whatever medium, language, or technology maximizes its reach. Choi, the Weverse executive, felt that the app was an extension of his boss’s “love of music.” Bang, he insisted, “wants to be in the music business forever—but he felt that the entire industry situation was very hard.” Although Bang’s fixation on audience data had kept his artists afloat, the emphasis on constant growth has changed the company culture. “We’re expanding like a U.S. business—we’re expanding catalogues, we’re expanding our labels,” Bang told me. “I don’t know if we can even call this K-pop anymore, what this will become.”

When Katseye's début single—titled “Debut”—was released, in June, it met with a tepid response. The attempt to showcase all six girls in a two-minute track felt rushed; the lyrics, co-written by Ryan Tedder (who also worked on “Halo,” for Beyoncé), were awkward: “Love me once the naughty turns to nice.” But, by midsummer, Bang’s playbook was working. The far catchier second single, “Touch,” came complete with TikTok-friendly choreography, and soon became lodged on Spotify’s Top Hits playlist. When a video dense with blink-and-you’ll-miss-it hints at a larger universe was released, fan theories bloomed in response.

The EP’s third track, co-produced by Bang, is particularly revealing of his method. If “Touch” is a boppy earworm about waiting for a boy to text you back—a near-universal experience for Katseye’s target demographic—“My Way” weaves in the girls’ personal preoccupations. New *hybe* artists undergo extensive interviews that dig into their personal lives, convictions, and anxieties. For Katseye, Bang had deputized an executive to ask them about “how the world sees them, and how they were able to let these things go.” Bang reviewed the transcripts and channelled the answers into “My Way,” which is about brushing off haters. “Every line, I try to put in stories from the lives of the members,” he told me. Avanzini sings of youthful insecurity about her thick, curly hair; during a live stream celebrating the album, listeners latched on to the verse: “i can relate to you dani,” one wrote, adding, “i have super curly coily hair and i struggled for a long time to love it.”

In July, I attended Katseye’s first live performance, which took place in L.A., on the final day of KCON, an annual proving ground for K-pop acts. The Enhypen booth, at the Los Angeles Convention Center, featured exclusive versions of the group’s latest album, “Romance: Untold,” which could be purchased only via Weverse. I thought that the added fuss of scanning a QR code and downloading an app might hurt sales, but attendees whipped out their phones, and the limited editions quickly sold out. (That weekend, “Romance: Untold” hit No. 2 on the *Billboard* 200.)

A few hours before the show, I noticed a crowd dotted with black-and-purple signs that read “*welcome to katseye world*” converging around a booth devoted to KCON’s lead sponsor, Samsung Galaxy. The girls, dressed in red and black, were doing some sponcon. A man with a microphone

celebrated the way the Galaxy enabled users to take “hands-free” selfies, and asked the girls to demonstrate. They struck their “Cute!” pose. A boy near me, in a pastel-blue sweater, shouted for the members by name: “Manon! Yoonchae! Sophia!” His eyes brimmed with tears.

The boy, a nineteen-year-old from Alabama named Joshua, had flown to L.A. with eight friends for KCON. He’d followed Katseye since the competition phase, downloading Weverse to vote for his favorites—and had supported all six of the final members. A Black dancer himself, he found Manon’s selection moving. “To see people of my same background break out onto the scene, and to get to watch her journey and her growth, is really inspiring,” he told me. “What’s special about Katseye is that they feel so down to earth—like normal people.”

I headed to the nearby Crypto.com Arena to see an array of idols perform. Katseye, as a new group, was part of the pre-show. It was only 4:45 *p.m.* when the girls went onstage, and the arena was far from filled. But true believers screamed loudly enough to compensate. Giant screens displayed an introductory clip for each idol; Laforteza’s prompted a roar.

Bang’s training regime was paying off. The members’ chemistry had visibly increased since I’d met them; their choreography was immaculate, down to their fine-tuned facial expressions. After the group sang “Debut,” each girl addressed the crowd, telegraphing gratitude and excitement. Later, when clips of the performance were uploaded, Eyekons responded with proprietary pride at how far the group had come.

When I spoke to Bang again, in September, he, too, was pleased with Katseye’s progress. They’d performed on “Good Morning America,” and, though not everything was to his satisfaction—“I knew American music shows wouldn’t be able to create the sort of stage that meets my expectations”—the girls had delivered. They have already amassed some ten million monthly listeners. Katseye would soon begin a tour of South Korea, Japan, and the Philippines. “We’re moving in step with the grand plan,” Bang said. There’d been “whispers” among his American peers about “whether this would work here,” he said, a bit smugly. “We can see with the numbers that it *is*.¹”

His situation in Korea was less stable. Min Hee-jin had been forced out, but the *HYBE* idols who'd been under her care wanted her back—and had used the company's own tools to express displeasure. “After our C.E.O. was dismissed, I’ve been struggling and dealing with a lot of worries,” a NewJeans member wrote to fans. “But there wasn’t a day that went by that I didn’t think of you all and how *you* must be feeling.” In mid-September, NewJeans stealthily held a live stream in which they demanded Min’s reinstatement, and called out their boss directly: “We hope Chairman Bang and *hybe* will make a wise decision.”

When I asked Bang about Min, he declined to comment, citing the ongoing legal conflict. He had other corners of the empire on his mind. *hybe* has opened offices in Mexico City and Miami, in an attempt to enter the Latin-music market. The company is quietly training a group in the region. “It’s running well,” Bang said. He’s also developing two new groups in the U.S.—a boy band and another girl group—and was back in L.A. to work on a track with the rapper Don Toliver. “My ambition is not to just have *one* successful group,” Bang said. “To achieve the ultimate goal of cultural change, it’s almost a necessity to make sure you have many of them progressing.”

Though he still speaks of BTS with paternal fondness, Bang takes a more hands-off approach with *hybe*’s fledglings. When he called to congratulate BTS on topping the *Billboard* charts for the first time, in 2021—a moment immortalized in one of the behind-the-scenes videos that had helped to make the boys famous—he was near tears. These days, things are different. Even Enhypen, one of *hybe*’s great hopes, has been subjected to a punishing, data-driven campaign: this summer, when the band concluded one world tour and immediately announced another, devotees parked a truck in front of the company’s Seoul HQ emblazoned with the words “*let enhypen rest.*” The group has sold millions of albums in the past few months alone—but few outside the world of K-pop have heard of them. Bang himself almost never watches them in the flesh. In deference to his digital-native audience, he now makes it his policy to experience *hybe* artists through a screen. Concerts like Weverse Con aside, he told me, “I haven’t seen a live performance in person in a very long time.”

Bang noted that it had been easier to train Katseye than early *hybe* acts, because the girls had already internalized much of his playbook. “Young artists from one generation ago, when we talked about K-pop-style fan engagement, a lot of them weren’t comfortable with doing it,” he said. But Katseye’s members were “eager and active—even more, sometimes, than K-pop artists.”

A week later, on the Philippines leg of Katseye’s Asia tour, Laforteza started a Weverse Live. The stream had the air of a casual FaceTime with a friend; it was late in Manila, and she was brushing her hair as viewers poured in. She said she was thrilled to be back home, but confessed that, after several years in L.A., she’d grown rusty at using her mother tongue. “Can you guys help me . . . get back into the groove of speaking Tagalog?” she asked, in English. She switched playfully between the two languages, thanking Filipino users by name as they supplied words she’d forgotten.

Other Katseye members wandered into the room; Laforteza offered them Philippine snacks. They’d been bantering for half an hour when a follower dropped a Tagalog tongue twister in the chat. Laforteza managed it, but the other girls giggled as they stumbled over the words; it was the kind of easy, authentic cross-cultural communion that Bang had dreamed of. After several attempts, nobody had quite mastered the sentence, but one had a suggestion for how to make it stick: “If you teach me it like a song, I will understand.” ♦

Letter from Greenland

When the Arctic Melts

What the fate of Greenland means for the rest of the Earth.

By Elizabeth Kolbert

October 07, 2024



In the middle of the night in the middle of the summer in the middle of the Greenland ice sheet, I woke to find myself with a blinding headache. An anxious person living in anxious times, I've had plenty of headaches, but this one felt different, as if someone had taken a mallet to my sinuses. I'd flown up to the ice the previous afternoon, to a research station owned and operated by the National Science Foundation. The station, called Summit, sits ten thousand five hundred and thirty feet above sea level. The first person I'd met upon arriving was the resident doctor, who warned me and a few other newcomers to expect to experience altitude sickness. In most cases, he said, this would produce only passing, hangover-like symptoms; on occasion, though, it could result in brain swelling and death. Belatedly, I realized that I'd neglected to ask how to tell the difference.

N.S.F. Summit Station—according to the agency’s many rules, this is how visiting journalists are required to refer to the place—was erected in the late nineteen-eighties. Initially, it was occupied only in the summer; now a small crew remains through the winter, when, at Summit’s latitude—seventy-two degrees north—the sun never clears the horizon. The station’s main structure is known as the Big House. It resembles a double-wide trailer and teeters almost thirty feet above the ice, on metal pilings. Arrayed around it are a weather station, also elevated on pilings; a couple of very chilly outhouses; several tanks of jet fuel; and an emergency shelter that’s shaped like a watermelon and called the Tomato. Some of the station’s residents used to sleep in tents, but a few years ago a polar bear showed up, so the tents have been replaced by metal sheds.

The Greenland ice sheet has the shape of a dome, with Summit resting at the very top. The ice dome is so immense that it’s hard to picture, even if you’ve flown across it. It extends over more than six hundred and fifty thousand square miles—an area roughly the size of Alaska—and in the middle it is two miles tall. It is massive enough to depress the Earth’s crust and to exert a significant gravitational pull on the oceans. If all of Greenland’s ice were cut into one-inch cubes and these were piled one on top of another, the stack would reach Alpha Centauri. If it melted—a rather more plausible scenario—global sea levels would rise by twenty feet.

Until relatively recently, it was thought that Summit would be, if not unaffected by climate change, at least untroubled by it. Such is the ice sheet’s bulk that at its center it creates its own weather. But in the past few decades Greenland has changed in ways that have stunned scientists who spend their lives studying it. Since the nineteen-seventies, it has shed some six trillion tons of ice, and the rate of loss has been accelerating. Crevasses are appearing at higher elevations, glaciers are moving at non-glacial speeds, and large parts of the ice sheet appear to be twisting, like a writhing beast. In July, 2012, surface melt was detected at Summit for the first time since modern measurements began. In 2019, the station experienced melt in mid-June and then again in late July. On August 14, 2021, it rained, an event so remarkable that it made news around the world. (“For the First Time on Record, Rain Fell at the Summit of Greenland,” ran the headline in the *Sydney Morning Herald*.) There was late-season melt at Summit in September, 2022, and more melt in June, 2023.

The story of climate change is generally told in terms of human action, and for good reason. The almost two trillion tons of CO₂ that people have pumped into the atmosphere have changed the planet in ways that every day become more apparent. Last year, average global temperatures set a new record, and by a wide margin. Canada experienced record wildfires; the Caribbean saw record ocean temperatures, which devastated its coral reefs; and Libya was hit with record rainfall, which led to a dam collapse that killed more than five thousand people. This year's global temperatures will almost certainly surpass last year's. Among the many climate-related disasters of 2024 so far have been a heat wave in Mecca that killed thirteen hundred pilgrims during the hajj and Hurricane Helene, which caused at least twenty billion dollars' worth of damage. How people—or governments and corporations, run by people—respond to the mounting losses will have repercussions that will last, for all intents and purposes, forever. As no less an authority than the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change put it, upon releasing its latest scientific assessment, “The future is in our hands.”

But, like so many stories that get told, this one doesn't tell the whole story. The future depends on how humanity reacts to global warming, and it also depends on how the Earth does. Owing to advances in everything from satellite altimetry to deep-sea drilling, a great deal has been learned in the past few decades about the planet's history. Much of the new science suggests that the climate is, all on its own, unstable, prone to dramatic and sometimes sudden shifts.



The history of Greenland is a case in point. During what's known as the Last Glacial Maximum, some twenty thousand years ago, an ice sheet stretched more or less continuously from Greenland across Ellesmere and Baffin Islands and down over Canada and much of the northern United States. So much water was tied up in the ice that sea levels were four hundred feet lower than they are today, and it was possible to walk not just from Siberia to Alaska but also from Australia to Tasmania and from England to France. When the ice began to recede, around fifteen thousand years ago, large swaths of the world experienced catastrophic flooding. During one particularly sudden period, known as meltwater pulse 1A, sea levels rose by more than a foot a decade.

Most scientists believe that ice ages—there have been at least ten of them over the past two and half million years—are initiated and terminated by periodic shifts in the Earth's orbit, caused by, among other factors, the tug of Jupiter and Saturn. But orbital shifts produce only slight changes in the amount of sunlight that reaches different parts of the globe at different times of the year. Such slight variations are insufficient to explain the growth and subsequent retreat of massive ice sheets. Rather, it seems, the orbital shifts act like a trigger, setting off other processes—feedbacks—that greatly amplify their effect. One relatively straightforward feedback features albedo, from the Latin word for “whiteness.” Ice and especially snow have a high

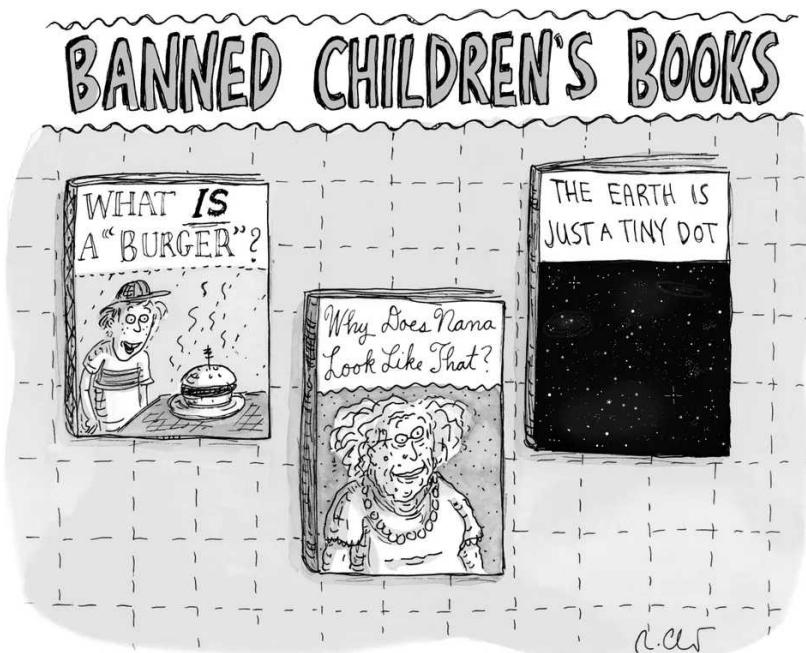
albedo. They reflect lots of sunlight back to space. Thus, as an ice sheet grows, the planet absorbs less energy. This has a cooling effect, which encourages the buildup of more snow and ice, which results in more reflectivity, and so on. Start to melt an ice sheet and the same cycle spins in reverse.

Today, feedbacks are, to put it mildly, a growing concern. A report published last year by more than two hundred researchers from around the world noted that many of the systems that determine the climate exhibit nonlinear behavior. Such systems may “shift to a very different state, often abruptly or irreversibly, as a result of self-sustaining feedbacks.” The researchers identified two dozen potential “tipping systems,” among them the Greenland ice sheet.

At a certain point, the report warned, feedbacks could become so powerful that, even if CO₂ emissions were cut dramatically and temperatures stabilized, the ice sheet would continue to shrink, possibly until it collapsed. The “best estimate” of when this critical threshold will be reached is when average global temperatures rise 1.5 degrees Celsius—roughly three degrees Fahrenheit—above preindustrial levels. Even after that line is crossed, it will take many centuries for the changes set in motion to play out. Still, as a practical matter, there will be no going back. When it comes to tipping systems, the future is in our hands until it isn’t.

Days at Summit begin with a staff meeting held in a heated tent that’s outfitted with a treadmill, weights, and yoga mats. In front of the treadmill, people have taped scenes from more temperate climes—ones with trees and flowers. On my first morning at the station—I still had a headache, but no fatal brain swelling—the station’s supervisor opened the session with a request for volunteers to lug a pair of propane tanks up the stairs to the Big House. Summit’s cook announced that the latest shipment of food was short on lettuce. Someone pointed out that there were problems with the flags on the station’s runway, which is made entirely of snow. A fourth person promised to clean the outhouses. After the meeting, I got to launch the daily weather balloon, which was about three feet tall and dangled a cartridge of electronic instruments. The balloon, filled with helium, flew out of my hands. I tried to follow it as it sailed over the ice, but I soon lost sight of it.

The view from Summit in all directions is pretty much the same: white. The Norwegian explorer Fridtjof Nansen, who, in the eighteen-eighties, led the first team to cross Greenland on skis, recalled the ice sheet's monotony—an “interminable flat desert of snow.” There was, he complained, “no break or change in our horizon, no object to rest the eye upon, and no point by which to direct the course.” Especially when it’s cloudy, the ice, free of shadows, appears as one enormous blank page.



In fact, the ice sheet is packed with information, like a giant encyclopedia. Among the first to recognize this was Ernst Sorge, a German glaciologist. “I’m looking at a landscape whose vast simplicity is nowhere to be surpassed on earth, and which yet conceals a thousand secrets,” he wrote.

Sorge was part of a famous—infamous, really—expedition that set off from Copenhagen in the spring of 1930. The expedition’s leader was another German scientist, Alfred Wegener, who’s best known for having come up with the theory of continental drift. One of Wegener’s goals was to establish a camp at a site dubbed Eismitte, or “ice middle,” about a hundred miles south of where Summit now sits. Sorge and a colleague were supposed to overwinter at the site and take meteorological measurements. Owing to a series of unfortunate events, a third man, who was suffering from frostbite, ended up stuck at the camp as well and had to have his toes amputated with

a penknife. Meanwhile, Wegener died as he was trying to fight his way back to the coast, eating his sled dogs along the way. His body is still buried somewhere in the ice.

From the surface, the camp at Eismitte looked like a snow fort with a round turret. Beneath the surface were chambers—a living room, an instrument room, and a storeroom—that had been dug out of the snow. Fascinated by the subglacial world, Sorge kept on digging until, at the far end of the camp, he had sunk a shaft more than fifty feet deep. Studying the walls of the shaft by lamplight, he discovered that he could tell the difference between snow that had fallen on Eismitte in the summer and snow that had fallen in the winter. By counting backward through the seasonal layers, he calculated that his shaft extended through twenty-one years' worth of accumulation.

In the decades that followed, researchers delved deeper and deeper, using increasingly sophisticated drills. The farther the drills descended, the denser the layers of old snow became, until they were compressed into ice. But even in the icy depths the difference between summer and winter precipitation could be discerned. This made it possible to date each layer back through the centuries.

Meanwhile, scientists found that they could tease out a wealth of data from every annual increment. By analyzing the ice with a mass spectrometer, they could calculate what the average temperature on Greenland had been in any given year. And by extracting the gases contained in tiny bubbles of trapped air they could reconstruct changes in the atmosphere.

In the nineteen-nineties, a team of American researchers working at Summit succeeded in drilling all the way from the top of the ice sheet to the bedrock. In the process, they pulled up thousands of long, skinny cylinders of ice—two miles' worth. In ice from fifteen hundred and two feet down, there was snow that fell when Nero was emperor; at twenty-three hundred and fifty feet, snow from the reign of Tutankhamun. At the very bottom was snow that fell before the start of the last glaciation.



Analysis of the core showed, in extraordinary detail, how temperatures in central Greenland had varied during the last ice age, which in the U.S. is called the Wisconsin. As would be expected, there was a steep drop in temperatures at the start of the Wisconsin, around a hundred thousand years ago, and a steep rise toward the end of it. But the analysis also revealed something disconcerting. In addition to the long-term oscillations, the ice recorded dozens of shorter, wilder swings. During the Wisconsin, Greenland was often unimaginably cold, with temperatures nearly thirty degrees lower than they are now. Then temperatures would shoot up, in some instances by as much as twenty degrees in a couple of decades, only to drop again, somewhat more gradually. Finally, about twelve thousand years ago, the roller coaster came to a halt. Temperatures settled down, and a time of relative climate tranquillity began. This is the period that includes all of recorded history, a coincidence that, presumably, is no coincidence.

Richard Alley, a glaciologist at Penn State and the author of a book about the ice-coring project, summed up the findings as follows: “For most of the last 100,000 years, a crazily jumping climate has been the rule, not the exception.”

To work at Summit, scientists have to apply to the N.S.F., an independent agency of the U.S. government. The same goes for journalists. My trip to the

station was arranged by the agency's Polar Media Program, which sent an "escort"—a Washington, D.C.-based press officer—to accompany me. So intent was my escort on not letting me out of her sight that it became something of a station joke. At one point, when we briefly became separated, I asked someone in the Big House to let her know that I had gone to another building.

"Don't worry," he replied. "I'll tell her you wandered off into the snow."

At the time of my stay, in mid-July, roughly half of the station's forty-odd residents were contract employees who were there to keep the place running, an immense logistical challenge. Summit's (more or less) constant below-freezing temperatures make basic operations like supplying drinking water both complicated and energy-intensive: the water has to be melted from snow, the pipes that circulate it have to be heated, and the fuel that provides the energy has to be flown in. (Thanks to a long-standing arrangement, supplies and also people are transported to Summit by the New York Air National Guard's 109th Airlift Wing, which operates a fleet of ski-equipped cargo planes out of an old U.S. Air Force base on Greenland's west coast.) Several people I met at Summit had spent the previous winter working on Antarctica, either at McMurdo or South Pole Station, and were planning to return there for the next austral summer. They said that the challenge of the work was part of its draw, as was the space-station-like camaraderie.

Another largish contingent was installing a network of radio antennas. These, it was hoped, could be used to detect ultra-high-energy neutrinos. Potential sources of such neutrinos, I learned, include gamma-ray bursts, pulsars, and clusters of galaxies known as flat-spectrum radio quasars.

"We cannot detect the neutrinos directly," Felix Schlüter, a German astrophysicist, explained to me one day, when I sat down with him in the Big House. "We can only detect them when they're interacting with the ice and producing other particles." The following afternoon, I (and my escort) set out with Schlüter on snowmobiles to visit some antennas that had recently been installed about three miles from the station. During the ride, I pulled my neck gaiter over my mouth, which turned out to be a mistake: the moisture from my breath caused it to freeze to my face. When we got to the spot, it was maybe ten degrees Fahrenheit, and a brisk wind was blowing.

There was some scaffolding and green flags, but most of the critical equipment had been buried hundreds of feet down. We were deep enough into Nansen's interminable desert that the Big House, the Tomato, and the outhouses had all sunk out of view.

Every summer, the N.S.F. flies a group of high-school students up to Summit as part of a program whose stated goal is to "inspire the next generation" of polar researchers. Zoe Courville, a snow scientist with the Cold Regions Research and Engineering Laboratory, in New Hampshire, was at the station to prepare for the annual visit. One morning, I watched her and an energetic young technician named Caleigh Warner dig a snow pit behind the Big House. The idea was to use it, à la Sorge, to show the kids the difference between summer and winter snow. When Courville and Warner were done, the pit was about seven feet deep and accessible only by a set of snow stairs. I clambered down.

For the first few layers, the seasonal differences were clear even to a novice like me. Summer snow is coarse and grainy; winter snow, smooth and dense. Courville ran a bare finger down one wall of the pit. A couple of feet below the surface, she paused. "That's probably last summer's melt," she said. "When you look at the grains, they're rounded and fused together." I ran a gloved finger along the same spot. The melt layer was thin and brittle. I broke off a piece that resembled a shard of glass.

"When I first started coming up here, twenty years ago, we had models that were predicting what the climate would be like in Greenland," Courville said. "And we're starting to be outside of even the most dire predictions in terms of temperature increase."

"I try to be optimistic about things," Courville told me at another point. "I don't know that it's all doom and gloom. But from what I've experienced here in Greenland, at the center of the ice sheet, we're approaching the point of no return."

When the students finally arrived—they were a day late, owing to various problems with the ski-equipped planes—they were buzzing with excitement. They took turns descending into the pit in heavy boots and parkas that they had borrowed for the trip. A visiting scientist from the University of

California, Irvine, brought out some cylinders of ancient ice to show them. The kids were invited to smash the cylinders with a mallet, an activity they took to with gusto. Ziplock bags were passed around so that everyone could take a chunk as a keepsake. The gesture struck me as curious, since the ice was destined to melt as soon as the students took off again for the coast. But maybe, I thought, that was the point.

Today, the spot where the Summit core was drilled is preserved almost like a shrine. The metal casing that the drillers left behind still sticks up out of the snow, even though the borehole beneath it has collapsed. The casing is wrapped in a custom-made jacket, and attached to it is a red flag that shudders in the near-constant wind.

The Summit core—officially the Greenland Ice Sheet Project Two, or *GISP2*, core—filled in a key chapter in climate history and, at the same time, opened up a huge gap. Apparently, there was some great force missing from the textbooks—one that was capable of yanking temperatures around like a yo-yo. By now, evidence of the crazy swings seen in the Greenland ice has shown up in many other parts of the world—in a lake bed in the Balkans, for example, and in a cave in southern New Mexico. (In more temperate regions, the magnitude of the swings was lower.)

Scientists are still struggling to make sense of the data. The best theory is that the wild swings were set off by some daisy chain of feedbacks involving the ice, the air, and—most important—the oceans.

The great wheelworks of the climate, the oceans transport fantastic amounts of energy—a quadrillion watts’ worth—from the sun-drenched tropics toward the sun-starved poles. One particularly important loop in this system is the Atlantic Meridional Overturning Circulation, or *AMOC* (pronounced “ay-mock”). The loop might be said to begin in the North Atlantic, where the surface waters are especially cold and salty. The combination of low temperature and high salinity makes the water unusually dense, so it sinks. Warmer water from the south rushes in behind it; as this water cools, it sinks, drawing still more water north, and so on. Oceanographers measure currents in units called sverdrups. One sverdrup equals a million cubic metres per second. When the *AMOC* is operating at full strength, the water

circulates to the tune of twenty sverdrups, a hundred times the flow of the Amazon River.



Any disruption of the *AMOC* would disrupt the great oceanic transfer of energy and, with that, the climate. The consensus among scientists is that such disruptions must have occurred repeatedly during the last glaciation, even if exactly what triggered them remains unclear.

In the context of global warming, the *AMOC*'s vulnerability is—once again, to put things mildly—worrysome. The fact that there haven't been any major disruptions for the past twelve thousand years could mean that the system is stable during warm periods. Alternatively, it could mean that it's stable until it receives some ill-understood nudge.

"We play Russian roulette with climate," Wallace Broecker, a geologist at Columbia University who popularized the term "global warming" and did critical work on ocean circulation, once observed. But "no one knows what lies in the active chamber of the gun."

As Greenland melts, more freshwater is streaming into the oceans. Discharge from Arctic rivers, like the Lena, in Russia, is also rising. All this is changing the density of the North Atlantic, potentially enough to interfere with the *AMOC*'s conveyor-belt-like motion.

Researchers have been directly monitoring the system’s rate of flow for only about twenty years—too short a time to draw firm conclusions. But scientists who have tried to reconstruct circulation patterns over longer periods, by looking at indirect evidence, have concluded that the *AMOC* is slowing. A 2021 study, published in the journal *Nature Climate Change*, found several “early warning signals” that the system was “close to a critical transition.” A 2023 study, in *Nature Communications*, went a step further: it predicted that the *AMOC* could tip into a new state within decades. Just before I left for Greenland, yet another study on the *AMOC* appeared; this one estimated that it could shut down completely sometime between 2037 and 2064.

Were the *AMOC* to collapse, heat would build in the Southern Hemisphere. Global rainfall patterns would shift, storms in the Atlantic would become more destructive, and warm water would pile up on the shores of the eastern U.S., leading to rapid sea-level rise. Places like Britain and Scandinavia would, perversely, grow much colder; according to one recent study, temperatures in London would drop by almost twenty degrees, which would give it a climate like present-day Siberia’s. Farming in much of northern Europe would become impossible.

“A full *AMOC* collapse would be a massive, planetary-scale disaster” is how Stefan Rahmstorf, an oceanographer at the University of Potsdam, in Germany, recently put it. “We *really* want to prevent this from happening.”

Greenland, the world’s largest island, is a Danish territory. Though eighty per cent of the island is covered in ice, there are slender ice-free strips along the coast, and people have inhabited these areas, on and off, for nearly five thousand years. Today, most Greenlanders are of Inuit descent and speak both Danish and Greenlandic. About a third of the island’s fifty-six thousand residents live in the capital, Nuuk; the rest live in towns and villages that hug the fjords.

Kangerlussuaq, which has a population of about five hundred, sits at the end of a particularly long fjord on Greenland’s west coast. The town exists largely because of its runway, which was built by the U.S. Air Force during the Second World War and is now used by Air Greenland as well as by the New York Air National Guard. It has a grocery store, a restaurant

overlooking the runway, and a recreation center open only to Guard members and their invited guests. After my stay at Summit, Kangerlussuaq struck me as positively cosmopolitan.

In Kanger, as it is often called, I had arranged to meet Marco Tedesco, a climate scientist at Columbia who studies ice dynamics. When I caught up with him, he was fuming over a rental car. He'd been under the impression that he'd reserved an S.U.V. with off-road clearance; instead, he'd been handed the keys to an ancient Honda. Would the car get stuck in glacial silt, which sometimes acts like quicksand? From Tedesco, I learned a new word in Greenlandic: *immaqa*, meaning "maybe."

Tedesco, who grew up near Naples, is tall and lanky, with a shaved head and a collection of tattoos that he has acquired in various places for various reasons. On his right arm is a shower of snowflakes; one is twelve-pointed, which, he told me, is a design very rarely found in nature and which he chose in memory of his mother. On his left arm, the assortment includes a water droplet that he got in Hawaii during a low period—"I felt like a drop in the ocean"—and on his chest are Chinese characters that he translated as "big truth." Tedesco had brought along a former graduate student of his, Paolo Colosio, who's now a postdoc at the University of Brescia. When I told them that my husband taught Dante, they both began reciting the opening canto of the Inferno: *Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita / mi ritrovai per una selva oscura / ché la diritta via era smarrita.*

We went to have dinner at the restaurant by the runway. The weather along the coast had been bad, and the place was crowded with people whose flights had been cancelled. (I later heard that Air Greenland is sometimes referred to as Immaqa Airline.)

Tedesco told me that he had become interested in the Greenland ice sheet about twenty years ago. At the time, he was working for *NASA*, thinking about how to improve the detection of snowmelt via satellite. After a while, he decided that he needed to see the place for himself. "I wanted to look at things more completely," he said. Since 2010, he has visited Greenland fourteen times. On one visit, he launched a radio-controlled boat into a meltwater lake and, from a safe distance, watched the lake drain. On another,

he installed sensors on the bottom of an empty meltwater lake and, from a not so safe distance, waited for it to fill.

On a trip last year, Tedesco brought along a drone to measure albedo at the edge of the ice sheet. Melt along the edge is exposing more rock and soil; since these are darker than ice, they absorb more sunlight, fostering more melt. But even where plenty of ice remains the reflectivity of the surface is dropping.

“The surface is darkening from an energy point of view,” Tedesco said. “It’s basically like exposing a wound and then putting some salt in it.”

Beyond its runway, Kangerlussuaq has one main attraction: a twenty-mile dirt road that leads away from the coast, toward the ice sheet. The road, improbably enough, was laid for Volkswagen, in the late nineties. As the story goes, the carmaker had a cold-weather test facility erected on the ice which included a track and a dorm for workers. But, after a few years, the whole scheme was abandoned. The road is now maintained by the municipality of Qeqqata, which encompasses Kangerlussuaq and is the size of Ohio.

“I’m always very emotional when I drive this road,” Tedesco said the next morning, as we headed out. “It’s my adopted land.” As he drove, he described to me a scheme of his own—never realized—to establish a museum of Arctic smells. Archived fragrances might include the herbal scent of the tundra and the perfectly blank smell of the ice. It was Colosio’s first visit to Greenland, and Tedesco warned him that the place had a mystical draw.

“You’re going to want to keep coming back,” he said. “You’re going to be under the spell.”

The old VW road runs almost due east, through a flat, sandy valley flanked by glacially smoothed hills. The area’s native trees are all low and shrubby, but a few miles out of Kangerlussuaq we came to a grove of introduced pines. The pines seemed to be thriving in the warming climate, and people had decorated some of them with Christmas ornaments. We passed an Arctic hare—very white and surprisingly large—and then a family of reindeer.

After about an hour, we reached a spot where, across the valley, a tongue of ice spilled over a ridge. Tedesco identified the tongue as belonging to the Russell Glacier. (In addition to the ice sheet, which is essentially one enormous glacier, Greenland also has thousands of smaller, peripheral glaciers.) We stopped to take a better look.

When Tedesco first travelled the VW road, Russell ended in a dramatic wall of ice. Now the wall is gone, and the glacier looks deflated—more like an ice doormat. Tedesco compared visiting Russell to calling on a friend with a terminal illness. “You have to have the strength to say goodbye,” he said. “You see this and you say, ‘Oh, man, it’s happening really fast.’ ”

The VW road originally ran from Kangerlussuaq all the way to the ice sheet. Thanks to melt, it no longer gets there. Instead, it gives out a half mile short, at a huge pile of dirt and jumbled rock—a moraine in the making. We parked near an old bulldozer that seemed to be rusting into the ground. Tedesco and Colosio strapped on backpacks filled with equipment, and we began hiking over the rubble.



It was cloudy and a relatively balmy forty degrees. (The average annual temperature in Kangerlussuaq is around twenty-four degrees Fahrenheit, compared with about minus twenty degrees at Summit.) “*Speriamo che non*

piova,” Colosio remarked. (Let’s hope it doesn’t rain.) We reached the edge of the ice sheet, which was so thin that we could walk right onto it, as you would step onto a curb. There was meltwater everywhere, collecting in puddles and running in rivulets. In some places, the rivulets had merged to form streams that had to be jumped across.

“If we come back in a few days, we’ll have to bring bathing suits,” Tedesco joked, laying down his backpack.

Tedesco’s goal for the expedition was to repeat the albedo measurements that he had made last year, to see how conditions had changed. Once again, he’d brought along his drone. It was equipped with two sets of sensors—one to measure incoming radiation, from the sun, the other to measure outgoing radiation, reflected off the ice. To calibrate the sensors, he laid out a plastic sheet checkered in black and white, like a signal flag. It was apparently a lot more high-tech than it looked. “That little square cost me two thousand bucks,” he said.

While Tedesco and Colosio tinkered with the drone, I wandered around. At Summit, it’s always very white because there’s always—or nearly always—fresh snow, and everyone wears goggles or sunglasses to prevent snow blindness. At the ice sheet’s ragged edge, whatever snow had fallen during the winter had, by mid-July, long melted away, and there was only ice, which came in many shades, all of them gray. The ice was speckled with bits of dust, which glaciologists call cryoconite, and pocked with cryoconite holes, which form because dust absorbs sunlight more efficiently than ice does. The surface was changing so quickly that I could watch as neighboring holes merged to form pools. I also came upon a much larger hole, maybe twenty feet across and perfectly round, that went straight down. It had, I figured, once been a moulin, which is a shaft tunnelled out by a river of meltwater. When they’re full, moulins are spectacularly beautiful and equally dangerous. This one was empty and dingy, with blackened edges. It looked like some kind of side entrance to the underworld.

I wandered back. The drone was flying, making a series of parallel passes over the ice. Tedesco was following its progress on the video screen of his remote control. He told me about a film he wanted to make that would feature mournful music and footage of the ice sheet taken from above. It

would last exactly nine minutes and seventeen seconds, because the density of pure ice is nine hundred and seventeen kilograms per cubic metre.

“I want people to really feel the ice,” he said. “I think it’s important for people to realize that we’re doing this and we are responsible. We have to look at ourselves in the mirror, right?”

Once you go looking for feedbacks, you start to see them just about everywhere. On Greenland, the ice sheet isn’t just getting darker; large sections of it are losing elevation. Because temperature and altitude are inversely related—imagine descending a mountain—this is bringing the ice into contact with warmer air, leading to melt, leading to further loss of elevation. Across the Arctic, permafrost is thawing. In the process, it’s releasing carbon dioxide and methane—an even more powerful greenhouse gas—producing more warming and more thawing. Canada’s boreal forest is another vast carbon storehouse. Owing to bigger and more intense wildfires, the forest is giving up its CO₂, and so encouraging more fires. Much the same thing is happening in the American West.

Key to the survival of the Amazon rain forest is rain generated by the forest itself: moisture evaporating off the leaves condenses into clouds that then drop their water on the trees. As droughts in the Amazon intensify and deforestation continues, the rain forest is shrinking, fostering deeper droughts and further shrinkage. Like the Greenland ice sheet and the *AMOC*, the Amazon is considered a potential tipping system; without sufficient rainfall, large parts of it could turn into grassland.

The existence of so many amplifying feedbacks—and the possibility of crossing multiple tipping points—increases the risk associated with every additional bit of warming, though by how much, exactly, no one can say. In a paper published last year, a group of scientists from Europe and the U.S. identified twenty-seven positive, or intensifying, feedback loops in the climate system and only seven negative, or dampening, ones. (A key negative feedback—the so-called Planck feedback—involves the fact that a warmer planet radiates more energy out to space.) They warned that feedback loops could feed on one another and that this could result in a “sequence of climate tipping points being exceeded, producing ‘climate cascades.’”



In 2015, when world leaders agreed in Paris to try to limit the global temperature increase to 1.5 degrees Celsius, it was hoped that this would minimize the damage from feedbacks and prevent the world from crossing dangerous thresholds. Already, by some measures, temperatures have crept above that limit. According to the research group Berkeley Earth, over the past year they have averaged 1.66 degrees above preindustrial levels, and according to Copernicus, part of the European Union's space program, they have averaged 1.64 degrees above those levels. "The 1.5-degree limit is deader than a doornail," the former *NASA* climate scientist James Hansen, who is sometimes referred to as the father of global warming, has said. The world might need to spend decades at 1.5 degrees before triggering the tipping points associated with this temperature, but that is slim comfort, as in coming decades temperatures will almost certainly continue to rise.

There is, in principle, nothing wrong with a warmer world, or even one whose climate bounces around. At many points in history, the Earth has been much hotter than it is today. During a period known as the Cretaceous Thermal Maximum, for instance, around ninety million years ago, breadfruit trees grew on Greenland, and a rain forest thrived on Antarctica. During the Wisconsin, as temperatures yo-yoed up and down, people were living in Africa, Europe, Asia, Australia, and quite possibly North and South America. Some of them managed to get by, or we wouldn't be here.

But the society we have now was built for the climate we have now, or at least a close approximation of it. Alter the world by, say, drowning Dhaka or Shanghai and all sorts of knock-on effects follow. Last year's report on global tipping points—the one produced by more than two hundred researchers—predicted that “escalating climate change” will increase “the risk of violent conflict” and that this, in turn, will “undermine societies’ ability to cooperate,” leading to yet more climate change.

The roughly six trillion tons of ice that Greenland has lost translates to enough water to cover the Eastern Seaboard to a depth of eighteen feet. Roughly half the loss has come from surface melt, the other half from an increase in the discharge of icebergs.

From Kangerlussuaq, I flew to the town of Ilulissat, which is sometimes called the “iceberg capital of the world.” (The town’s name, in fact, means “icebergs.”) Some hundred and fifty miles north of Kangerlussuaq, Ilulissat sits on Disko Bay, at the mouth of another very long fjord. Icebergs break off into the fjord and float along until they hit an underwater sill just south of town. The bigger icebergs get stuck on the sill, and other icebergs pile up behind them, in a great glacial traffic jam. A few years ago, the Greenlandic government opened a museum not far from the ice jam, and on my first day in town I went to talk to its director, Karl Sandgreen.

From the outside, the Icefjord Centre looks like a cross between a milking barn and a concert hall, with lots of metal beams and a roof that meets in a swale instead of a peak. At the entrance, visitors are instructed to remove their shoes and put on felt slippers. Inside, the design is pure Scandinavian minimalism.

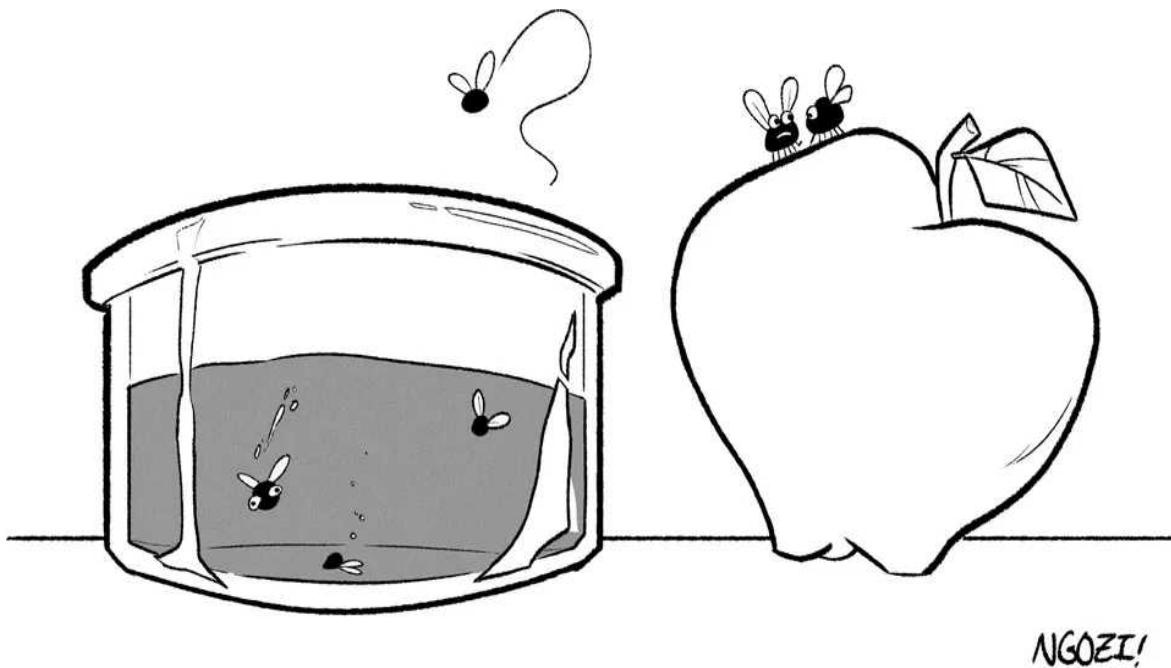
Sandgreen met me in the museum’s window-lined café. We chatted for a bit about Ilulissat’s history prior to colonization. Just beyond the museum lie the remains of an ancient settlement that was serially occupied by three different cultures: the Saqqaq, the Dorset, and the Thule. The first two groups died out—the Saqqaq around three thousand years ago, the Dorset around a thousand years ago—for reasons that are unknown. Contemporary Greenlanders are descendants of the Thule, who arrived on the island from what’s now the Canadian Arctic around the year 1200. (The Thule are

sometimes called the proto-Inuit.) “We are from the Thule culture,” Sandgreen told me.

Sandgreen, who is forty-five, was born and raised in Ilulissat, which was—and still is—an important fishery. His father fished for prawns in Disko Bay, and he would have done the same had his parents not encouraged him to get more education, in Denmark. “I’m very happy I listened to them,” he said.

We went to take a look at the Centre’s exhibits. There were some Thule artifacts and an animation showing how the calving front of the Jakobshavn Glacier—the source of Ilulissat’s icebergs—has moved over time. Since the mid-nineteen-nineties, the front has retreated some fifteen miles up the fjord.

At the Centre’s center, a set of glass cases displayed sections of an ice core from a site known as *EGRIP*. (The core, which was drilled by a Danish team about two hundred miles northeast of Summit, was completed just last year.) Though the cases were refrigerated, the ice cylinders were dripping. “We are very concerned about how they’re melting so fast,” Sandgreen said. “We’re going to have to get some new ones.”



Sandgreen told me that Ilulissat’s climate had changed dramatically since he was a boy. It used to be that Disko Bay froze over every winter and people rode dogsleds over the ice to hunt. Now the bay no longer freezes, and it

doesn't pay to keep dogs, so the town's canine population, which used to number almost ten thousand—twice as high as the number of humans—has dropped to around seventeen hundred.

"Also, the temperature," Sandgreen said. "When I was a teen-ager, I remember minus forty degrees Celsius was just normal. But after this climate change the air has become moister. So now, when it's, like, minus ten degrees, it feels colder than minus forty." (Minus forty degrees Celsius is also minus forty degrees Fahrenheit; minus ten degrees C is fourteen degrees F.)

I asked Sandgreen what message he hoped people would take from the Icefjord Centre. He told me that a lot of politicians had visited Ilulissat, including the former U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry. "They're coming here to see the climate change, to tell the rest of the people in the world what is happening," he said. But he didn't believe that it would make much difference: "I think we are too few people in Greenland to tell the people in the rest of the world to do something."

The next day, I went back to the Icefjord Centre, and then kept on walking, along a boardwalk that crosses a stretch of spongy tundra. The stretch, which borders the fjord, was the site of the ancient settlement, though you wouldn't know that by looking at it. In an apparent violation of the rules, two women in red vests were trudging along on the tundra itself. They turned out to be American scientists, there to study erosion. As the permafrost in the area degrades, the remains of the old settlement are, they told me, collapsing into the sea.

I kept walking. It was a spectacular day, and there was a wonderful scent in the air—a bit like thyme and a bit like lemon. I thought of Tedesco's museum of Arctic smells. The boardwalk curled east and then ascended a rocky ridge. From the ridgetop, there was a view directly onto the ice jam: a floating mountain range with slopes of pure white. The reflections of the icebergs quavered in the water, which was blue to the edge of purple. The smaller bergs were the size of a house; the bigger ones, I figured, were the size of Grand Central Terminal. A couple arrived right behind me. "Oh, my God," the woman exclaimed in American-accented English. "This is unbelievable!"

The icebergs' source, the Jakobshavn Glacier, is sometimes called an outlet glacier and sometimes an ice stream. Ice is always flowing, albeit slowly, from the center of the ice sheet toward the edges. In an ice stream, it flows particularly quickly. As Jakobshavn's calving front retreated, it also thinned, and the glacier's speed—already brisk for a block of ice—increased. In 2012, its flow rate exceeded a hundred and fifty feet a day, which is believed to be a glacial world record. Though it has since slowed down again, the glacier has still been losing a lot of ice—during the past few decades, some ninety billion tons of it. (All on its own, Jakobshavn is believed to be responsible for more than one per cent of global sea-level rise since 2000.)

The key driver of Jakobshavn's losses appears to be rising water temperatures in Disko Bay. As warmer water makes its way up the fjord, it is melting the glacier's front from below, or so the theory goes. To prevent this from continuing, a group of scientists in 2018 proposed artificially increasing the height of the iceberg-snagging sill. The sill, which stretches across the mouth of the fjord for three miles, now sits about a thousand feet below sea level. Topping it with a three-hundred-foot-tall berm would, the group argued, "reduce the volume of warm water" pushing up the fjord and hence "slow the melting." Construction of such a berm, the researchers calculated, would require about three and a half billion cubic feet of gravel and sand, which, conveniently enough, could be excavated from Greenland's continental shelf.



More recently, one of the researchers involved in that proposal, John C. Moore, of the University of Lapland, in Finland, suggested an alternative fix: a three-mile-long curtain across the fjord. In an article published earlier this year, in the journal *Climatic Change*, Moore and several colleagues examined dozens of “emergency measures” that have been proposed to help conserve the Arctic, which is warming four times faster than the global average. In addition to the underwater curtain, the schemes include pumping water onto the Arctic sea ice to thicken it and “brightening” the region’s clouds so that they reflect more sunlight. The group argued that studying such “emergency measures” was important not because all—or even any—of them would work but because options are dwindling.

Interest in exploring such interventions is “most definitely growing,” the group wrote, owing to the “increasingly dire findings of the effects of warming in the North, and the obvious global impacts of climate-related disasters.”

I spent a few hours at the ice jam, basically just admiring the view. A cruise ship had docked in Ilulissat, and several people wearing jackets with the tour company’s insignia joined me on the ridge. I asked a few of them why they had come to Greenland. An American woman told me she had already been to so many other exotic places, including Antarctica, that this was one of the

few destinations left. A British woman said that climate change had influenced her choice: “We definitely made a point to see it now, before we lose it.” A Norwegian man who had travelled on his own told me that he had come to visit his brother, who was working at a destination restaurant just south of Ilulissat. (When I later looked up the restaurant, I found that the tasting menu, wine included, ran to seven hundred and forty-five dollars and might feature whale skin, musk ox, and reindeer.)

Until the Second World War, Greenland was more or less inaccessible to outsiders. It could be reached only by boat, and the Danes, who at that point considered it a colony, made it hard for foreigners to visit, ostensibly to protect the island’s population from the destructive trends of modernity. Many Greenlanders still lived, if not exactly as their ancestors had, without electricity or running water.

Following the war, Greenland modernized rapidly—so rapidly that one scholar described it as having transitioned “from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century in less than twenty-five years.” Today, Greenland is eagerly courting foreigners. A new international airport has been built in Nuuk, and another is under construction in Ilulissat. From the ridge overlooking the ice jam, I could see a cloud of dust rising from the construction site.

The new airports will bring more visitors to Greenland to see the melting ice, and the increase in air travel will melt more ice—another potential feedback loop. No one desires this outcome—not the travellers and certainly not the Greenlanders, whose attachment to the ice is profound. But everyone pushes ahead anyway.

Climate change is not like other problems, and that is part of the problem. What it lacks in vividness and immediacy it makes up for in reach. Once the world’s remaining mountain glaciers disappear, they won’t be coming back. Nor will the coral reefs or the Amazon rain forest. If we cross the tipping point for the Greenland ice sheet, we may not even notice. And yet the world as we know it will be gone. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the density of pure ice.

A Reporter at Large

Silicon Valley, the New Lobbying Monster

From crypto to A.I., the tech sector is pouring millions into super *PACS* that intimidate politicians into supporting its agenda.

By Charles Duhigg

October 07, 2024



One morning in February, Katie Porter was sitting in bed, futzing around on her computer, when she learned that she was the target of a vast technopolitical conspiracy. For the past five years, Porter had served in the House of Representatives on behalf of Orange County, California. She'd become famous—at least, *C-span* and MSNBC famous—for her eviscerations of business tycoons, often aided by a whiteboard that she used to make camera-friendly presentations about corporate greed. Now she was in a highly competitive race to replace the California senator Dianne Feinstein, who had died a few months earlier. The primary was in three weeks.

A text from a campaign staffer popped up on Porter’s screen. The staffer had just learned that a group named Fairshake was buying airtime in order to mount a last-minute blitz to oppose her candidacy. Indeed, the group was planning to spend roughly ten million dollars.

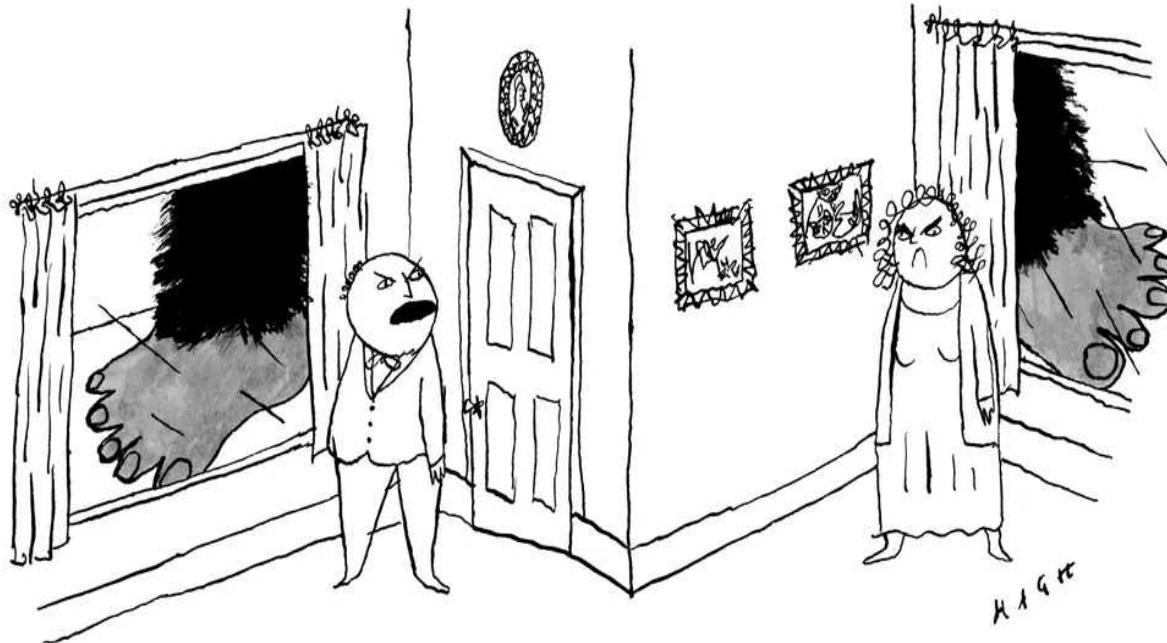
Porter was bewildered. She had raised thirty million dollars to bankroll her entire campaign, and that had taken years. The idea that some unknown group would swoop in and spend a fortune attacking her, she told me, seemed ludicrous: “I was, like, ‘What the heck is *Fairshake*?’ ”

Porter did some frantic Googling and discovered that Fairshake was a super *PAC* funded primarily by three tech firms involved in the cryptocurrency industry. In the House, Porter had been loosely affiliated with [Senator Elizabeth Warren](#), an outspoken advocate of financial regulation, and with the progressive wing of the Democratic Party. But Porter hadn’t been particularly vocal about cryptocurrency; she hadn’t taken much of a position on the industry one way or the other. As she continued investigating Fairshake, she found that her neutrality didn’t matter. A Web site politically aligned with Fairshake had deemed her “very anti-crypto”—though the evidence offered for this verdict was factually incorrect. The site claimed that she had opposed a pro-crypto bill in a House committee vote: in fact, she wasn’t on the committee and hadn’t voted at all.

Soon afterward, Fairshake began airing attack ads on television. They didn’t mention cryptocurrencies or anything tech-related. Rather, they called Porter a “bully” and a “liar,” and falsely implied that she’d recently accepted campaign contributions from major pharmaceutical and oil companies. Nothing in the ads disclosed Fairshake’s affiliation with Silicon Valley, its support of cryptocurrency, or its larger political aims. The negative campaign had a palpable effect: Porter, who had initially polled well, lost decisively in the primary, coming in third, with just fifteen per cent of the vote. But, according to a person familiar with Fairshake, the super *PAC*’s intent wasn’t simply to damage her. The group’s backers didn’t care all that much about Porter. Rather, the person familiar with Fairshake said, the goal of the attack campaign was to terrify other politicians—to warn anyone running for office that, if you are anti-crypto, the industry will come after you.”

The super *PAC* and two affiliates soon revealed in federal filings that they had collected more than a hundred and seventy million dollars, which they could spend on political races across the nation in 2024, with more donations likely to come. That was more than nearly any other super *PAC*, including Preserve America, which supports Donald Trump, and WinSenate, which aims to help Democrats reclaim that chamber. Pro-crypto donors are responsible for almost half of all corporate donations to *PACs* in the 2024 election cycle, and the tech industry has become one of the largest corporate donors in the nation. The point of all that money, like of the attack on Porter, has been to draw attention to Silicon Valley's financial might—and to prove that its leaders are capable of political savagery in order to protect their interests. "It's a simple message," the person familiar with Fairshake said. "If you are pro-crypto, we will help you, and if you are anti we will tear you apart."

After Porter's defeat, it became obvious that the super *PAC*'s message had been received by politicians elsewhere. Candidates in New York, Arizona, Maryland, and Michigan began releasing crypto-friendly public statements and voting for pro-crypto bills. When Porter tried to explain to her three children why she had lost, part of the lesson focussed on the Realpolitik of wealth and elections. "When you have members who are afraid of ten million dollars being spent overnight against them, the will in Washington to do what's right disappears pretty quickly," she recalls saying. "This was naked political power designed to influence votes in Washington. And it worked."



Porter's defeat, in fact, was the culmination of a strategy that had begun more than a decade earlier to turn Silicon Valley into the most powerful political operation in the nation. As the tech industry has become the planet's dominant economic force, a coterie of specialists—led, in part, by the political operative who introduced the idea of “a vast right-wing conspiracy” decades ago—have taught Silicon Valley how to play the game of politics. Their aim is to help tech leaders become as powerful in Washington, D.C., and in state legislatures as they are on Wall Street. It is likely that in the coming decades these efforts will affect everything from Presidential races to which party controls Congress and how antitrust and artificial intelligence are regulated. Now that the tech industry has quietly become one of the most powerful lobbying forces in American politics, it is wielding that power as previous corporate special interests have: to bully, cajole, and remake the nation as it sees fit.

Chris Lehane was just shy of thirty years old when he came up with the notion of “a vast right-wing conspiracy,” to explain Republican efforts to undermine Bill and Hillary Clinton. It was such an inspired bit of showmanship that Hillary Clinton adopted it as one of her signature lines. At the time, Lehane was a lawyer in the Clinton White House tasked with defending the Administration from charges of scandal, but he specialized in seizing control of the political conversation, finding colorful ways to put

Republicans on defense. Tactics such as declaring that the President of the United States was the victim of a shadowy conservative cabal were so effective that the *Times* later declared Lehane to be the modern-day “master of the political dark arts.”

After serving in the White House, Lehane joined Al Gore’s Presidential campaign, as press secretary, and after Gore’s defeat he set up shop in San Francisco. Despite the size and the electoral significance of California, many campaign operatives viewed the state as a political backwater, because it was so far away from Washington. But Lehane, who had worked on the Telecommunications Act of 1996, was convinced that Silicon Valley was the future, and he quickly built a business providing his dark arts to wealthy Californians. When trial lawyers wanted to increase the state’s caps on medical-malpractice jury awards, they brought in Lehane, who helped send voters flyers that looked like cadaver toe tags, and produced ads implying that doctors might be performing surgery while drunk. A few years later, when a prominent environmentalist hired Lehane to campaign against the Keystone XL Pipeline, he sent activists into press conferences carrying vials of sludge from an oil spill; the sludge was so noxious that reporters fled the room. Then he hired one of the Navy *SEALs* who had helped kill Osama bin Laden to talk to journalists and explain that if the pipeline were approved a terrorist attack could flood Nebraska with one of the largest oil spills in American history. Lehane explained to a reporter his theory of civil discourse: “Everyone has a game plan until you punch them in the mouth. So let’s punch them in the mouth.”

But Lehane’s efforts generally failed to impress the tech industry. For decades, Silicon Valley firms had considered themselves mostly detached from electoral politics. As one senior tech executive explained to me, until about the mid-twenty-tens, “if you were a V.C. or C.E.O. you might hire lobbyists to talk to politicians, or gossip with you, but, beyond that, most of the Valley thought politics was stupid.” Within a decade of Lehane’s move West, however, a new kind of tech company was emerging: so-called sharing-economy firms such as Uber, Airbnb, and TaskRabbit. These companies were “disrupting” long-established sectors, including transportation, hospitality, and contract labor. Politicians had long considered it their prerogative to regulate these sectors, and, as some of the startups’ valuations grew into the billions, politicians began making

demands on them as well. They felt affronted by companies like Uber that were refusing to abide by even modest regulations. Other companies tried a more conciliatory approach, but quickly found themselves mired in local political infighting and municipal bureaucracies. In any case, “not understanding politics became an existential risk,” another senior tech executive said. “There was a general realization that we *had* to get involved in politics, whether we wanted to or not.”

In 2015, San Francisco itself became the site of a major regulation battle, in the form of Proposition F, a ballot initiative to limit short-term housing rentals, which both sides acknowledged was an attack on Airbnb. The proposal had emerged from built-up frustrations: some San Franciscans complained that many buildings had essentially become unlicensed hotels, hosting hard-partying tourists who never turned off the music, didn’t clean up their trash, and—most worrying for city leaders—hadn’t paid the taxes that the city would have collected had they stayed at a Marriott. Other residents argued that Airbnb’s presence was making it harder to find affordable housing, because it was more profitable to rent to short-term visitors than to long-term tenants. Proposition F would essentially make it impossible for Airbnb to work with many homeowners for more than a few weeks a year. Early polling indicated that the initiative was popular. Numerous other cities had been considering similar legislation, and were eagerly watching to see if lawmakers in San Francisco—where Airbnb was headquartered—could teach them how to rein in the Internet giant, then worth some twenty-five billion dollars.

Airbnb’s executives, panicked, called Lehane and asked him to come to their headquarters; he showed up within minutes of their call, in the sweatpants and baseball jersey that he’d been wearing at his son’s Little League game. Lehane has the lean build of someone accustomed to athletic self-torture—he runs daily, often fifteen miles at a stretch, typically while sending oddly punctuated e-mails and leaving stream-of-consciousness voice mails—and he has a boyish crooked front tooth that offsets the effect of his receding hairline. To Airbnb’s leaders, he didn’t look like much of a political guru. But, once Lehane caught his breath, he launched into a commanding speech. You’re looking at this situation all wrong, he said. Proposition F wasn’t a crisis—it was an opportunity to change San Francisco’s political landscape, to upend a narrative. The key, he told executives, was to build a campaign

against Proposition F as sophisticated as Barack Obama's recent Presidential run, and to deploy insane amounts of money as a warning to politicians that an "Airbnb voter" existed—and ought not be crossed. He proposed a three-pronged strategy, and explained to executives that what politicians care about most is reelection. If the company could show that being anti-Airbnb would make it harder for them to stay in office, they would fall in line. Lehane was soon named Airbnb's head of global policy and public affairs.

His first step in this role was to mobilize Airbnb's natural advocates: the homeowners who were profiting by renting out their properties, and the visitors who had avoided pricey hotel rooms by using the service. By the end of 2015, more than a hundred and thirty thousand people had rented or hosted rooms in San Francisco. Lehane recruited several former Obama-campaign staffers to lead teams who made tens of thousands of phone calls to Airbnb hosts and renters, warning them about Proposition F. The team members also urged hosts to attend town-hall meetings, talk to neighbors, and call local officials. During this period, the company—accidentally, it says—sent an e-mail to everyone who had ever stayed in a California Airbnb, urging them to contact the California legislature. The legislature was inundated with messages from around the world. The Senate president pro tem called Lehane to let him know that the message had been received, and to beg him to stop the onslaught. "I kind of wish we *had* done it on purpose," someone close to that campaign told me.

The second part of Lehane's strategy was to use large amounts of money to pressure San Francisco politicians. The company brought on hundreds of canvassers to knock on the doors of two hundred and eighty-five thousand people—roughly a third of the city's population—and urge them to contact their local elected officials and say that opposing Airbnb was the equivalent of attacking innovation, economic independence, and America's ideals. The relentless campaign posed a clear threat to the city's Board of Supervisors: if an official supported Proposition F, Airbnb might encourage someone to run against him or her. "We said the quiet part out loud," a campaign staffer said. "The goal was intimidation, to let everyone know that if they fuck with us they'll regret it." In all, Airbnb spent eight million dollars on the campaign, roughly ten times as much as all of Proposition F's supporters combined. "It was the most ridiculous campaign I've ever worked on," the staffer told me. "It was so over the top, so extreme. You shouldn't be able to spend that

much on a municipal election.” That said, the staffer loved her time at Airbnb: “It was the most money I’d ever earned working in politics.”

The third aspect of Lehane’s strategy was upending the debate over Proposition F by proposing alternative solutions. Otherwise, Lehane and Airbnb’s chief executive, Brian Chesky, believed, the company would face similar proposals in other cities. “You can’t just be against everything,” Lehane told the Airbnb board. “You have to be *for* something.” As a compromise gesture, Airbnb had voluntarily begun paying taxes on short-term stays within the city. It also offered to share some internal company data—such as the number of guests visiting the city each month—that would help local officials monitor the service’s impact on the community. What’s more, Airbnb eventually offered to build a Web interface that San Francisco officials could use to register hosts and track rental patterns. The solution was self-serving, in that it made the city dependent on Airbnb for monitoring Airbnb’s activities. But the proposals addressed many of the complaints that had prompted Proposition F. More important, they guaranteed San Francisco tens of millions of tax dollars annually. When Proposition F finally came to a vote, it was resoundingly defeated.

Airbnb’s approach to political conflict was in stark contrast with that of [Uber](#), which had just become the most valuable startup in the world—and which, owing to its resistance to various taxi regulations, was soon under fire from multiple cities and nations. Airbnb’s tactics were designed to appeal to politicians’ higher ideals. After the Proposition F campaign, Lehane began working on a partnership with the S.E.I.U., one of the nation’s largest labor unions, to unionize the workers who cleaned Airbnb rentals. The plan never came together, but labor-friendly politicians in San Francisco and New York began viewing Airbnb as a potential ally.

To other political operatives, Lehane’s tactics hardly seemed groundbreaking. But within Silicon Valley his approach was a revelation. “It was a huge bang for a relatively small outlay,” a tech executive told me. “It turns out the R.O.I.”—return on investment—“on politics is way better than anyone suspected.”

After the defeat of Proposition F, San Francisco’s Board of Supervisors eventually agreed to many of Airbnb’s suggestions. By then, Lehane had

moved on to other locations. He began similar Airbnb campaigns in dozens of other cities, including Barcelona, Berlin, New York, and Mexico City. When the U.S. Conference of Mayors convened in Washington, D.C., in 2016, Lehane was invited to speak after Michelle Obama. “Read my lips,” he told the gathering. “We *want* to pay taxes.” Airbnb soon had agreements with more than a hundred cities, and when local politicians proved intransigent—leaders in Austin, for instance, seemed immune to Airbnb’s overtures—the company simply went over their heads. In Texas, it persuaded the state legislature to make it hard for any municipality to ban short-term rentals. Today, Airbnb has agreements with thousands of cities.

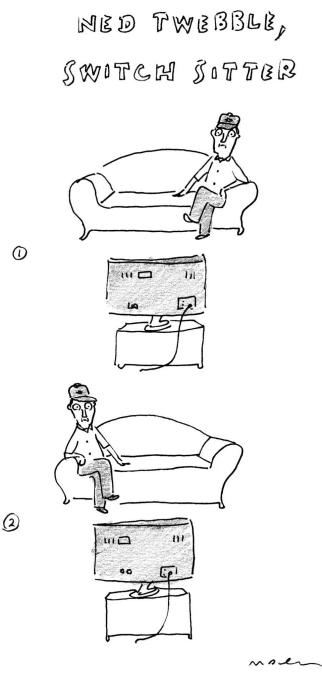
A few years after Lehane joined Airbnb, a venture capitalist pulled him aside at a party and said, “It used to be, hiring the right C.F.O. was the most important thing to make sure a company goes public. But you’ve proved a political person is just as important.” Lehane, however, had had an even bigger insight. These campaigns had revealed that tech companies—particularly firms, like Airbnb, with platforms that connect people who might otherwise have trouble finding one another—were now potentially the most powerful cohort in politics. “At one point, organizations like labor or political parties had the ability to organize and really turn out large numbers of voters,” Lehane told me. Today, Internet platforms have the bigger reach; a tech company can communicate with hundreds of millions of people by pushing a button. “If Airbnb can engage fifteen thousand hosts in a city, that can have an impact on who wins a city-council race or the mayoralty,” Lehane told me. “In a congressional or Senate race, fifty thousand votes can make all the difference.” Of course, simply having a huge user base doesn’t guarantee that Airbnb can get everything it wants. Voters respond only to enticements that they find persuasive. But companies like Airbnb, Lehane understood, could make arguments faster, and more efficiently, than nearly any political party or other special-interest group, and this was a source of considerable power. “The platforms are really the only ones who can speak to everyone now,” Lehane said.

For the tech industry, the Trump years were a bewildering mess. The President attacked tech platforms for being biased against conservatives, and liberals railed against Silicon Valley’s social-media companies for propelling Trump into the White House. Tech executives declared their support for the industry’s many immigrants in the face of Trump’s Muslim ban and border

separations; they also contended with walkouts and protests from employees over racial injustice, sexual harassment, and all-gender bathrooms—subjects that neither an engineering degree nor business school had prepared them for. When Joe Biden won the Presidency, in 2020, the Valley’s leaders were relieved. The Biden Administration seemed like a return to the Pax Obama, an era when tech was considered cool and politicians boasted of knowing Mark Zuckerberg. Biden’s victory also meant that Lehane, with his deep roots in the Democratic Party, was unquestionably Silicon Valley’s top political guru. Companies sought him out; employees loved that he was generous with credit and made politics fun. (Many former colleagues talk proudly about the nicknames that he bestowed upon them.) Most of all, he made the people he worked with feel like they were on a righteous quest. Peter Ragone, a prominent adviser to numerous Democratic politicians, told me that, among the handful of political consultants transforming Silicon Valley, “Chris is the tip of the spear. His capacity for processing information at speed is breathtaking.”

The Valley’s enthusiasm for Biden, however, was short-lived. The President quickly appointed three prominent tech skeptics—Gary Gensler, [Lina Khan](#), and Jonathan Kanter—to oversee the Securities and Exchange Commission, the Federal Trade Commission, and the antitrust division of the Department of Justice, respectively. Soon the government was suing or investigating Google, Apple, Amazon, Meta, Tesla, and dozens of other companies. Some of those suits and inquiries had been initiated under Trump, but Biden’s S.E.C. found a particular target in the cryptocurrency industry. Gensler, an ally of Elizabeth Warren, filed more than eighty legal actions arguing that crypto firms or promoters had violated the law, most often by selling unregistered securities. Some of the executives being sued by the S.E.C. had contributed lavishly to the Democrats. Brad Garlinghouse, the C.E.O. of the crypto firm Ripple, who had been a fund-raising bundler for Obama, was among those under legal fire, and he clearly felt victimized. He told Bloomberg that the federal government was acting like “a bully,” and tweeted, “Dems continue to enable Gensler’s unlawful war on crypto—sabotaging the ability for American innovation to thrive. It’s no wonder the GOP has announced a pro-crypto stance Voters are paying attention.” (Last year, a federal judge upheld some portions of the S.E.C.’s case against Ripple and dismissed others.)

To certain people, the government's approach felt oddly aggressive. One crypto executive told me she discovered that her bank accounts had been frozen—with no explanation—only when she tried to make a withdrawal to repair a catastrophic home-septic-system failure. Around this time, various regulatory agencies were warning banks about the risks posed by the crypto industry. When the executive's accounts were later unfrozen—again, without a clear explanation—she was left wondering if the government's goal was to intimidate the industry. (The Office of the Comptroller of the Currency, which regulates national banks, said that it does not direct banks to freeze individual accounts.)



The Biden Administration's oppositional stance, however, seemed warranted when, in 2022, FTX—the enormous crypto exchange and hedge fund led by [Sam Bankman-Fried](#)—imploded amid revelations that more than eight billion dollars had been misallocated or lost. Bankman-Fried had been a prolific political donor, and violating campaign-finance law was among the crimes for which he was arrested. Another crypto executive told me that, after the FTX scandal, many figures in the industry “just wanted to put our heads down and disappear,” adding, “The less people noticed us, the better.”

But among Silicon Valley's most moneyed class retreat wasn't an option. The powerful venture-capital firm Andreessen Horowitz had already raised

more than seven billion dollars for crypto and blockchain investments. The “super angel” investor Ron Conway had poured millions of dollars into crypto firms through his venture fund. Lehane urged some of the largest crypto investors and companies, many of whom were bickering on Twitter, to instead form a coalition devoted to changing the public narrative. He began hosting private biweekly gatherings, known as the Ad-Hoc Group, where various collaborations were discussed. Eventually, a former partner at Andreessen Horowitz, Katie Haun, recommended that the large crypto firm Coinbase, where she was a board member, bring on Lehane as an adviser.

Lehane met with Coinbase’s co-founder Brian Armstrong and told him that, just as with Airbnb, what seemed like a crisis was actually an opportunity. “This is not the time to go quiet,” Lehane told him. “This is your chance to define your company and the industry, and prove you’re different from FTX.” In 2023, Lehane joined Coinbase’s Global Advisory Council. Twenty-five days later, the S.E.C. sued the firm.

Lehane established a war room with the primary goal of convincing politicians that the political consequences of being anti-crypto would be intensely painful. The person familiar with Fairshake, who was then an employee at Coinbase, told me, “It wasn’t really about explaining how crypto works, or anything like that. It’s about hitting politicians where they are most sensitive—reëlection.” Armstrong clarified this aim at a crypto conference in 2023. The goal, he said, was to ask candidates, “Are you with us? Are you against us? Are we going to be running ads for you or against you?”

Although Lehane’s basic strategy resembled the one he’d used at Airbnb, that campaign had been focussed on municipal issues and local political races. The crypto effort was national in scale, targeting Senate and House races—and potentially even the Presidential contest—and would require significantly more money. Lehane suggested to Armstrong that crypto firms set aside fifty million dollars for outreach. Let’s earmark a hundred million, Armstrong replied. Coinbase, Ripple, and Andreessen Horowitz donated more than a hundred and forty million dollars to Fairshake, the crypto super *pac*. Executives at other firms contributed millions more.

Lehane, collaborating closely with Fairshake, began crafting a pro-crypto message and helping to build a “grassroots” army. “We need to demonstrate there’s a crypto voter,” he told the Coinbase team. “There’s millions and millions of Americans who own this stuff. We need to prove they’ll vote to protect it.”

The Federal Reserve has said that in 2023 fewer than twenty million Americans owned cryptocurrencies. Polling indicates that the issue is not an electoral priority for many voters. One Coinbase staff member pointed out this discrepancy to Lehane, saying, “I don’t know if there *is* a crypto voter.”

“Then we’re going to make one,” Lehane replied.

Coinbase began loudly promoting the results of surveys reporting to show that fifty-two million Americans owned cryptocurrencies, and that many of them intended to vote to protect their digital pocketbooks. Those polls indicated that sixty per cent of crypto owners were millennials or Gen Z-ers, and forty-one per cent were people of color—demographics that each party was trying to woo. Lehane also quietly helped launch an advocacy organization, Stand with Crypto, which is advertised to Coinbase’s millions of U.S. customers every time they log in, and which urges cryptocurrency owners to contact their lawmakers and sign petitions. The group says that it currently has more than a million members. The Coinbase employee told me that Stand with Crypto would identify a city with a significant population of crypto enthusiasts, like Columbus, Ohio, and then inundate them with push notifications aimed at organizing town halls and rallies. The employee explained, “If you can get fifty or sixty people to show up, with good photo angles you can make it look like hundreds. In small states or close elections, that’s enough to convince a candidate they should be paranoid.”

This supposed army of [crypto voters](#) fed directly into the next stage of the assault: scaring politicians. Stand with Crypto built an online dashboard that assigned grades to U.S. senators and representatives—and to many of their challengers—which reflected their support for crypto. The scores seemed to inevitably be either “A (Strongly supports crypto)” or “F (Strongly against crypto),” though the data undergirding the grades were sometimes specious. “Most of them hadn’t really taken a side,” another Coinbase staffer told me. “So we’d, you know, look at speeches they’d given, or who they were

friends with, and kind of make a guess. If you were friends with Elizabeth Warren, you were more likely to get an F.”

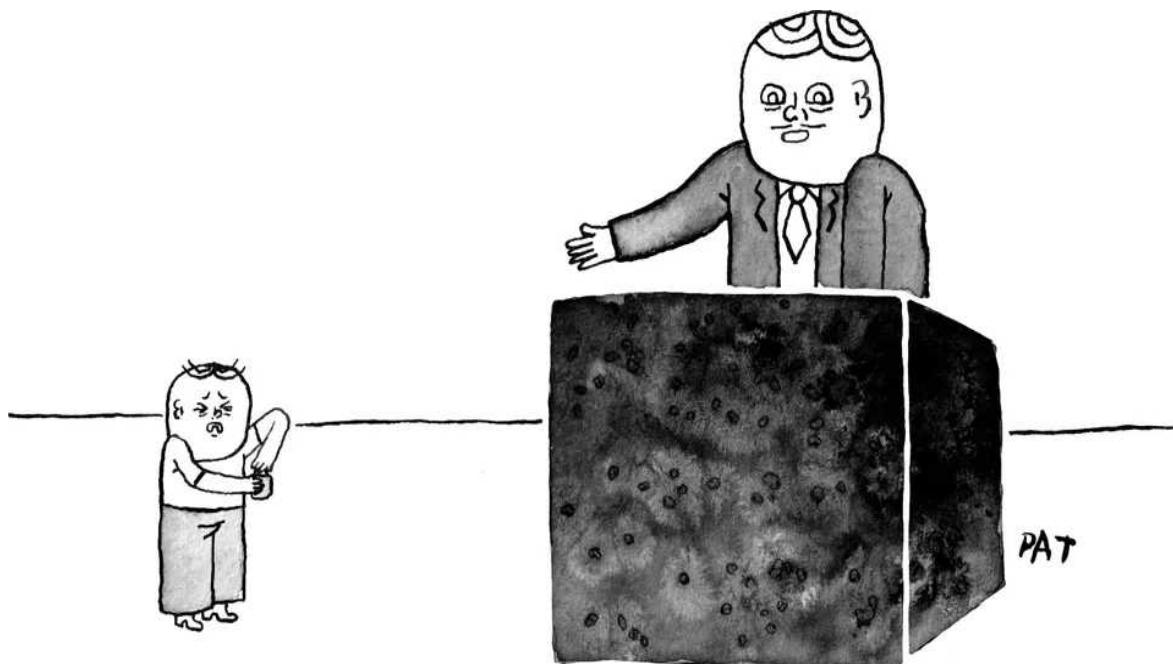
Nevertheless, Lehane insisted that Fairshake maintain a nonpartisan tone. The super *PAC* was careful to support an equal number of Democratic and Republican candidates, and, following Lehane’s advice, it planned to stay out of the 2024 Presidential race altogether. A venture capitalist who has advised the crypto industry told me that the group’s nonpartisan stance was essential, because, “if we want to get the right regulations in place, we have to get a bill through Congress, which means we need votes from both parties.” Moreover, Fairshake’s goal was to “create a nonpartisan cost for being negative on crypto and tech,” the venture capitalist added. “People need to know there are consequences.”

To make this point, Lehane and Fairshake wanted to find a contest in which the group’s spending was certain to attract national attention. Fairshake compiled a list of high-profile races, and near the top was the fight to replace Dianne Feinstein in California. The obvious target was Porter, whose strongest opponent in the Democratic primary was [Representative Adam Schiff](#). California was reliably blue, and so, if Fairshake helped defeat Porter, the group wouldn’t get blamed for handing a seat to the Republicans. What’s more, California’s primary occurred on March 5th—early in the campaign season—which meant that Porter’s race would get lots of attention and Fairshake would have time to broadcast its involvement and petrify candidates in other states. Because Porter was friendly with Elizabeth Warren, she could be painted—fairly or not—as anti-crypto. Best of all, many polls indicated that Porter was unlikely to win the primary anyway, so if the super *PAC* “went in with a big spend, and made a big splash and she lost, Fairshake could take the victory lap regardless of whether it tipped the scales,” the Coinbase employee said. The calculation was prescient: Fairshake’s spending helped doom Porter in the primary, and the general election appears to be a lock for Schiff (who got an A from Stand with Crypto). As another political operative put it, “Porter was a perfect choice because she let crypto declare, ‘If you are even *slightly* critical of us, we won’t just kill you—we’ll kill your fucking family, we’ll end your career.’ From a political perspective, it was a masterpiece.” Porter will be out of government at the end of this year.

After Porter's defeat, many politicians who had once treated crypto with disdain or hostility suddenly became fans. In May, two months after Porter's defenestration, a pro-crypto bill came up for a vote in the House. In previous years, similar bills had languished amid tepid Republican support and strong Democratic opposition. The new bill—known as the Financial Innovation and Technology for the 21st Century Act—was openly opposed by President Biden. But it sailed through the House, with nearly unanimous Republican backing and seventy-one votes from Democrats. The Senate Majority Leader, Chuck Schumer, recently joined a Crypto4Harris virtual town hall and promised that passing the legislation this year is “absolutely possible,” adding, “Crypto is here to stay.” The Democratic senator Sherrod Brown—a longtime crypto critic—is running for reelection in Ohio, where Fairshake has directed forty million dollars to ads in support of his opponent; Brown has lately been tempering his public criticisms of the industry. Earlier this year, crypto donors indicated that they might get involved in Montana’s Senate race, where the incumbent Democrat, Jon Tester, once a crypto skeptic, is facing a difficult fight. Soon afterward, Tester voted to weaken S.E.C. oversight of cryptocurrencies, earning him the unusual grade of “C (Neutral on crypto).” It looks like Fairshake will stay out of Montana as long as Tester keeps voting the right way. A similar dynamic occurred in Maryland: after the super *PAC* threatened to take sides in the Democratic Senate primary there, both major candidates proclaimed their pro-crypto bona fides.

In total, Fairshake and affiliated super *PACs* have already spent more than a hundred million dollars on political races in 2024, including forty-three million on Senate races in Ohio and West Virginia, and seven million on four congressional races, in North Carolina, Colorado, Alaska, and Iowa. Three and half million dollars was used to help vanquish two left-wing representatives who were members of the so-called Squad: Jamaal Bowman, of New York, and Cori Bush, of Missouri. Of the forty-two primaries that Fairshake has been involved in this year, its preferred candidate has won eighty-five per cent of the time. The super *PAC*’s latest filings indicated that it had more than seventy million dollars to spend in the remainder of the election cycle. Its donations to political candidates are on par with those of the oil-and-gas industry, the pharmaceutical industry, and labor unions.

Just as Airbnb sought to change the conversation around Proposition F by proposing various concessions—paying taxes and sharing data—the crypto industry has become a vocal proponent of a seemingly solutions-oriented fix: new regulations for cryptocurrencies and the blockchain. Critics, however, say that these proposals are self-serving. A central dispute between the crypto industry and regulators concerns whether cryptocurrencies are securities—akin to, say, a share of Apple, the sale of which is governed by strict investor-protection laws—or commodities, like a bushel of corn, which can be sold with very little government involvement. Most fiat currencies—that is, those issued by governments—are used primarily to buy such things as food and clothing, rather than to gamble on the rise and fall of exchange rates. Cryptocurrencies, in contrast, are often difficult—or, in some cases, impossible—to use for purchasing physical goods, and they are frequently held by speculators solely as a wager that their value will rise. There are several thousand cryptocurrencies in existence. A few—most notably, Bitcoin and Ether—are considered commodities. The statuses of most of the rest are up for debate.



Many within the industry want Congress to pass regulations that would treat mainstream cryptocurrencies as commodities, which are overseen by the Commodity Futures Trading Commission, a relatively sleepy agency that most people have never heard of—and that tends to be less belligerent than

the S.E.C. If the C.F.T.C. becomes the primary regulatory body for crypto, it's likely that the stream of lawsuits and fines against large crypto companies will slow or cease. More important, selling Dogecoin (the cryptocurrency associated with a Shiba Inu dog), Dentacoin ("the only cryptocurrency by dentists, for dentists"), or CumRocket (cryptocurrency for the pornography aficionado) would become significantly less risky, and more profitable.

People in the government think that this would be disastrous. "A lot of these tokens, frankly, have no real utility, no actual use, and they're just for gambling or scamming people," an official familiar with the S.E.C.'s thinking told me. "We already have regulations in place that have protected investors in these kinds of situations for decades. Crypto just doesn't want to abide by them. If your entire business plan is asking 'Can we get Kim Kardashian to tweet about us?' and then taking people's money, the government needs to be involved."

In fact, convincing average Americans that the crypto industry is a wholesome, customer-friendly place has been a tough sell: polls indicate that most people do not consider the crypto sector to be safe. Lehane's colleagues within the industry have therefore shifted their tactics slightly. Getting Congress to pass friendly legislation is still a priority, but this push is now being presented as being in service of much loftier aims: protecting innovation, entrepreneurialism, and America's future.

In July, Marc Andreessen and Ben Horowitz, of the [Andreessen Horowitz venture fund](#), made a ninety-one-minute video accusing President Biden of weakening America. Andreessen said to Horowitz, "There's been a brutal assault on a nascent industry that I've just—I've never experienced before. I'm in total shock that it has happened." Horowitz replied, "They've basically subverted the rule of law to attack the crypto industry." These and other government actions, they said, threatened to doom America's economy, technological superiority, and military might. And Biden, by refusing to embrace various tech-industry proposals, was allowing China to leap ahead. "The future of technology, and the future of America, is at stake," Horowitz declared. The two men were so concerned, they said, that they had no choice but to endorse Donald Trump in 2024. (They also noted

that, under Biden, billionaires like themselves might have to pay more in taxes. But that issue received less airtime.)

To people inside the crypto industry, the video—which received a huge amount of attention, prompting online co-signs from Elon Musk and various other titans—was a masterstroke. As the Coinbase employee put it, “Now you’ve got Andreessen and Musk and all these other rich, powerful guys saying that crypto is part of a bigger debate. It’s about an attack on American innovation and progress and the future of the country! It changed the conversation from ‘Is cryptocurrency a scam?’ to ‘Does Biden even care about middle-class entrepreneurs?’”

Even though Lehane opposes Trump’s candidacy, and had nothing to do with the video, Andreessen and Horowitz’s move was right out of the Lehane playbook. Lehane had done such a good job teaching the Valley how to play politics that others could now mimic his gambits. In July, Lehane joined Coinbase’s board of directors. “Chris is a genius,” the Coinbase employee said. “I don’t know how he comes up with this stuff, but he can change reality. He makes magic happen.”

The annual conference for Bitcoin enthusiasts isn’t an event at which politicians usually appear. The affair often draws more than twenty-five thousand people, many of them distrustful of government. Wandering around the sea of booths, you can get a free vodka shot at 10 a.m. or discuss “tax-avoidance strategies” that fall somewhere between fraud and fantasy. People sell Edward Snowden T-shirts and crypto-themed board games. It’s a safe haven for enthusiasts of Panties for Bitcoin. But when the event took place in Nashville, in July—at a venue just a few blocks from the Redneck Riviera bar, where women were offering to lift their shirts in exchange for some of “that bit stuff”—it was teeming with political luminaries. There were eight senators, nearly a dozen representatives, and countless candidates for national and state office, some of whom launched into impromptu speeches whenever the techno music paused. The star attraction, however, was Donald Trump.

The event’s appearance on the Presidential campaign circuit—and Trump’s willingness to spend one of his campaign days in a state he’s guaranteed to win—confirmed that the crypto campaign initiated by Lehane was having an

effect. When Trump gave a speech before a standing-room-only crowd in orange wigs and “Make Bitcoin Great Again” hats, he pledged, “On Day One, I will fire Gary Gensler”—the S.E.C. head. This prompted a standing ovation and choruses of pro-Trump chants. A man standing near me FaceTimed his wife and insisted that she watch the speech, even though she was in the delivery room where their grandchild was being born.

[Trump’s embrace of crypto](#) was a hundred-and-eighty-degree turn. As President, he had tweeted that he was “not a fan” of cryptocurrencies, which “are not money” and “can facilitate unlawful behavior, including drug trade and other illegal activity.” He continued, “We have only one real currency in the USA. It is called the United States Dollar!” Later, he said that Bitcoin “just seems like a scam.” But after leaving office Trump began seeking out new revenue sources, such as selling non-fungible tokens—a type of digital content hosted on the blockchain. This earned him a reported \$7.2 million in 2023. Trump was convinced. His current Presidential campaign was among the first to accept cryptocurrency donations. He recently announced that—presumably in exchange for compensation—he’d become the “chief crypto advocate” for World Liberty Financial, a company led, in part, by an entrepreneur who’d reportedly sold marijuana and weight-loss products. Before Trump took the stage in Nashville, he hosted a “roundtable” fundraiser with crypto investors, many of whom paid more than eight hundred thousand dollars to attend. Conference organizers have said that Trump raised twenty-five million dollars there.

When Trump spoke at the conference, it was clear that he had been, in the parlance of Bitcoin fans, “orange-pilled.” He promised that, if elected, he would direct the federal government to hold billions of dollars’ worth of cryptocurrency reserves. The U.S., he proclaimed, would become the “crypto capital of the planet and the Bitcoin superpower of the world!” Trump began echoing the crypto campaign’s talking points. “If we don’t do it, China is going to be doing it!” he said.

You might think Trump’s newfound veneration of Bitcoin would have delighted Lehane. It didn’t. Rather, it suggested that his campaign might be working a bit *too* well. As with Airbnb, Lehane doesn’t want the crypto industry to become firmly associated with either Democrats or Republicans,

because then it will be impossible to pass legislation around it. And virtually any policy championed by Trump becomes a partisan matter by default.

President Biden's announcement, in July, that he was dropping out of the race seemed to offer the crypto industry an opportunity for a reset with the Democrats. The ascension of Vice-President Kamala Harris, a Californian with a tech-friendly record, raised the possibility of balancing the partisan scales. In a September speech about her economic plans as President, Harris pledged that the U.S. would "remain dominant in A.I. and quantum computing, blockchain, and other emerging technologies." The détente seems to be working: on October 4th, Ben Horowitz, the venture capitalist who had appeared in the video attacking Biden, [told his employees](#) that he and his wife would be making a personal donation to "entities who support the Harris Walz campaign"—in no small part because some private conversations he'd had with Harris and her team made him "very hopeful" that, as President, she'd abandon Biden's "exceptionally destructive" crypto policies. Lehane, for his part, has donated thirty-five thousand dollars to Harris's campaign (and nothing to Trump's).

In the meantime, however, the crypto coalition that Lehane helped to build has begun fraying—a victim of the same partisan divides that plague the rest of the nation. In August, Ron Conway, the California power broker who had given half a million dollars to Fairshake, e-mailed the super *PAC*'s other funders, including Andreessen and Armstrong, to complain that the campaign was alienating Democratic lawmakers. "How short sighted and stupid can you possibly be," he wrote. Fairshake's donations to unseat Senator Brown in Ohio were, Conway said, a "slap in the face" to Schumer. "NOT ONE PERSON BOTHERED TO GIVE ME A HEADS UP THAT YOU WERE DOINIG THIS," he continued, proving that billionaires also ignore spell-check. "We have two factions: a moderate faction and a Donald Trump faction (Brian and Marc). . . . I have been working too long with people who [do] not share common values and that is unacceptable." He went on, "Because of your selfish hidden agendas it is time for us to separate. . . . I will I no longer compromise myself by associating or helping."

Republican leaders began making parallel complaints. When Andreessen and crypto executives joined a Republican congressional retreat in Jackson

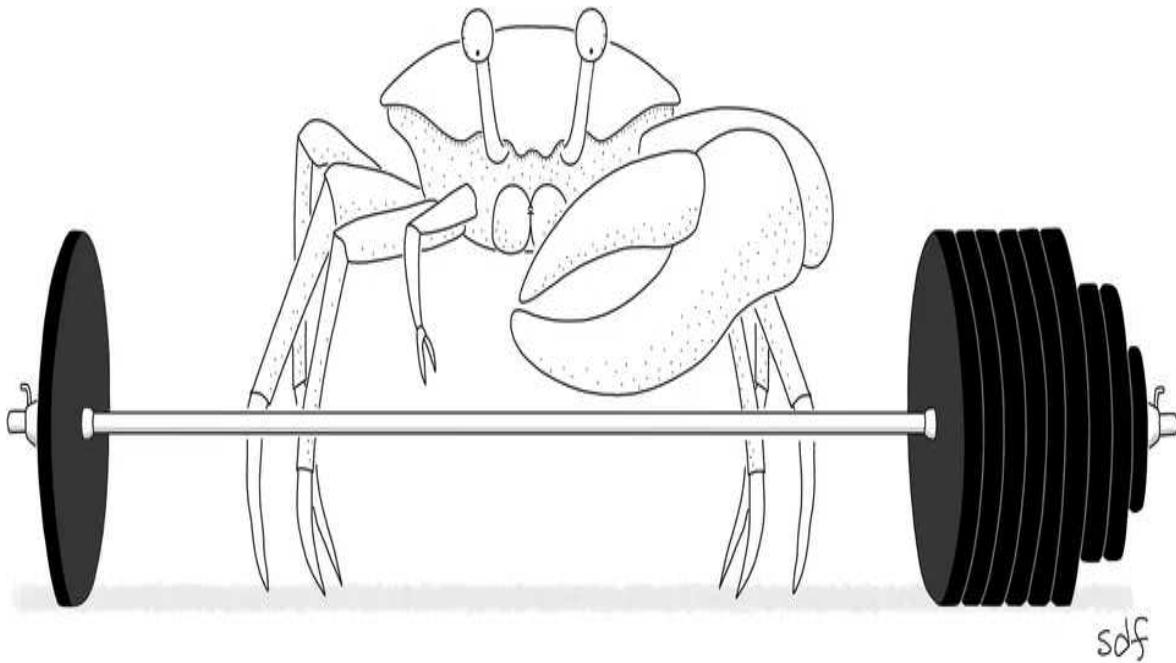
Hole this past summer, attendees expressed fury over the fact that Fairshake had spent money on ads supporting the Democratic candidates in the Arizona and Michigan Senate races—contests that might well decide which party takes control of the chamber.

Whether or not Lehane’s coalition holds together, one thing is clear: Silicon Valley has become part of a tradition that stretches back to Boss Tweed. Tech has learned how to politick. To paraphrase Ronald Reagan, the industry is mastering the world’s second-oldest profession by studying the techniques of the first. Tech’s money and emerging political savvy mean that its interests—crypto, the sharing economy, ungoverned social media—are here to stay. For the S.E.C., Silicon Valley’s turn has sparked something close to terror. “If crypto wins, you’re going to see financial firms suddenly saying their products are on the blockchain, and they’ll drive billions through that loophole,” the official familiar with the S.E.C.’s thinking told me. “We saw this happen with savings and loans, and with mortgage derivatives, and with regional banks, and it always ends badly. Something’s going to blow up, and a lot of people are going to get hurt.” Even the people who have worked on Lehane’s campaign aren’t certain that they’re doing the right thing. “Yeah, the Valley is more sophisticated now, but that doesn’t mean it’s good for the public,” the Coinbase staffer told me. “The public gives zero shits if crypto is a security or a commodity. What’s really important to them—How do I protect myself? How do I know which coin is safe?—that’s not part of the conversation. This isn’t enlightened debate and discussion. This is about using money to be a bully, so everyone knows you’re the scariest ones on the playground.”

There are two ways of looking at Silicon Valley’s new political sophistication. The first is that it is a manifestation of how a modern democracy is supposed to work. As Peter Ragone, the prominent Democrat consultant, put it, “I’d rather have people getting involved and getting their hands dirty—being willing to talk about regulation and saying their opinions in public—than a situation like the past, where all the rich guys cut deals in back rooms.” Many of America’s proudest political battles—the fights for marriage equality, universal suffrage, environmental protections—succeeded only because they were backed by supporters with deep pockets and fierce tenacity, advantages that the tech industry also has. And no amount of money can decide an election unless the voters agree with the agenda. “You

don't get to take office unless you have a majority, or close to a majority, of people agreeing with you, no matter how rich you are," Ragone said. In this view, tech-industry proponents, like many Americans, have simply learned to advocate for a cause, build a coalition, and make sure that their voices are heard.

The other way of viewing the Valley's political exertions is as a symptom of systemic rot—as proof that American governance and legislation have become so perverted by money that it is nearly impossible for people other than billionaires to further their agendas. This dynamic can be seen as particularly dangerous given that the U.S. economy has dumped lavish riches on a tiny group of disaffected, defiantly unaccountable technologists. As many critics of Silicon Valley see it, today's startup founders and venture capitalists are, like the nouveaux riches of previous eras, using their wealth for selfish aims. In doing so, they have revealed themselves to be as ruthless as the robber barons and industrial tyrants of a century ago—not coincidentally, the last time that income inequality was as extreme as it is today.



Lehane, for his part, acknowledges that our political system is flawed, but he believes he's making it better. He's been successful, he told me, only because he's worked with so many talented colleagues devoted to building a

better, fairer world. “For me, it’s always been about ‘Can you give the little guy a much bigger knife to cut a much bigger piece of the economic pie?’ ” he said. As he sees it, Airbnb fought large hotel chains so that teachers and nurses could earn extra money by renting out their empty bedrooms. Coinbase has given people a way to sidestep the big banks and their onerous fees. Many entrenched industries have used politics to benefit themselves at the public’s cost. It’s only fair, Lehane argues, to let Internet upstarts fight for their agenda; he says his advocacy is rooted in a passionate belief that tech, if regulated wisely, can help the powerless get their share.

Of course, this mission has also made Lehane very wealthy. (He declined to disclose precisely *how* wealthy.) “But, at the risk of being incredibly hubristic, there’s a lot of places I could have gone to make money,” he said. What motivates him, he added, is a righteous battle. His X profile features a photograph of him in boxing gloves, grimacing mid-punch.

In August, OpenAI, the artificial-intelligence giant, announced that it had hired Lehane as its vice-president of global affairs. Unlike the battles that he’s fought at Airbnb and Coinbase, where the ideological lines of combat have been easy to define, the political fights over artificial intelligence are murkier and more nascent. There are numerous stakeholders with competing interests within the tech industry itself. Marc Andreessen, for one, has called for little to no additional regulation of underlying A.I. technologies, because, he wrote in a jeremiad last year, hampering the development of technology that might benefit humanity “is a form of murder.” In other words, “any deceleration of AI will cost lives.” He left it unsaid that creating regulations would also likely make it more difficult for him and other venture capitalists to find fast-growing companies to invest in, thereby denying them profits.

On the opposing side is a contingent of A.I. engineers who believe that their creations may soon become powerful enough to exterminate most of humanity. Regulation, therefore, is urgently needed to insure that only the most enlightened technologists can practice this mysterious alchemy. The technologists pushing these arguments, inevitably, place themselves among those enlightened few, and their “more responsible” visions of A.I. development often align with the business plans of their own startups.

Somewhere in the middle is Lehane and [OpenAI](#). The company made an opening salvo in July, when its chief executive, Sam Altman, published, with Lehane's support, an op-ed in the *Washington Post* which portrayed the fight around A.I. regulations as one pitting democracies against authoritarian regimes. "The bottom line is that democratic AI has a lead over authoritarian AI because our political system has empowered U.S. companies, entrepreneurs, and academics," Altman wrote. But that lead is not guaranteed, he continued, and it can be protected only if Congress passes regulations that encourage important software advances—like OpenAI's ChatGPT chatbot—and also prioritize "rules of the road" and "norms in developing and deploying AI." OpenAI, Altman indicated, is prepared to accept substantial constraints on data security and transparency, and it supports the creation of a government agency to regulate A.I. development and use.

This rhetoric may sound high-minded, but—not surprisingly—Altman's position is also somewhat self-interested. The company's smaller rivals would probably find such rules and norms expensive and cumbersome, and therefore have a harder time complying with them than OpenAI would. The op-ed was also an example of Lehanian reframing: instead of talking about big A.I. companies competing with small startups, or about the inevitable tensions between rapid technological leaps and slower but safer progress, Altman recast the A.I. battle as one between good and evil. And Silicon Valley, in this story line, is the home of virtuous superheroes.

Some observers of the A.I. industry find this perspective cynical. Suresh Venkatasubramanian, a professor of computer science at Brown, is a co-author of the White House's "Blueprint for an AI Bill of Rights," which urges regulations on data privacy and transparency, and protections against algorithmic discrimination. He told me, "You notice OpenAI doesn't want to talk about its alleged theft of copyrighted materials, which is definitely anti-democratic and, if true, definitely anti-American." (ChatGPT was developed by inhaling texts from the Internet without paying—or, for the most part, crediting—their authors; OpenAI claims that this is fair use.) What's more, Altman's reframing elides important issues that democratic nations might disagree on, such as what kinds of privacy regulations ought to govern A.I., and who should pay for the environmental costs of A.I. data centers.

But Lehane's strategy of putting Altman forward as a strong political voice guarantees that OpenAI, and the A.I. industry as a whole, will continue to influence the American political conversation for years to come. Venkatasubramanian told me, "The goal is to get a seat at the table, because then you have influence over how things turn out." The A.I. industry's influence is already being felt in state capitals. Workday, a giant human-resources software company, has been lobbying in several states to add what could be a subtle loophole to legislation about "automated decision tools" in the workplace. Companies that, like Workday, sell A.I.-enhanced software for hiring employees would essentially be immune from lawsuits over racial discrimination, or other biases, unless a litigant could prove that A.I. was the "controlling" factor behind the rejection of a candidate. "It all comes down to just one word in the legislation," Venkatasubramanian said. "One word makes all the difference, and if you are at the table, and involved in the conversation, you can nudge that word into the legislation, or out of it."

Even Lehane admits that the A.I. campaign is in its early stages. The exact pressure points aren't quite clear yet. Alliances and enmities are constantly shifting. What is certain, though, is that Silicon Valley will continue to bully and woo politicians by deploying money—and its giant user base—as a lure and a weapon.

Things could change: the robber barons of the Gilded Age were eventually brought down; twentieth-century industrial tyrants were, over time, shamed into retreat. The most well-known tech companies—Google, Apple, Meta, and Amazon—have become bêtes noires to people on both the right and the left. (So far, though, this seemingly hasn't done much to harm profits, or to cow executives.) Democracy, in all its mess and glory, may prevail. The only fixed truth about technology is that change is inevitable. Most of the tech industry "has run independent of politics for our entire careers," Andreessen wrote when he announced that his political neutrality was over. Going forward, he would be working against candidates who defied tech. As Andreessen saw it, he didn't have a choice: "As the old Soviet joke goes, 'You may not be interested in politics, but politics is interested in you.' " ♦

Shouts & Murmurs

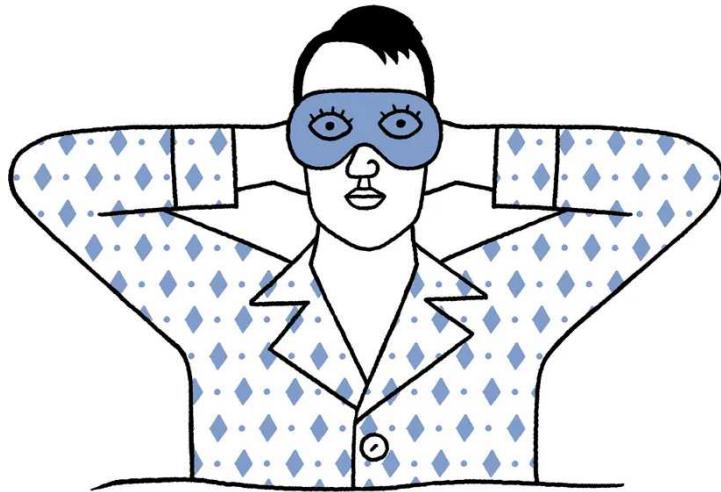
- Sleep Essential for Health

Shouts & Murmurs

Sleep Essential for Health

By Ian Frazier

October 07, 2024



To achieve good health, you must maintain a regular sleep schedule, and be able to get back to sleep once you are awake. At least eight hours of sleep—or nine hours, or even more, if you include the time you spend awake, trying to get back to sleep—is essential. Scientists who study sleep patterns stress the significance of stress, which makes it hard not only to get to sleep but to get back to sleep if you wake up in the night. They advise you to just go back to sleep.

Every night, sunrise is approaching at speeds of up to a thousand miles an hour, depending on how far you are from the equator. Try to get back to sleep faster than that, by clenching your eyes tightly shut and going back to sleep in a hurry. If that doesn't work, unclench your eyes, re-close them in the regular way, and then go back to sleep at a normal speed. Since you've started thinking about this, the dawn, glinting pink on the cold, endless waves of the ocean, has reached the point in the Atlantic where the Titanic

sank. In terms of getting back to sleep, nothing is to be gained by imagining this.

So just go back to sleep. Experts suggest the following mental exercise: imagine that Donald Trump is lying next to you in the bed. He is wearing snug cotton pajamas printed to look like his signature blue suit, white shirt, and red tie. You are happy to have this chance to tell him a few things you think he ought to know. You start to tell him, but he responds by fake-snoring, in order to drown out what you are saying. The snoring would not fool anybody, so you raise your voice. Soon you are sound asleep.

No, you're not. You're awake—fortunately! Death may be coming for you this very night, and now you will be awake to deal with him when he gets here. The Centers for Disease Control recommends that, when you hear the shaft of Death's scythe bumping on the stairs, you should get under the sheets down at the foot of the bed with your arms over your head in the "braced and cowering" position, and then pile all the rest of the covers on top of you; that way, maybe he won't be able to get you. This advice goes back to the days of the Black Death, in the fourteenth century, and to the famous painting by Giuseppe Caggiano which shows Death at the gates of Hell. In the painting, Death has just handed Satan the list of the souls that he is bringing in. They are visible in the background, walking single file into the flames below. The Devil is looking at Death disapprovingly, and Death is saying, "There was one I couldn't get because he scrunched way down under the covers" (*my translation from the original Umbrian*).

Death is like anybody else, just putting in his time, which is eternity. Another way to get back to sleep is to think about him and Mrs. Death. Imagine you're on one of those super-luxury cruise ships, and Death and Mrs. Death are in the next cabin. He leaves his scythe in the corridor to be sharpened. As you and the dawn reach the place where the Titanic sank, you realize that you have neglected to bring food along, and the ship doesn't provide any. Even worse, when you're hungry, it's that much harder to get back to sleep. Searching for a vending machine, you pass Mrs. Death in the corridor. No point in asking her if she has anything to eat in her cabin—she's Mrs. Death, after all. Very skeletal, but not unattractive. In fact, you have several tattoos that look like her.

Death (the condition, not the guy) is the one “sleep” that is *not* essential for health—quite the opposite! Sleep may be essential for health, but waking up is even more essential. So, from that perspective, if you can’t get back to sleep, with Mrs. Death in the next stateroom piling up room-service dishes to leave outside the door, along with the scythe for the steward to sharpen (so the ship *does* provide food, after all, but maybe only for V.I.P.s)—with all that clattering going on, you can’t get back to sleep? That’s not entirely bad, if waking up is equally (or even more) important for good health. You don’t have to worry about waking up or not waking up because, thank God, you’re awake already.

Now Trump is actually asleep. His real snoring is incredibly loud, and so powerful that, when he inhales, all the items in the stateroom, including some of the smaller pieces of furniture, get suctioned by the indraft until they are clustered around his nose and his wide-open mouth. Then, when he exhales, making a “B-b-b-b-b” sound with his lips, the items return to their original positions in the room. Soon it will be morning. ♦

Fiction

- [Official Survey by the National Association of Toddlers](#)
- [Hi Daddy](#)

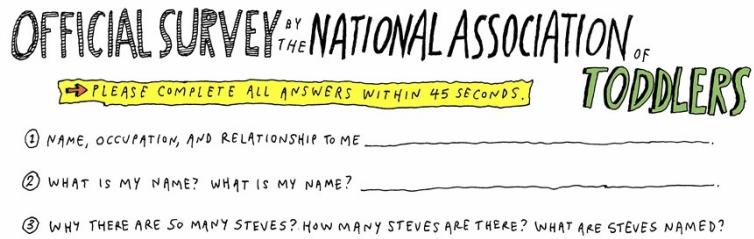
Sketchbook

Official Survey by the National Association of Toddlers

Why I took off my hat? Why my hat not on my head? And other important data points.

By Liana Finck

October 07, 2024



OFFICIAL SURVEY BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF TODDLERS

► PLEASE COMPLETE ALL ANSWERS WITHIN 45 SECONDS.

① NAME, OCCUPATION, AND RELATIONSHIP TO ME _____

② WHAT IS MY NAME? WHAT IS MY NAME? _____

③ WHY THERE ARE SO MANY STEVES? HOW MANY STEVES ARE THERE? WHAT ARE STEVES NAMED? _____



④ WHAT DO ZEBRAS EAT?
⑤ HAY
⑥ MUFFINS
⑦ BABY'S CHY BEAR



⑧ WHAT COLOR IS IT?
(CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)
⑨ RED
⑩ BLUE
⑪ GREEN
⑫ WHAT COLOR IS IT?



⑬ WHY I TAK OFF MY HAT?

_____.

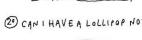


⑭ WHY YOU SCREAMED?

_____.
_____.



⑮ CAN YOU PICK ME UP?
⑯ Y
⑰ N
⑱ OTHER



⑲ CAN I HAVE A LOLLIPPOP NOW?

⑩ CAN I HAVE A PRESENT?
(PLEASE CHECK ONE)

⑪ YES


⑫ NOT THAT PRESENT!
(PLEASE RESPOND IMMEDIATELY)

⑬ SORRY, HERE'S A LIGHT
-UP YOYO OR SOMETHING.

_____.
_____.

⑭ WHY I DREW ON MY FEET?
⑮ N

⑯ WHY MY HAT NOT ON MY
HEAD?
⑰ HERD?

⑱ WHY YOU WAITED FOR A CHUNG
WHEN YOU WERE A DAY BEFORE
A GIRL TOOK YOUR TOY AND YOU
GOT A BLOODSTAIN ON YOUR KEEF?

_____.
_____.

⑩ WHY MY HAND IS
STICKY!!!

_____.
_____.

⑪ WHY THERE ARE GREEN BEARS
AND BROWN BEARS AND BLACK
BEARS AND WHITE BEARS?
(PLEASE ANSWER TWELVE TIMES)

_____.
_____.

⑫ CAN I HAVE A LOLLIPOP?
⑬ Y N

⑭ WHY I SCREAMED?
⑮ S
⑯ HERD?

_____.
_____.

⑰ WHY A BABY BIT ME AND MY
TEACHER GAVE ME A BAND-AID
AND I CRIED AND THE BABY
CRIED?

LITTLE

Fiction

Hi Daddy

By Matthew Klam

October 06, 2024



My daughter was going on a trip to Europe that she'd been dreaming about for a year and planning for months, with the boyfriend she'd dumped and then got back together with a few weeks earlier. Lucas was already over there with two friends, and as we drove to the airport I had the feeling that her flying alone across the dark, empty ocean was practice for her real departure, to college, a month from now.

There was the sound of us not speaking as I drove, then the stiff, formal quiet of me keeping out of Leah's way as we parked and she hefted her backpack, twenty-eight pounds of teen-age clothing, and followed me into the Dulles terminal and up the stairs to the atrium, with its soaring cement columns and a beautiful pink sunset with mythic clouds on the other side of the tall glass walls. "Watch my stuff," she said, and went to the counter. The airport was empty, as if she had some power to wipe out anyone who might try to stop her. Leah wore loose, soft clothing, and a bucket hat pulled down on her head. She was competent and smooth. She came back and gave me a

shoulder hug and said, “O.K., pal,” and lifted her backpack. “Thanks for the nice ride. I love you and I’ll see you later.”

I asked her if she had her phone all charged. She said she did.

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

I watched her go through security. As she went by, she flashed a peace sign—at me or maybe at the Amish-looking woman beside me, in a starched cap and timeless flowered dress, black socks and sneakers—and some portal opened into her future, while I was recorded and preserved, folded into history.

Lucas had been sending updates for the past week as he and his friends met up with another group of boys in Bilbao. They were sick from clubbing until 7 a.m., and somebody had broken a piece of furniture so they’d been evicted from their hostel and had to sleep in a train station. He was glad to be splitting off from the others for the next part of the trip. Leah had shown me a photo from a beach on the northwestern coast of Spain, an intimate closeup of a boy, camera aimed up his nose, while another boy leaned in—this was Lucas—mouth open, tongue and teeth glistening.

“Are they bald?”

“They bald,” she said. For some reason, they had shaved their heads.

I hit traffic getting out of the airport, and the inexact designations of the Beltway confused me, north and south, inner and outer, even though I’d been driving here for twenty-four years. I’d been a little off lately, with strange things going on in my mind and body, and didn’t want to get lost at night on a highway in suburban Virginia. I’d had *Covid*, after dodging it for years, and there were these lingering effects, and at times it was hard to know whether it was that or this—my kid was leaving, and I was stunned, in a perpetual state of shock, and couldn’t catch up with reality. My mind looped through the images: her first night home from the hospital; sleepaway camp; tumbling passes and shoulder injuries; how she’d stood in a field, listening to the bloodcurdling screech of a fox. Ninth-grade math; spots on her face; mean girls; test prep; her infected nose ring; the boy she

fooled around with in the bottom of a rowboat; the Olaplex hair tonic to repair damaged hair; college applications; the personal essay; White Claw; Lucas; prom.

At home, I saw Leah's hair ties and her favorite little cookies and her stupid sheepskin slippers, and opened the fridge and put away the oat milk she'd left on the counter. Before taking her to the airport, I'd made her this elaborate dinner, and the kitchen was still a wreck. What was I doing? I wasn't here for myself. I wasn't here as myself. I was here for her, and she wasn't here. I blew my nose on a paper towel and felt that flip-flopping in my chest, as if I were excited or something, and went to press the button on my heart monitor, but I'd already mailed it back to the doctor so he could read the data.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Matthew Klam read "Hi Daddy."](#)

I'd been fine, really, and got good at functioning around it, whatever it was —arrhythmia, stomach pains, coughing my brains out in the shower, sneaking away to pass out like someone who'd crawled through the jungle on his hands and knees. A nutritionist had prescribed five hundred dollars' worth of herbs and vitamins, and every morning I swallowed them, and they got stuck in my throat and stayed there, which felt more or less like a heart attack.

On the counter was a tray of delicate little basil and tomato plants, a box of light bulbs, and a three-litre can of my mother's favorite olive oil: these things were for her. She and my father lived an hour away, and needed all the love in the world right now, but, if I was going to make the drive, I'd have to trick myself into doing it, so I texted my mother to say that I'd be there in the morning. She called back, but I let it go to voice mail. I knew what she'd say. My father was scared of dying, and my mother was scared of how much his dying would cost.

And now she'd be counting down the minutes until I appeared in her driveway.

In the meantime, she'd be worrying about her back, and the ironing board falling out of the closet and knocking her unconscious, and who would take care of him then. She didn't want anyone coming in, and she wasn't going to send him anywhere. His mind and body were mostly gone, but she wanted him to be at home for as long as possible, though she had no help lifting or moving him. This had been going on for almost a year; she was eighty-two, and hanging in there.

Marla was at a conference in Bloomington, Indiana, of all places, receiving her usual accolades in the difficult, sometimes hopeless field of juvenile-justice reform, navigating between the federal government and various state, local, and tribal organizations. When I'd asked about the conference, she'd used words like "allocating," "outsourcing," and "prosecutorial restraint." She'd been in a low-grade panic since we'd got a response to our *FAFSA* financial-aid form saying that we wouldn't receive any help with Leah's college tuition, and had been trying as hard as possible to make an extra quarter of a million dollars. She'd FaceTimed that morning while eating breakfast in her hotel room, hoping to talk to Leah, who was still asleep. Marla had looked worried, overwhelmed by a big pink sweater, with an age spot on her face that I'd never noticed before and bags under her eyes like Benicio Del Toro's. She'd called to give us a list of final preparations, although we'd already done everything. I had all the details of Leah's ten-day trip, had gone over dates and times with Lucas's parents, the Lazzarones, had spoken to Leah about pickpockets and heatstroke, and given her suggestions of cathedrals to visit, which she'd ignored. Leah had saved up to pay her own airfare to Spain, but we'd paid for a hotel room near the beach in Málaga, and a hop by plane from Seville to Barcelona.

I texted Marla to say that I was back from the airport and she could call if she wanted to hear about the drop-off, but she wrote that she was in some plenary talk and needed to pay attention, and, anyway, she'd been on the phone with Leah while she was waiting to board.

"Oh good," I texted back.

Marla texted a heart.

I texted a smiley face.

“She said you tried to run someone over in the parking lot.”

“I was kidding around.”

Marla was typing.

“She’s going to be fine. We’ll miss her but we’ll manage.”

Marla was typing again.

“She was anxious and we talked about similar situations she’d been in, how she settled into kindergarten when she realized that other kids were scared, too.”

She kept typing.

“I told her how I waited outside her classroom for the whole first week, watching her through the door, and she said, Mommy, I know. I could see her at that little plastic stove stirring something with a magic wand.”

Marla was still typing. It was hard to overstate how attentive, professional, and educated she was—she had a master’s in psych and a law degree from Fordham—or how disgustingly intentional and engaged she’d been in Leah’s emotional and psychological development.

“Before she got on the plane I told her, We will always love you and this will always be your home. This house and the ground around it and the air above it, with the tree outside your window, the sun coming through it. It will come back to you in dreams forever.”



What the fuck.

“Ha ha. I’m sure you have your own version of how things went for her in kindergarten.”

“I remember being in Ohio watching John Kerry lose the election, and you telling me you were pregnant, and then nothing until Leah’s birthday with the bouncy house,” I texted.

“Third grade. You tend to forget things that make you emotional.”

“I guess.”

“Which makes her feel weird, and she doesn’t know what to do with you. She’s a teen-ager. She lives in the moment.”

I said I’d try to live in the moment, too. I wondered whether Leah actually needed any insight into my feelings. Like maybe she just needed to have her own feelings, in my presence. Like maybe all a young person needed was some kind of space, independent of her parents, to assemble and prepare herself for the life ahead. “To be alone in the presence of another,” or whatever the saying was.

I thought back to four months earlier, when Leah and I had gone for a walk in the woods. She was angry that it was hot, and complained that the woods smelled like sewage. She listed the pros and cons of the schools that had accepted her, and then for no sane reason decided that she was moving to the Pacific Northwest for the next four years, rather than a pretty good place fifty or even a hundred and fifty miles away. I maintained my commitment to being a blank slate for her to draw her thoughts on, dadlike, stoic and steady, but as the trail wound through the forest I thought I was about to throw up or do something out the other end. I was praying that I'd make it back to the car, and when we got home I was, in fact, quite ill, overcome with these somaticized issues related to who knows what. Then I cooked us a healthy dinner, and sat at the table pretending to eat, while she went through the whole thing again with Marla. The simple act of eating—that vital and necessary process of digestion which I'd done all my life with the spirited gusto of a goat in a junk yard swallowing tin cans and plastic bags—had been problematic since *Covid*, and I sat there with a sharp pain in my stomach, debilitating exhaustion, and a fear that this thing was knitted permanently into my nerves.

Marla was typing. “She’s in love for the first time in her life and flying to a beach on the Mediterranean and it’s exciting and romantic. Think of all the joy we’ll be gaining from her experiences!”

“Absolutely.”

Marla’s work focussed on helping adolescents in conflict as they processed their emotions and instructing them on how to deal in a diplomatic way with external power dynamics. As the years passed and Leah lost interest in gymnastics, volleyball, and playing soccer in the mud, Marla had led the way, teaching her what it meant to be a woman out in the world, how to work through disagreements with friends, how to make her eyelashes look longer, what boys want and how they’ll roofie you and rape you and throw you in a ditch, how to apply concealer, how to make salad.

At the same time, my role had become more clearly defined and circumscribed. I drove the car, took her to doctors, did grocery runs. I was the better cook, and so, in one of those charming reversals that men experience these days, I was complimented for my cooking and how much

more attractive I was since I'd lost weight but not for what I thought or what I said. I tried not to say much, to keep my voice down, tried not to loom over someone while complaining about the environmental cost of cloud storage, not to laugh sarcastically when someone lost their phone, not to go around the house in a bathrobe.

A few days a week, I did comms for an organization that provided funding for the humanities in developing countries. I oversaw the disparate pieces of our annual report, and punched up speeches for senior leadership, stripping out acronyms, making them sound human. Marla's work was more difficult, and more urgent—reading court testimony, fighting to protect children who'd been tried as adults in the criminal-justice system, engaging with their families—and in her downtime she liked to watch videos of crippled dogs being rehabilitated in Mexico, but her weekends with Leah were usually fun. After breakfast, they'd head out to their exercise class, then go to lunch and buy lotions. Meanwhile, I'd act like the greatest troop leader for a fun group of boys, going for a hike or a run, except that it was just me alone, doing things by myself.

As the clock ran down toward Leah's departure, she and Marla got closer. They shared clothes, and split entrées at restaurants, and at bedtime had long talks in the dark in Leah's room. They'd spent hours discussing the contents of the backpack she took to Spain, turning quiet and calm and anxious together. Marla was mulling over what she'd do with herself this fall after Leah had gone—maybe take banjo lessons, or learn to solder so she could make her own jewelry, or volunteer for this program where you get to hold opioid babies. Or we could move to the Pacific Northwest—like who's to stop us?—or maybe Marla would move there alone.

When we finished texting, I sat on the couch, watching Leah's flight on a tracking app, off the coast of Nova Scotia. It passed over St. John, then crossed Newfoundland, moving five hundred and sixty miles an hour, until there was nothing but ocean between her and Lisbon.

My alarm went off at five, so that I could see if she'd landed and would make her connecting flight, and I got up after that. I'd been up and down all night, wandering around, staring at board games stacked on a shelf in the hall or at the shag rug in our bedroom, endlessly bleeding nostalgia. I left

early, glad to get out of the house, and didn't stop for coffee, and forgot to bring the dog so she could run around. My parents lived in the middle of nowhere, and as I got closer I saw trees damaged by a recent storm. My car hit the gravel of the driveway and I pulled up to their house, reminding myself to be nice.

The front door opened onto the old part of the house—low ceiling, pine floors, stone hearth, framed photos of grandkids—which I passed through into the new part, open, airy, sunny, painted white, with sliding glass doors, high ceilings, hanging plants, funky smells, and dust everywhere. My mother yelled hello from upstairs.

I found my dad at the table reading the newspaper, pretending to, and having breakfast. I kissed his cheek and it startled him. I felt the soft, smooth skin he shaved with his loud electric razor, his warm pink face. I sat and saw the watery, hazel-colored eyes behind his glasses, reflecting turmoil and disbelief. The area around his lower eyelids was especially troubling.

I hadn't seen him since two weeks earlier, when he'd fallen and hit his head. The blood had pooled around him as he lay there, and my mother couldn't get him up, so paramedics had to come. He still had the staples in and wore a hat to hide them. He was ashamed of his unwashed hair, and of his red-rimmed eyes, and wore some seven-dollar magnifying readers—six with his veteran's discount—that made it almost impossible for him to see. His T-shirt, which had been clean that morning but no longer was, had been sent from Tokyo by my sister. It said "I'm Big in Japan," which my brother-in-law really was, as a jazz pianist. My father also wore around his waist a wide cloth belt with magnets inside it, ostensibly for his lower back, but the Velcro had failed, so he held it together with a potato-chip-bag clip.

He gave me a long, funny look, because he thought he knew me from somewhere—158th Street in Harlem, where he'd lived with his parents and his crazy aunt and the heater that leaked carbon monoxide.

"I'm too young," I said. "I'm your son." I was familiar with this line of questioning, and we went around like that a few times, but he thought I was lying.

I pictured the round-faced, red-haired boy he'd been, out on the fire escape with Johnny Passerelli, and the plaid Woolrich coat he wore in the blizzard of 1950-something. There'd been gangs, and some kid had stabbed Johnny, and my father had had to switch schools, whatever.

My mother came downstairs and screamed my name at him and went into the kitchen. For the past couple of months, my father had been calling me different things. He ignored her. He couldn't hear anyway. The phone rang, and my mother answered. It was my aunt. My father had something to tell me.

"I fell."

"I know. I brought you home from the hospital."

"I'm not the same guy."

"Sure you are."

He started to tell me again but got distracted, chewing. He was like a zombie who ate Cheerios. He already had the most cereal and milk you could have on yourself without bathing in it. As I watched him, a terrible energy, that menacing strength he'd had all his life, coursed through me. I could imagine things: dropping him like a stone to the bottom of the ocean, or lifting him gently and carrying him to bed. My desperation to please him—or my need to get along with him, or to get away from him—had formed me, but now I was in charge. Then again, maybe I wasn't, because he'd forgotten me—me, but not my sisters. It became hard to think. I felt buzzy with this new feeling.

Twenty years ago, my parents had sold the house I grew up in, in suburban D.C., and moved out here. There were nice towns, with rich people and summer music festivals and hip distilleries and rolling farms with fancy stables and pretty fencing. This wasn't one of them. It felt generationally unchosen, with a sad main street and too much slate in the ground for good farming but not enough to quarry and mine. And yet their place was beautiful, and sometimes fifteen degrees cooler than the city, with a nice view, and wildflowers and songbirds, and a lush, comfortable darkness to sleep in at night, a good breeze, no mosquitoes, a spring-fed pond that felt

silky and cool, and a little brook that wandered through the woods and snaked behind their house, and made rippling sounds that you could hear while lying in bed with the window open.

Leah loved this place, and loved to visit these people I neglected and had mostly abandoned because they were not as important to me as she was. I tried to come here as little as possible. I liked to pretend I'd had parents only casually, and didn't want to be reminded of how hard I'd clung to them for so long. I was a terrible son.

The window in front of us looked out on the hill that descended to the pond. As my father continued to eat his breakfast, a strange reddish-colored horse appeared outside, dragging a cinder block on a lead line across the driveway.

“Whose horse is that?”

“It’s the girl’s,” my mother yelled from the other room, still on the phone.

The horse came closer, stepping daintily, carefully, into the flower bed by the dogwood tree. With his pinkish nose, he nuzzled the bird feeder, tipping it so that the whole sleeve of black thistle poured into his mouth.

“Goddammit!” my father said.

My mother went outside still holding the phone, and told the horse to get out of there. Then she came in, looking for more birdseed, and went back out.

When I was growing up, we always had animals. Who could forget Gladys the bloodhound, who jumped like a kangaroo and ate a meat loaf off the back of the stove, or the teacup Yorkie that loved to hump its squeaky pig. Sometimes now I lost track of the names of the dogs my parents let spit all over the windows and the cats who were bloodied in fights with raccoons, or the goat who got loose and drowned in the neighbor’s pool. We also had rabbits, hamsters, infestations of mice, and, for some years, despite my father’s effort to ascend the classes, a dozen or so chickens who’d come clucking into the house through the dog door, from the back-yard chicken coop. They crowed at dawn, inciting neighbors’ complaints, until rats or foxes picked them off. After my father retired, my parents moved here so

that he could finally keep horses and become the gentleman farmer he'd dreamed of being, but it was so much work, and then they got too old to ride and gave the horses away.

My mother came back in and I got up and hugged her. She looked tired but the same.

"I have your plants."

"O.K."

"I can leave them for you to deal with, or I can take them out back and put them in the ground. It's up to you."

She seemed to be considering the options. "Why don't you take them out back and shove them up your ass?"

My mother had a wonderful sense of humor, and had in fact just sent me a birthday check for a hundred dollars with a card inscribed to "Marvin," one of the names my father had recently come up with for me; then she'd crossed "Marvin" out and written "Garvin, or whatever your name is," and wished me a good year. She was beautiful, with only a few gray strands in her thick dark hair.

"How's life?"

"O.K.," she said. "I'm ready for it to be over."

She made coffee. I made toast. The phone rang, my other aunt calling, and I listened to my mother describe my arrival, the horse, me eating toast now, and how I liked it. My father was doing things with the food in his mouth and we tried not to look, but it was impossible. He said something then, and she had to translate, "Help me up!," waving her hand as a commentary on his imperiousness, or maybe to make sure I did it. His voice had changed and fallen back into his throat like Frankenstein's, and he didn't say "please" anymore, and treated whoever was there like a disobedient servant. He was the same as he'd always been—selfish and angry—but he was acting this way while dying.

I lifted him to his feet, which somehow seemed ridiculous to him, and he gave me a devilish chuckle. I held his hand as we walked to the stairs, my mother narrating for my aunt. At the bottom he started nervously counting, then took the first step and went up slowly, resting in the middle, shaking and panting, and I had to tell myself that this was real. He wasn't faking it. Here was this wreck of a human being, and yet everything else was normal. I'd seen this kind of thing in movies and read about it in books. At the top of the stairs, trembling, he told me he didn't need my help anymore, as I helped him undress and get into bed. He closed his eyes, and I watched him lying there, and thought he might die right then. He looked like Yoda at the end, or E.T. in the riverbed, that little guy so far from home.

He died a few weeks later.

We had a memorial service at the Hindu meditation center my parents used to belong to on Western Avenue, which shared a sanctuary with a kooky Unitarian church. His business partner spoke about how he used to wear work boots to the office, and my oldest sister told stories about someone I didn't recognize, and got her facts wrong, and her husband, the jazz guy, wore a Canali suit and paid for the reception.

The next day we hiked out to a trail my father loved, and dumped his ashes in the Potomac. My mother hiked with us, and I was glad that she was all there, still strong. Some months later, at Thanksgiving, I watched her haul a twenty-four-pound turkey out of the oven with a grunt and bang it onto the stove while my beefy nephew stood next to her, asking where she kept the club soda.

My father was maybe not ideally suited to raise children, but he saw that as more of a problem for us than for him. I think he was the kind of father they had back then, and maybe I was the kind we had now. There were things you could say about him and you could say the opposite and it would also be true. He could be infinitely patient, untangling your fishing line over and over, and never complaining. More than once, he'd used pliers to calmly remove a hook that I'd accidentally planted in his arm or leg while casting my line. And he spent hours in his woodshop, planing the cherry planks he used to build the kitchen. But if he ever got stuck doing a job he didn't want to do, which happens quite often in life, especially when you're raising four

kids, he'd fly into a demented rage, which was terrifying and spoiled everything.

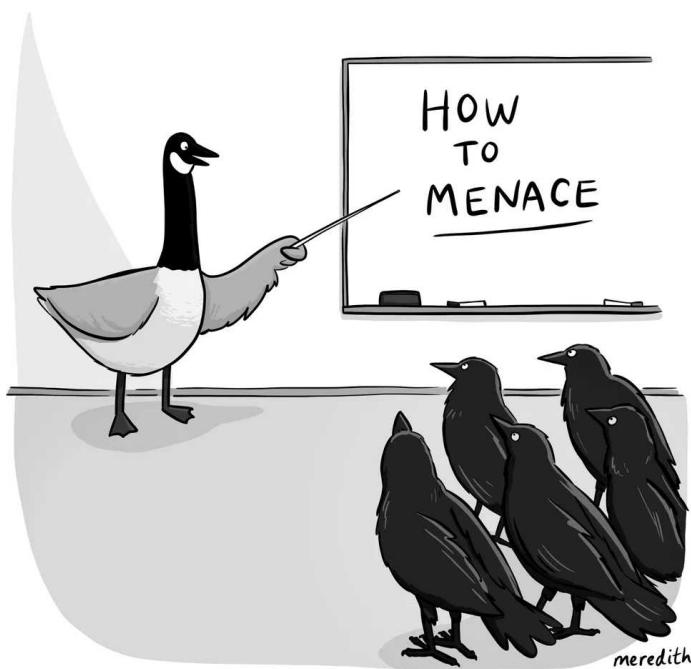
When we came to visit when Leah was small, as soon as we walked in he would drop down to the rug, singing and clapping or petting the dog so that she'd join him. And in his magnetic and self-effacing way he'd draw her to him, a seemingly gentle patriarch. If she showed up with a friend he'd be annoyed, and would not recover, would be sour and put-upon in a familiar way. He'd need me to dump a wheelbarrow full of bricks in the woods, or he'd ask me to join him in a repair I wasn't qualified for, holding a wrench on some pipe under the moldy sink, wasting the day, him standing over me offering inexpert advice, and at some point, without having fixed anything, I'd walk away. I'd given him a grandchild, enough already.

He was eighty-three when he died, and I was surprised that he'd made it that long. He didn't believe in drinking water, and had lived for a good part of his life on burnt hot dogs and Triscuits. He didn't think you had to wash cooking pots after you used them. He didn't believe in recycling, thought it was some left-wing conspiracy. He didn't really believe in death, either, and had refused to attend any of his friends' funerals. He liked to challenge himself with Sisyphean outdoor labors involving his beloved chainsaws, or with other acts of male fortitude, like taking something out of the refrigerator, scraping off the mold, and eating it, while yelling at anyone who was afraid to try it. He'd be remembered for the good deeds he'd done for the community—county co-chair for the Special Olympics, and two whole days a week volunteering at the local elementary school. It was my mother who had made me out of nothing, but my father had made the world, the birds and the trees, and had named them for me: the goldfinch and the evening grosbeak, the American hornbeam and the copper beech. He loved Leontyne Price singing "Knoxville: Summer of 1915." He loved his smelly truck. The last time he'd climbed behind the wheel, he'd driven into the back of the garage. "It's fine," my mother had said. "Let him." She said this nicely, like a crazy person.

I wondered what he'd thought of me (before he forgot my name), outside of the performative way he seemed to see me—as a leech, or a rival, or a threat, or a clown, or as an exact replica of himself, down to the way we stood, and belched, and cleared our throats.

I saved two photos that day at my parents' house. One of my father asleep after I helped him to bed, hat pulled down, glasses askew. And one that Leah sent from Spain: a selfie of her riding on the back of a motorcycle, dutifully wearing a helmet, her cheeks pink from the heat, holding a pizza box. If you pressed on the photo, you could see three whole seconds of video, hear her laughing, and get a glimpse of Lucas in front, no helmet, shaved head, looking relaxed. She'd texted to say that they'd gone straight to the beach, and how good it had felt to swim after a long plane ride—"It's a bit baptismal." Where the fuck did she learn to talk like that?

Downstairs, I sat with my mother. "The girl" who owned the horse, she explained, was the daughter of her friend down the road. The girl and her husband had started a special-ed school, but the school had gone bust and the horse was homeless.



"Who's taking care of it?"

"I know how to feed a horse."

"Are you mucking out the stall?"

"He's mostly outside."

I kept fidgeting, getting up to clean things.

“You should take him for a trot,” she said.

“I don’t know how to ride,” I said.

“He needs to get his ya-yas out.”

“Why don’t you get your ya-yas out?”

Then she tucked her pants into her socks and went for a walk. I cleaned the kitchen and enjoyed being in the quiet house with her outside and him asleep.

My mother had cried a little, while finishing her breakfast, and I’d held her hand and kissed it, but her sadness didn’t penetrate. I’d felt it in my face, the stony witnessing, waiting for it to pass. I couldn’t fix her life. I wanted to get home, or go somewhere far away. I cleaned out the fridge, changed light bulbs, and ran the vacuum.

I took the plants from my car and went out to the garage for a shovel. The horse came by the garden and clocked me with his big orange eyeball, dragging the cinder block, cropping grass around my father’s outdoor grill. I saw the stone gnome my parents had brought from our old house, the one we called Lorenzo Squink. I’d driven past that house not long ago and seen that it was for sale, and had gone in to take a look. The owners had put a pool where the chicken coop used to be, but left everything else—the rusty radiator in my parents’ bathroom, the crappy fireplace tools I made in eighth-grade metal shop. All it needed was some red velvet ropes and you could open a museum. When we lived there, it was the five of us, my mother and four kids, against him. We were a unit and we gaslit him, and it must’ve been awful for an only child who grew up poor, to be so alone. For us he had a job he claimed to hate, and I guess we could’ve been nicer. Or maybe he deserved it?

When I was done in the garden, I checked on my father, who was still asleep, then went into the kitchen and made a stir-fry with everything minced into tiny bites, enough to put half in the freezer. My mother came in

and told me I'd left the garden gate open, and the horse had gone in there and eaten her lettuce, cucumbers, new basil, squash, zucchini, and watermelon plants.

"Sorry."

We could see him out back through the living-room windows. His rusty reddish coat was the color my father's hair had once been, and I wondered whether it was him, reincarnated ahead of schedule. He was throwing his head around and having a good time, and that was when I noticed that the lead line was still attached to his halter but there was no cinder block dragging on the ground. He'd sheared it off on the garden fence, and now he strolled freely beneath a stand of white pine trees, joyfully rolling in the bed of golden pine needles, hooves in the air, whipping his tail around, then springing up and charging down the hill. The next time I saw him, he was in the pond, taking a dip. My father had also loved to swim naked, and to sit by the pond, bare-assed, doing the crossword. The horse came out of the water, shining, dark, and sleek as a seal.

We decided that one of us would have to confront him. If you're not a cowboy with a lasso, there is another way to catch a jumpy horse in an open field: put some oats in a bucket and shake it so that the horse can hear what sounds like dinner, then walk toward but also sort of away from him, in case he spooks. If you do this wrong, and even if you do it right, he might stomp you.

As I got closer, he started to whinny, a good sign, then he shoved his head in the bucket and ate some oats. There was the great wheel of his jaw, and the thick haunch of his neck. I could have grabbed his halter, but then he lifted his head and spun, heading for the road.

I imagined myself up there in a bone-jarring trot, sliding around in a saddle, trying to find my seat. Then he fell into a smooth canter, heading downhill. At the end of the driveway he cleared the fence, hooked left, opened his stride, and exploded into a gallop. His head went up and down, the sound of his hooves like the Pony Express. I thought of a mailman riding high, a hundred and sixty years ago, carrying the news. The President has been shot. He is grievously wounded. Ring the church bell.

I went back into the barn, put away the bucket, found my mother in the house, and told her I was leaving.

“Hey, what’s that horse’s name?”

“Chief,” she said.

I should have stayed, had dinner, slept over, getting up with my father every hour or so, giving her a night of uninterrupted sleep. But my dog had been locked inside all day, and Marla was flying in later. We hadn’t seen each other in a week. I had to go.

I looked for the horse on the road as I drove. There were double-wide trailers, and dead cars in front yards, and threatening political flags, and posted signs on spooky old trees with shaggy bark. He wasn’t there.

While driving, I noticed an empty lighter in the cup holder, a vape pen, and a soda can on the floor of the passenger side. Someone had drawn on the dusty outside of the glass of the sunroof—a smiling kitty face, a dick and balls, and “Hi Daddy.” All summer I’d been feeling subdued, stuffed down and worried, dreading Leah’s departure.

I remembered the first time I saw Lucas, even before he and Leah were together, when I went to pick her up from school and found her at the boys’ soccer game and watched him streak across the field to wipe out some kid with a slide tackle. He was brave and committed—short and barrel-chested—and it was a thrill to see him in action. A few weeks later, he tore ligaments in his ankle, and his soccer career ended. All last fall he’d show up at our house, hobbling around, looking bloated and sweaty, or I’d spot him on crutches on the sidelines with a video camera, and it was heartbreaking. By the time they started dating, he was a little tormented. He’d get into fights with his mom and be grounded, argue with Leah, scold her about something she drank or ate or said, then leave poems for her in the mailbox. At school he’d make a big deal of skipping lunch to do homework, but then not do it, and bomb the class. He hadn’t got in anywhere he’d applied and was planning to spend a gap year working on a farm for some program in Vermont.

There were other boys I liked more, like Leah's friend Andre, who was going to Michigan, with his arm muscles and his handsome face, his shiny black curls, and a profile like something on a Roman coin. But Lucas was her first love, and he was honest, loyal, dutiful, sad, afraid of alcohol, drawn to conflict, self-pitying, valorous, and paranoid. And even though Leah had grown irritated at having to walk at his pace between classes and drive him places with his crutches sticking out the window, it had taught her to be considerate. Though it had made me feel out of sorts to see her accommodating him, even after he'd gotten off crutches, creating this space inside herself to console him, to contain his anxieties, having to be patient and lower her expectations, while they learned to be a couple. I wondered how they'd manage in Spain.

They sent us photos from a whitewashed village outside Málaga, and joined a street party at midnight in Seville, then flew to the province of Girona and hid from the sun under a cliff at a gay beach and ate squid and jumped off rocks into the sparkling sea. For the past nine months, there'd been miserable breakups and torturous conversations out back at 3 a.m., until I had to lean out our bedroom window to tell them to shut up. But on their return from Spain they were so close, and, as the day approached for them to go their separate ways, they dragged out every last this or that, sleeping at our house or his, and anytime Lucas walked through our front door he brought flowers, or hugged Marla, or me, and I got a lump in my throat and felt the stupidity of what they were doing as brave and beautiful. On the final night before Leah left for college, they slept in our basement and cried until dawn.

Back home, waiting for Marla, I cleaned the house. I heard the voices of kids out on the street and tried not to think about what else would remind me of Leah, and make me miss her, for the rest of my life.

In the bathroom mirror, the sight of my own face calmed me down. It was long and haggard, with a thick jaw, a big nose, and wide nostrils—a soothing face, handsome the way a horse is handsome. If you looked at my right eye, you'd see blood vessels from waking up at 5 a.m., and if you looked at my left you'd notice the milky white from holding in my tears.

Out the window, the full moon had risen over my neighbor's porch, and I remembered once, taking Leah out of the tub when she was little, how she noticed the moon, so bright in the night sky that she thought it was the sun, and I explained to her what the moon was, and told her what a planet was, and how we lived in a solar system, in part of a web of galaxies in what we call the universe. She took it all in with a crooked little grin, as though I were probably insane, then brushed her teeth, climbed into bed, kissed her bear, and went to sleep. ♦

The Critics

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- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [Rachel Kushner's Covert Op Against Realism](#)
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Books

How John Lewis Put a Legacy of Heroism to Use

As the civil-rights era receded, his personal heroism loomed larger. But movement politics didn't easily translate into party politics.

By Kelefa Sanneh

October 07, 2024



In the early weeks of 2008, as [Barack Obama](#) was fighting [Hillary Clinton](#) for the Democratic Presidential nomination, many Party members felt obliged to pick a side, and to lend their voices to the side they picked. Few of these voices were as powerful as that of John Lewis, a congressman from Georgia and a veteran of the civil-rights movement. Lewis was skeptical of Obama, who was then a first-term senator from Illinois, known less for any particular accomplishment in Washington than for the inspirational speeches he gave. “He is no Martin Luther King, Jr.,” Lewis told the *Washington Post*, at a time when those speeches were helping Obama eat into Clinton’s once formidable lead in the polls. “I knew Martin Luther King.” King had been Lewis’s mentor, and then his ally; after King’s assassination, Lewis

came to be viewed as King's spiritual and moral heir. But Lewis was also a loyal Democrat, which made him a loyal supporter of the Clintons. "You need more than speech-making," he said. "You need someone who is prepared to provide bold leadership."

In "[John Lewis: A Life](#)" (Simon & Schuster), an appropriately weighty new biography, the historian David Greenberg explains what happened next. Obama's poll numbers kept improving, and Lewis's skepticism began to evaporate. During a conversation with Representative James Clyburn, of South Carolina, Lewis admitted that he was growing concerned about being "on the wrong side of history"; given that Lewis was known, above all, for having been on the right side of history in the nineteen-sixties, this was no small concern. After a few weeks of deliberation, Lewis called the Clintons to warn them that he was going to un-endorse Hillary, and then went on television to proclaim his support for Obama. Later, he explained to Oprah Winfrey that he had come to see Obama's movement as "very similar to the civil-rights movement," which meant that he could hardly fail to support it. Lewis later described Obama's election as a singular triumph—a kind of delayed vindication of all the marches and protests decades earlier. "I jumped so high I started shouting," he said. "I was just so overcome."

It was hardly the first moment of vindication for Lewis; nor was it the last. He was only thirty-five when he was beatified, alongside Mother Teresa, in a 1975 *Time* cover story titled "Saints Among Us." By the time he died, in 2020, at the age of eighty, he had been celebrated in countless documentaries, television specials, and books, including a graphic-novel trilogy called "March." Earlier this year, Raymond Arsenault published an admiring biography, "[John Lewis: In Search of the Beloved Community](#)." Greenberg's book is less hagiographic: it tells the story of Lewis's life and his career, first in the civil-rights movement, which he understood intuitively, and then in Congress, which took him a little longer to figure out. When he spoke at the March on Washington, in 1963, Lewis had asked, "Where is our party? Where is the political party that will make it unnecessary to march on Washington?" Although he continued to believe in the necessity of marches, he came to see the Democratic Party as his own. Protest and partisanship, he decided, were more compatible than he once thought.

Some biographers must wrestle with their subjects' inconsistencies, but Greenberg, for the most part, has the opposite challenge: Lewis seems to have been a stubbornly straightforward character, deeply committed to the civil-rights movement, and to other movements and moments that evoked it. His years fighting Jim Crow taught him the importance of courage in the face of injustice, and gave him a story that was sometimes too inspiring to be easily useful. In the second half of his life, he had to contend with the seeming mismatch between the soaring rhetoric of nineteen-sixties activism and the more earthbound reality of everyday politics, which often seemed rather petty or sordid by comparison. (In the context of an election, the courage to stand up for what's right might mean trying to block the ascent of an intriguing but untested senator from Illinois, at least temporarily.) In the nineteen-eighties, when Lewis was a member of the Atlanta city council, he became involved in an effort to stop the construction of a highway leading to Jimmy Carter's new Presidential library, arguing that it would disrupt nearby neighborhood life. During what seems to have been a lively forum hosted by the Georgia Department of Transportation, Lewis delivered a characteristically passionate speech, declaring, "We will use nonviolent protest to stop this road!" Powerful forces were arrayed against him, including Carter himself, but Lewis's opposition was implacable, though not insuperable. After Lewis went to Washington, a modified version of the highway was built, in time for the 1996 Olympics, and in 2018 it was renamed the John Lewis Freedom Parkway. At the naming ceremony, Lewis did not mention his past opposition to the project. Instead, he thanked the city, and encouraged everyone to vote in the forthcoming midterm elections, using his own history to suggest that politics was a simple choice between two directions. "We've come too far, we've made too much progress, and we're not going back," he said. "We're going forward."

One of the most astonishing things about Lewis's life is how quickly he found his path, and how closely he hewed to it. His parents were sharecroppers in rural Alabama, and he was one of ten children; his family appointed him to take care of the chickens, and he appointed himself to stage a peaceful protest whenever it came time for one of them to be slaughtered. In "[Walking with the Wind](#)," his 1998 memoir, Lewis wrote of hearing about "racial incidents" from many of the Black people he knew. (He didn't know any white ones.) When Emmett Till was abducted and lynched in Mississippi, a few hundred miles away, Lewis was fifteen, just a year older

than Till. Around the same time, Lewis heard Martin Luther King, Jr., on an AM radio station broadcasting from Montgomery, and soon resolved to join King's movement of spiritual and political liberation. "I wanted to use the emotional energy of the Black church to end segregation and gain freedom for Black people," Lewis later recalled, and, in 1957, as a first step, he decided to enroll at the American Baptist Theological Seminary, in Nashville.

He was not immediately recognized as a future leader. He was shy, with a strong accent and what Greenberg describes as a "mild speech impediment"; one friend remembered him as "pure hick." And he was never particularly interested in the finer points of academic theology. (He was eventually ordained, and later earned a bachelor's degree from Fisk, with what sounds like significant help from his friend Archie Allen. "The thesis was very solid, but it needed some editing," Allen told Greenberg. "Maybe I did the typing, too.") Lewis was single-minded, though, and before long he met his hero King—the two briefly considered a plan for Lewis to sue to desegregate Troy State, a whites-only institution near his home in Alabama, until Lewis's parents objected, fearing retaliation. Lewis also met James Lawson, an ally of King's who had studied Gandhi's doctrine of nonviolence while working as a missionary in India; by his junior year, Lewis was attending Lawson's nonviolence workshops and participating in local sit-ins. On a Saturday in February, 1960, during a sit-in at a segregated Woolworth's, Lewis was punched in the ribs by a counter-protester, and then arrested along with dozens of fellow-students, who refused to pay their bail on principle. From the start, Lewis's friends and comrades were amazed by his bravery and discipline. A white pastor who was active in the movement marvelled, "I think you could kill him and he wouldn't resist." Another activist said, "I never even saw him get angry." He wasn't tall, but he was imposing—"granite, fixed, immovable," another ally recalled, with "lips always pursed."

In November of 1960, in Nashville, he was locked inside a restaurant and subjected to fumigation; the manager released him only when the fire department showed up. During the Freedom Rides, a travelling protest against segregated bus lines, Lewis was bashed in the head with a wooden crate, knocked briefly unconscious, and left to bleed. Most famous of all was his assault in Selma, Alabama, during the confrontation known as [Bloody](#)

Sunday, when his skull was fractured by a state trooper's club and he was reduced to vomiting from tear gas; a few hours later, bandaged and lying in a hospital bed, he told a television news crew about the importance of nonviolent protest. These were not mishaps but crucial elements of the movement's plan to make America confront its treatment of Black people. Lewis understood, more deeply and vividly than many of his contemporaries, the symbolic power of blood, especially when it was your own. "We have shed too much blood in Mississippi to accept a compromise," he said at the 1964 Democratic Convention, during a debate over whether the Party would seat a whites-only delegation or an integrated alternative.

Only five years passed between Lewis's first arrest, in Nashville, and the 1965 march from Selma to Montgomery, which he helped lead alongside King, and which was probably his most famous protest. He was rather monkish in his devotion to the movement—Greenberg describes him as "fiercely moralistic"—although his friends sometimes helped him broaden his horizons. (Greenberg recounts a trip to Zambia, during which Lewis and other activists were taken to a night club featuring some sort of striptease. "I had not seen similar entertainment in the U.S.," Lewis remarked.) Some allies viewed Lewis's steadfastness as faintly embarrassing. Andrew Young, another activist who later became a politician, once recalled seeing Lewis and his acolytes on a college campus, neatly dressed for yet another sit-in. Young asked a student what was going on. "That's John Lewis's group," the student said. "There are a couple of restaurants that still haven't desegregated." After Lewis spoke at the March on Washington, one of his allies reportedly said, "Wow, this is the first time I've seen John without a bandage on his head."

At the time of the March on Washington, in August, 1963, Lewis had just been elected chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, known as *SNCC* (pronounced "snick"), which was younger and more militant than King's group, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Part of Lewis's job as chairman was to figure out how much more militant it should become. The divide was evident at the march, where Lewis originally planned to give a speech that evoked William Tecumseh Sherman, the Union general who cut a devastating swath through Georgia during the Civil War. "We shall pursue our own 'scorched earth' policy and burn Jim Crow to the

ground,” Lewis was going to say, before landing on a significant adverb: “nonviolently!” King himself intervened, asking Lewis to tone it down, and Lewis agreed, perhaps because his fiery draft was itself an attempt to find a compromise between different voices within SNCC, some of which were notably more radical than his.

At a time when so much activism is decentralized, it is illuminating to remember the extent to which the civil-rights movement was driven by membership organizations. In the years after the march, SNCC became a natural home for activists who were put off by King’s piety and relative moderation. (Some people referred to him, derisively, as De Lawd.) Meanwhile, Lewis had to contend with younger allies who viewed nonviolent resistance as a kind of masochism, and who increasingly gravitated toward an incendiary slogan with no clear definition: “Black Power!” These frustrations erupted during a fateful SNCC retreat in 1966, in a town outside Nashville called Kingston Springs. The movement was in a paradoxical position: the more progress it made—Congress had passed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and then the Voting Rights Act of 1965—the less momentum there seemed to be. It had been scarcely a year since Bloody Sunday, and yet many younger activists had come to see Lewis as ineffective, or worse. One of his fiercest critics within SNCC was a lifelong activist named Fay Bellamy, who later recalled that she saw Lewis as “a bit of a handkerchief head,” adding, “Every time L.B.J. called, he’d rush his clothes into the cleaners and be on the next plane to Washington.” This complaint—that *sncc*’s leader conferred too often with the President of the United States—says something about both the power and the fractiousness of the group at its height.

The man who became Lewis’s chief rival was in many ways his opposite: Stokely Carmichael, an erudite and provocative exponent of Black Power. In his memoir, Lewis recalled that Carmichael “loved nothing more than to scare the hell out of people, especially white people.” Carmichael, for his part, remembered Lewis as “a regular guy, uncomplicated, friendly, and brave,” which was part of the problem. Carmichael became the consensus choice of a SNCC faction that was looking for a chairman who would be a bit less regular, and a lot less friendly. (One member said, “We need someone to tell Martin Luther King to go to hell.”) During the Kingston Springs retreat, Lewis was reelected chairman, by a vote of sixty to twenty-

two. Then an activist named Worth Long challenged the election on procedural grounds; in fact, there didn't seem to have been any problem with the procedure, but Long's challenge helped unleash a rowdy late-night debate. In the course of it, nearly everyone seemed to agree that there was a problem with Lewis, and he was subjected to a series of heated denunciations. In his memoir, Lewis described the meeting as a kind of apocalypse:

I just sat and listened. I didn't speak. I certainly didn't protest. What was I going to protest? With what authority? There was no higher authority to appeal to now. It was anarchy. Everything was gone. This was the end.

Finally, sometime around dawn, Carmichael was elected the new chairman of SNCC, reorienting the group and effectively ending Lewis's career as a professional civil-rights activist. Even in Greenberg's careful account, the precise nature of the dispute remains obscure. The headline in the *New York Times* read, "*MILITANTS TAKE OVER STUDENT COORDINATING GROUP*," and the accompanying story emphasized Carmichael's disdain for both the Democrats and the Republicans. ("To ask Negroes to get in the Democratic Party is like asking Jews to join the Nazi Party," Carmichael said.) A follow-up article suggested that one of Carmichael's initiatives was to make SNCC a fully Black group. "We will not fire any of our white organizers," he told the *Times*, "but if they want to organize, they can organize white people. Negroes will organize the Negroes." Carmichael later argued that the media made too much of this shift, saying that "SNCC had always been a black-led organization." But his move to sideline the group's white members made Lewis and his allies seem like a bunch of old-fashioned integrationists, too concerned with what white folks wanted—and therefore not concerned enough with what Black folks needed.

Lewis, for his part, suspected that the political split within SNCC was evidence of a cultural and geographical divide. "Redemptive love came naturally to Negro Southerners," he once said: he and his allies were rooted in Black communities and shaped by the universalist message of the Black church. Militants like Carmichael, he argued, were often Northerners who had come South to find or reinvent themselves. "They grew up and lived, for the most part, in a white world—certainly whiter than the world many of the

Southern blacks among us, people like me, grew up in," Lewis wrote. In fact, Carmichael was an immigrant, born in Trinidad, but he was reared in New York, and attended the prestigious Bronx High School of Science before enrolling at Howard University. At SNCC, Carmichael published a manifesto, "Toward Black Liberation," which suggested that the project of integration was misguided: an attempt to "siphon off the 'acceptable' Negroes into the surrounding middle-class white community." What he wanted—what SNCC wanted—was self-determination. "SNCC proposes that it is now time for the black freedom movement to stop pandering to the fears and anxieties of the white middle class in the attempt to earn its 'good-will,' and to return to the ghetto to organize these communities to control themselves," Carmichael wrote.



Carmichael was right to perceive that the mood in Black America was shifting; he was wrong to think that an organization like SNCC could prosper by jettisoning its integrationist ethos and alienating so many of its supporters. Carmichael later explained his hope that, with Lewis and his allies gone, a "smaller core would be left to soldier on to the next change." Instead, the organization collapsed. A year after he took over, Carmichael relinquished his chairmanship and became a travelling activist and intellectual, eventually settling in Guinea, where he was welcomed by its authoritarian President, Ahmed Sékou Touré, and renamed himself Kwame

Ture. SNCC, running out of money, formed an alliance with the Black Panthers, then split with them; in the early seventies, the group disbanded.

Meanwhile, Lewis kept trudging forward: he got married; settled in Atlanta; took a job at the Voter Education Project, which helped register voters across the South; and, in 1986, ran for Congress. To win, he first had to defeat a different charismatic rival, his longtime friend Julian Bond, a fellow SNCC co-founder who was known, as Lewis was not, for his dashing appearance. (Bond had once been featured in an *Ebony* story titled “The Pleasures and Problems of the ‘Pretty’ Black Man.”) They faced off in a primary, which probably would have been less rancorous if the two men had been more ideologically distinct. Instead, they campaigned on competence and character, with Lewis challenging Bond to take a drug test. At one point, unidentified vandals destroyed a plate-glass window at Lewis’s headquarters. Lewis won the primary, thanks partly to his advantage among white voters, and then the general election, but his friendship with Bond never recovered.

Lewis seemed to understand that his new vocation would sometimes require a certain amount of ruthlessness. In 1988, when Jesse Jackson was running for President, Lewis declined to endorse him, using a version of the argument he would make twenty years later. “We’ve gone through the days of protest and now it’s time to make a contribution to the Party,” he said.

His own contributions to the Party tended not to consist of granular policy analysis. Greenberg says that a number of Lewis’s friends and colleagues in Washington reached the same conclusion: “He’s not much of a legislator.” Unlike most legislators, though, he was someone people cared about—a 1991 *Times* profile described him as “something of a celebrity, frequently stopped and praised by tourists and passers-by.” In fact, Lewis was not merely a celebrity; he was widely and justifiably viewed as “one of the great moral heroes of our time,” as his fellow-congressman Barney Frank once put it. That kind of reputation could be an effective political weapon, especially for topics that could be linked to civil rights. “Now, more than ever before, we need the Civil Rights Act of 1991,” he said, addressing President George H. W. Bush, who was initially hesitant to support the bill. The law made it easier for employees to pursue discrimination cases; when Bush expressed concern that it might create a system of de-facto racial quotas,

Lewis replied that, by using the word “quota,” Bush was “fanning the flame of division.” Bush signed the bill.

Lewis was often led by his moral intuition: he was an early supporter of gay rights, and a lifelong supporter of Israel. Mainly, though, his presence in Washington helped to solidify the relationship between the civil-rights movement and the Democratic Party. He used his political capital to make sure that the story of the movement would be remembered, and memorialized: in every session of Congress, starting in 1988, Lewis co-sponsored a bill to create a National Museum of African American History & Culture, and he was there when the museum finally opened, in 2016. The cause of civil rights had been controversial when Lewis was a young man, and of course many of the segregationists he faced down were fellow-Democrats. But, as the movement became more popular in retrospect, the Democrats’ identification with it became an important political asset. Part of Lewis’s job was to remind voters that, on one of the defining political issues of the twentieth century, his team had been on the right side. When Lewis spoke out in favor of gun restrictions or Obama’s Affordable Care Act, he spoke in the language of civil rights, suggesting that this new struggle was like that old one, and that his current political opponents were also destined to wind up on the wrong side of history.

Greenberg’s book, like its subject, spends little time considering the merits of the Democratic Party’s various priorities during the post-civil-rights era. Most people can agree that a man should not be beaten bloody for sitting in a restaurant, or for riding on a bus. But the arguments for and against various provisions of the Voting Rights Act, for instance, tended to be subtler than that. The act protected racial minorities against disenfranchisement, both individually and collectively, which was often interpreted to mean that Black voters, in particular, had a right to elect Black representatives. In 2002, Lewis filed an affidavit in support of a Georgia redistricting plan that would have slightly diluted some majority-Black districts, perhaps because the plan would have made it easier for Democrats to retain their advantage in the state legislature.

“The great majority of the African American voters in the State of Georgia, 90 percent or more tend to vote the Democratic way,” Lewis wrote in the affidavit. “So, it’s in our best interest for us to maintain a Democratic-

controlled state legislature.” He added that the civil-rights movement had, indeed, made substantial progress. “It’s a different state, it’s a different political climate, it’s a different political environment,” Lewis wrote. “It’s not just in Georgia, but in the American South, I think people are preparing to lay down the burden of race.” The real interests of Black voters, he seemed to argue, might best be served by making Black districts a bit less Black, in order to strengthen the over-all Democratic delegation.

Four years later, in 2006, Lewis was arguing, instead, for a stricter interpretation of the Voting Rights Act. He took to the House floor, flanked by a pair of large photographs from the Selma march. (“He always had those posters at the ready,” his legislative director recalls.) “The sad truth is, discrimination still exists, and that is why we still need the Voting Rights Act,” Lewis said. “When historians pick up their pens and write about this period, let it be said that those of us in the Congress in 2006, we did the right thing.”

No doubt discrimination existed, then as now, and not just in South Carolina, which was subject to special regulations under the act, but also in North Carolina, which was not. (Seven years later, the Supreme Court ruled that this system of heightened scrutiny for certain jurisdictions, known as preclearance, was unconstitutional, because it was based on the existence of historical—rather than ongoing—voter suppression.) But there were plenty of people in Washington capable of arguing the nuances of this or that piece of legislation, and very few who could match Lewis’s ability to evoke the weight of history, and to make listeners feel as if they had an important part in it.

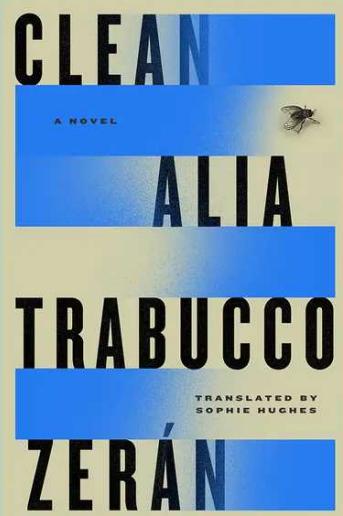
The bittersweet truth is that Lewis’s life story loomed ever larger as the civil-rights movement grew more distant. He had played a vital role in one of the country’s defining political movements. And he never let anyone forget it. ♦

Books

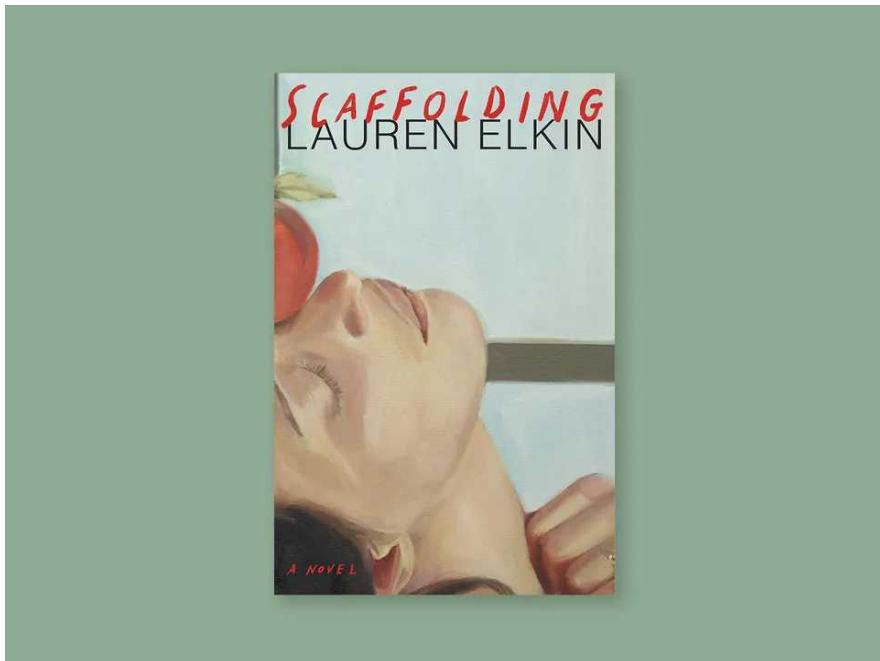
Briefly Noted

“Clean,” “Scaffolding,” “Homeland,” and “Do Something.”

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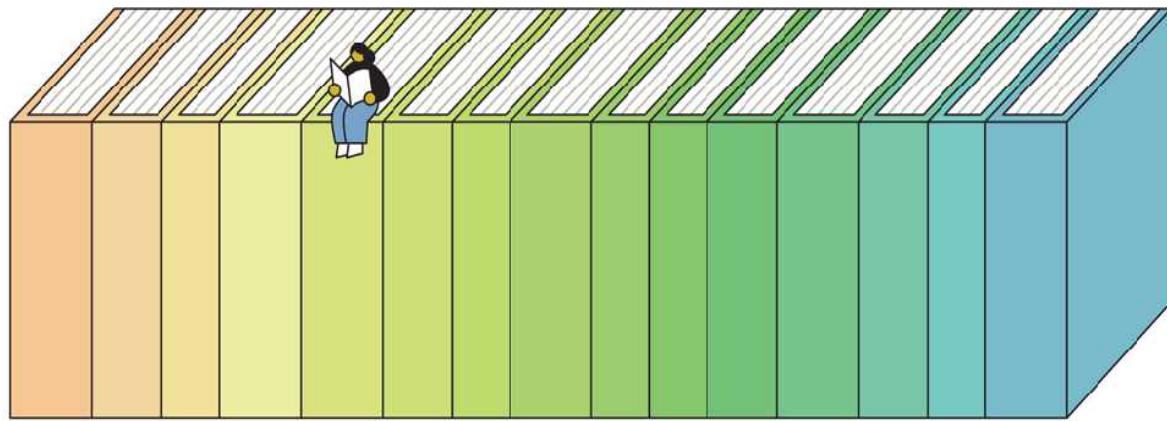
Clean, by Alia Trabucco Zerán, translated from the Spanish by Sophie Hughes (Riverhead). This tense and devilishly well-paced thriller is narrated by Estela, the housemaid of a wealthy couple in Santiago, Chile. Estela's duties include cleaning, cooking, and—most important—taking care of the couple's daughter; the novel consists of her recollection, delivered in an interrogation room, of the events leading up to the daughter's untimely death. With increasing agitation, Estela relates the family's dark dramas and her own mounting feelings of detachment, creating an outsider's portrait of bourgeois unravelling, deftly entwined with reflections on class and oppression.



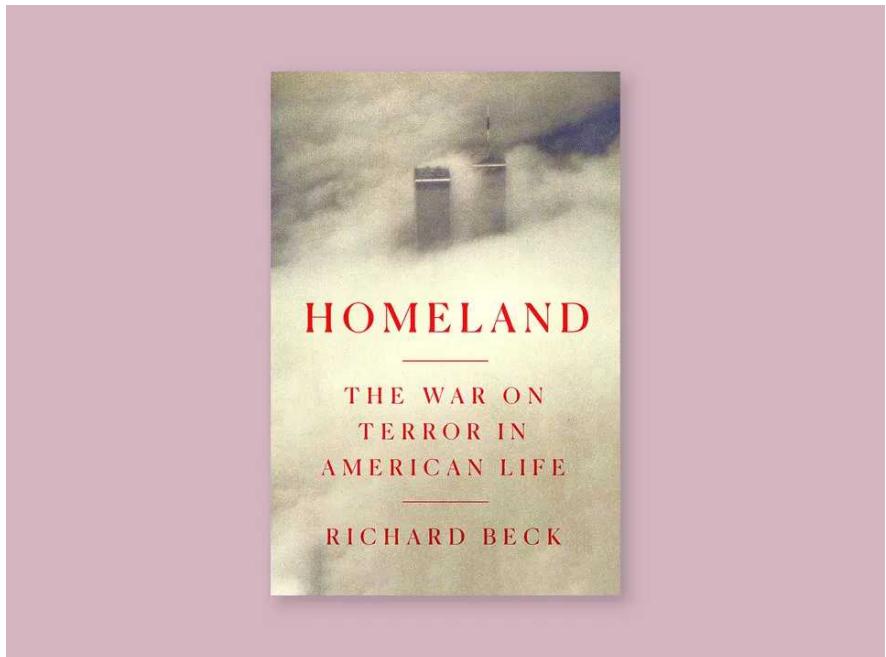
Scaffolding, by Lauren Elkin (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). Two linked story lines drive this loosely plotted but finely etched début novel, which centers on two women who lived in the same apartment at different times. In contemporary Paris, Anna, a married psychoanalyst on leave after a miscarriage, befriends Clémentine, a young woman who unwittingly opens a door onto Anna's past. In 1972, Florence, a feminist studying psychoanalysis and living in what will eventually become Anna's apartment, wants a child; her husband doesn't. As Anna and Florence separately puzzle over fidelity, desire, and Jacques Lacan, the novel hints that greater rewards come from intellectual quandaries than from the kind of certitude that

defines the thinking of Clémentine, who, at one point, reduces fidelity to “a container for sex, to keep it from being too threatening.”

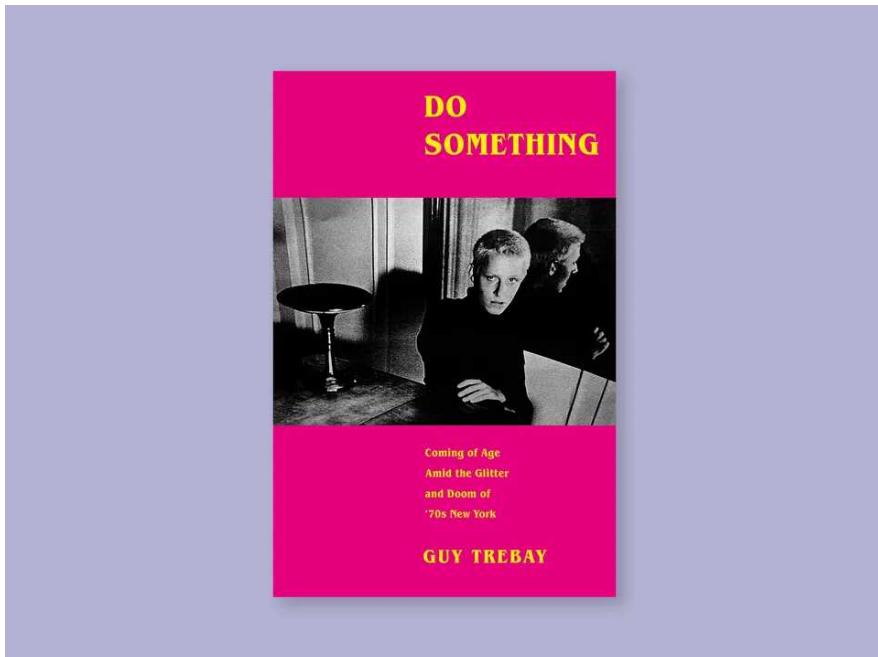
What We’re Reading



Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.



Homeland, by Richard Beck (Crown). The focus of this history of the war on terror is the war’s lingering cultural and political influence, which, its author argues, includes the deluge of Hollywood superhero films, a boom in S.U.V. sales, and the election of Donald Trump. Beck, a journalist, contends that the campaign was undertaken partly in an attempt to rescue “America’s declining power”—which it failed to do—and that “anti-Muslim bigotry had been baked into the war from the beginning.” Among the war’s legacies, he writes, are two failed states, increased surveillance within the U.S., a rise in police brutality, and the war in Gaza.



Do Something, by Guy Trebay (*Knopf*). This coming-of-age memoir is a love letter to nineteen-seventies New York, celebrating the creative tumult of the city “at a time when it was not at all unusual for people to shop around for the reality best suited to whatever story they happened to be telling.” Trebay, a longtime style reporter for the *Times*, peppers his story with reminiscences of his vibrant but troubled family, especially his huckster father and outlaw sister. The fondest passages concern his first steps as an eager but untrained journalist at *Interview* and the *Village Voice*, and his friendships with countercultural and literary figures, from Candy Darling to Jamaica Kincaid. Throughout, he testifies to an unbridled romance with “a city where the inexplicable is an everyday occurrence.”

Books

Rachel Kushner's Covert Op Against Realism

In her new spy novel, “Creation Lake,” Kushner attempts to expose the tradecraft of fiction itself.

By Alexandra Schwartz

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The narrator of “Creation Lake” (Scribner), Rachel Kushner’s new novel, is the pseudonymous Sadie Smith, a thirty-four-year-old American who specializes in infiltrating tight-knit groups of rebels, radicals, and subversives. She has penetrated a criminal biker gang and attempted to entrap eco-anarchists committed to animal liberation. Her current mission has landed her in France, where she is tasked with surveilling an anarchist commune called Le Moulin, in the southwestern region of Guyenne. The Moulinards farm; they raise their children collectively; and, though the government cannot yet prove it, they are suspected of sabotaging local infrastructure in order to cripple—or at least hobble—the capitalist state. Six months before the novel’s action begins, five costly excavators that were

being used to dig a “megabasin,” a huge, plastic-lined reservoir intended to store water for the industrial production of corn, were found burned in a presumed act of arson. “Between Boulière and Tayssac I had seen this corn, vast fields of green, sterile as a Nebraskan Monsanto horizon,” Sadie observes. The Moulinards deplore such environmental degradation—one of their goals is to “rewild” the surrounding ecosystem—but Sadie is unbothered. She’s a mercenary, unfreighted by qualm or scruple. She doesn’t even know the identity of the shadowy “contacts” who have hired her—only that they are paying her well.

Chief among Sadie’s assets are her command of languages and her “banal and conventional looks,” which she tallies like a shopkeeper’s list of dry goods: “symmetrical face, small straight nose, regular features, brown eyes, brown hair, clear skin.” (Lest her marks miss the point, she has augmented these features with breast implants.) In preparation for her mission, she has already targeted a dopey filmmaker named Lucien, an old friend of the Moulinards’ leader, Pascal Balmy. Sadie hopes that Lucien can vouch for her, but first she must get him to trust her himself. “It’s the same, whether you’re in a relationship with a man or pretending to be in one,” she reports. “They want you to listen when they tell you about their precious youth.” That is not all they want. To endure Lucien’s grim conversation and grimmer sex, Sadie remains aloof: “I suppressed my laughter, laughed only inwardly, bearing witness to his adolescent memories as if they were not a cliché, and instead, as if they mattered.”

This is a knowing voice, mordant and jaded. Kushner loves to write in the first person, pressing the reader close to the wary women she takes as her protagonists. Romy Hall, the main narrator of Kushner’s previous novel, “The Mars Room” (2018), is a former strip-club dancer serving two consecutive life sentences in a high-security California prison for killing her stalker. The heroine of Kushner’s breakout book, “The Flamethrowers” (2013), a young artist and motorcycle racer nicknamed Reno, is thrust into the freewheeling New York art world of the nineteen-seventies, and, later, gets mixed up with aristocrats and Marxists in Italy. Prison, the art world, the militant French left: these are exotic, alien milieus, and Romy’s and Reno’s ability to survive in them depends, as does Sadie’s, on how cannily they can deploy their powers of observation, holding themselves at a remove while seeming to blend in.

Indeed, Sadie is eager to tell us just how much she sees that other people don't, and she is constantly interrupting the novel's action to do it. As the book opens, she is driving from Marseille to Guyenne to meet up with Pascal. Pulling over to relieve herself on a quiet hillside, she notices "a pair of women's Day-Glo-orange underpants snagged in the bushes at eye level." This lurid sight, redolent of sexual violence, or at least of sexual commerce, prompts Sadie to hold forth on what she calls "the real Europe":

The real Europe is not a posh café on the rue de Rivoli with gilded frescoes and little pots of famous hot chocolate, baby macaroons colored pale pink and mint green, children bratty from too much shopping. . . . The real Europe is a borderless network of supply and transport. It is shrink-wrapped palettes of superpasteurized milk or powdered Nesquik or semiconductors. The real Europe is highways and nuclear power plants. It is windowless distribution warehouses, where unseen men, Polish, Moldovan, Macedonian, back up their empty trucks and load goods that they will move through a giant grid called "Europe," a Texas-sized parcel of which is called France.

This riposte to the frothy clichés of French life is as trite, in its grizzled, hardboiled way, as the delusions that it claims to dispel. The "posh café" that Sadie has chosen as the object of her scorn is recognizable as Angelina, a famed tourist destination in an upscale shopping district—it stakes about as much of a claim to representing "the real Europe" as does "Emily in Paris." And what could it mean, anyway, to call one of these scenes "real" and the other not? How does Sadie think the cocoa for the hot chocolate gets where it's going? The realm of Parisian luxury is intimately connected to the anonymous transport of the highway, and a novelistic way of seeing allows for the acknowledgment of both realities; in fact, it mandates it. But Sadie views the truth as a contest between the duped and the clear-eyed. It is vitally important to her to prove that she is smarter-than, a point of vanity that sets her up to be the biggest fool of all.

To balance this cynic's vinegar, Kushner gives us a sage. On the book's first page, we meet Bruno Lacombe, mentor to the Moulinards. Bruno is an "anti-civver." Since moving to Guyenne, in the seventies, as part of the back-to-the-land movement, he has receded from all but the most rudimentary social life, spending long stints alone in a cave. He is skeptical of technological,

political, and even evolutionary advancement—he holds the Neanderthals in high regard—though, curiously, he is fond of e-mail, which he uses to communicate with the Moulinards. Sadie has hacked his account in the hope of uncovering evidence of their disruptive plans. Instead, she finds extended ruminations on the condition of man, the nature of time, and other grand themes, which she transmits as a kind of reported speech:

Bruno said that transmigration, what some called metempsychosis, wasn't magic in the degraded sense of taking place outside physical laws or as conjured by people draped in wizards' cloaks. Transmigration, he said, was the entire story of people and their long history, archived as chains of information inside the bodies of every living person. No man was not the product of such a chain. Every human was a child of a child of a child of children of mysterious mothers who once lived, and whose secrets we carry. This was our genome, Bruno said. Science and technology are embattled terrain among those who reject capitalism, he acknowledged, but the new discoveries in the study of ancient DNA were stunning and consequential. They have to be dealt with, Bruno said.

“Creation Lake” is studded—you might say clogged—with such musings. What is Bruno actually proposing in these hundred and twenty-nine words? That we all come from somewhere, from someone. The inflated pedantry of his style, all those technical-sounding terms and incantatory clauses in the service of a simple idea, seems practically comic, but Kushner presents it earnestly, without a hint of irony. She has staged her novel as a kind of dialectic; if Sadie is all superficial knowingness, Bruno seems to represent actual knowledge, his mystical isolation offered up as a counterweight to her worldly glibness, and a salvation from it.

As a literary conceit, this is all well and good. As a literary device, it deadens the page. Between Bruno's philosophizing and Sadie's speechifying, your enjoyment of the novel may depend on your tolerance for being lectured. Mine, low to begin with, vanished as the book progressed, or, rather, failed to. Sadie's “real Europe” bit appears on page 29. More than a hundred pages later, she is back to riffing on the same theme, this time inspired by the sight of two road workers in coveralls, but she still has not met Pascal. Kushner heaps flashback upon flashback; minor characters flare

promisingly to life—a creepy uncle of Lucien’s, a disgruntled ex-Moulinard—before sputtering out, victims of their own inconsequence. Eventually, Sadie has a tryst with a Moulinard named René, who is straight out of central casting for terse French men who like to smoke and fuck. “Creation Lake” has been short-listed for the Booker Prize, and I can hear the rebuttals from the novel’s defenders: Kushner is not *writing* a spy novel—she is *subverting* the spy novel! She is the true secret agent, using the ruse of promised genre pleasures to smuggle in a discussion of ideas! But the notion that a book is playing with its genre is cold comfort when the play proves a slog. Stalling is not the same thing as suspense, and plot is an unfortunate thing to dispense with in a spy story, even—maybe especially—if it is only a pastiche of one.

A novel, of course, can survive, even thrive, without plot. What it cannot weather is indifference. “The Mars Room” and “The Flamethrowers” are riveting books, but it is not story alone that makes them so; it is their protagonists, those bruised women who come spectacularly alive on the page—who, with their ambitions, their vulnerabilities, their pride and confusion and painful regrets, seem fully human, and, yes, real. You want to see what Reno and Romy see, to feel what they feel. You care, and caring, in fiction, is the whole game.

In that sense, readers of novels are as much of a mark as people who fall for any other kind of scam, and Kushner knows it. When Sadie, referring to the persona that she puts on to lure Lucien, calls herself “a woman who didn’t exist,” she is telling the truth two times over. Can we really blame Lucien for falling in love with an imaginary character when we do it all the time? Throughout the novel, Kushner draws our attention to the trickery that is her trade; where she once encouraged our sympathetic intimacy with her fictions, she now prefers estrangement. To stress Sadie’s artificiality, Kushner tells us nearly nothing of her “actual” life, save for the bizarrely specific detail that she was enrolled in a Ph.D. program in rhetoric at Berkeley, where she despised a cohort of “fake tough girls” for their “craven substitution of cynicism for knowledge.” This could double as a description of Sadie. In some ways, she seems to be a classic unreliable narrator: the woman who claims to see through others can’t truly see herself.

But, where the novel should open a gap between our perception and hers, it too often mirrors her withering, blinkered point of view. Take Pascal Balmy. Before she meets him, Sadie suspects that she will find him ridiculous; she knows that he is a wealthy Parisian—he purchased the land for Le Moulin with his inheritance—who apparently models himself on the Marxist philosopher Guy Debord. Balmy does prove to be slightly sinister and fully absurd, in the way of self-important cult leaders everywhere, and Le Moulin even more so. As an agricultural project, it is a failure; as a revolutionary one, it is a joke. When Sadie finally arrives at the commune, she immediately notices that society’s ancient disparities have been magnified there. Women do the dishes, men do the thinking; the children are left to fend for themselves. “We are not the first group to discover that a division of labor between the genders reasserts itself when you try to live in a communal structure,” Pascal tells her. This is funny, biting. But a leftist commune that falls short of its utopian ideals is as obvious a target for ridicule as a fancy Parisian café—and since Kushner gives us no reason to take the people who live there seriously, we don’t.

It can seem, here and elsewhere, that Kushner has grown uneasy with the artifice that is the root of her art, so eager is she to dismiss the world that she has assiduously created and peopled. In one of his e-mails, Bruno discusses the celebrated cave paintings made by *Homo sapiens*, for which he has nothing but scorn. “The *Homo sapiens* was a *copier*,” he tells the Moulinards. “Despite his virtuosity in drawing animals and scenes of hunting, he depicted what was *already there*.” Neanderthals, with their abstract markings, their “dots, slants, cuts,” were the true artists, the dreamers of fantastical dreams. So Kushner is staging a disparagement of realism, the mode that she has worked in so expertly, and, at the same time, situating it at the very core of our humanness. Bruno is right: a weakness it may be, but *Homo sapiens* cannot live on abstraction alone. Throughout the book, Bruno is totally disembodied, like the Wizard of Oz hidden safely behind his curtain. Sadie never does meet him, though she tries. His very immateriality seems to heighten his guru-like power over her, even as it shrinks his consequence to us.

Sometimes, though, Kushner lets us glimpse the man behind the inert myth, and, when she does, it is wonderful. In the middle of the novel, Bruno begins to describe a memory from his childhood, during the Second World War. He

came from Paris, where his parents were involved with the Communist Party, and had an older brother, Maxime; his maternal grandparents were Jews from Odesa by the name of Kouchnir. In the summer of 1942, when rumors spread that families were being rounded up to be deported, their parents sent Maxime, then twelve, to Burgundy, and Bruno, five, to a farm in the Corrèze. Only later did he learn that his parents had been in the Resistance; in any case, he never saw them or his brother again. One day, the Germans came to the village where he was living. The old woman caring for Bruno hid with him in the hayloft of a barn. After the Germans left, Bruno and the village boys went gallivanting about the woods, and found a dead German soldier and near him his helmet, “which lay on its own like a giant walnut shell, empty and discarded.” Bruno put the helmet on. A few hours later, his head began to itch; the child had caught the dead Nazi’s lice.

This is an astonishing moment, eerie and reverberant with unspoken meaning. Bruno doesn’t let it stay unspoken for long: the lice, he insists, represent the “transmigration of life, from one being to the next, from past to future.” But we don’t need the moment parsed for us, flattened into the symbolic. It is enough to see the empty helmet, and the body lying next to it, to feel the boy’s wonder, his curiosity, and then the agony of the lice crawling on his scalp. That is the kind of transmigration that fiction can accomplish: the transfer of experience from an invented person to an actual one, so that what began in the imagination becomes, finally, real. ♦

The Art World

The Drawings the Shakers Got from God

An exuberant exhibit shows that, when it comes to art, the community should be known for far more than its furniture.

By Jackson Arn

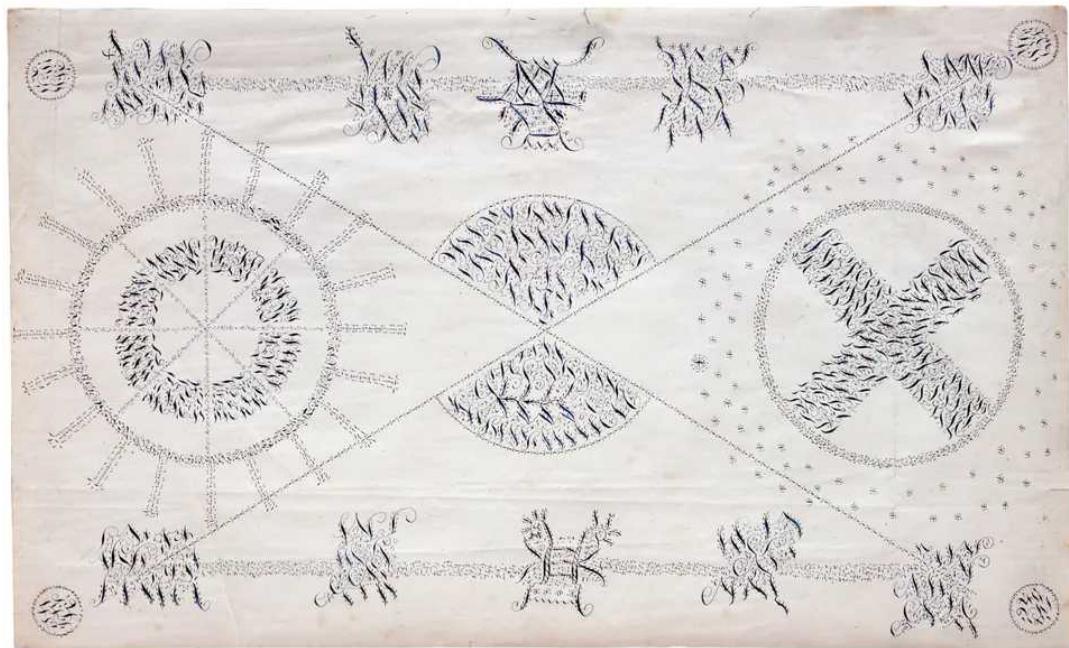
October 07, 2024



“Anything but Simple: Gift Drawings and the Shaker Aesthetic,” at the American Folk Art Museum, is a splendidly offbeat way to celebrate our country’s favorite strict-yet-serene religious splinter group. More traditional festivities might include hanging your laundry from wooden clothespins, a Shaker invention; or sweeping your house with a broom, which was given its modern form by Brother Theodore Bates, in 1798; or contemplating the heavenly glory of labor, so long as you do not let your thoughts interfere with the labor itself.

The Shakers came to America two hundred and fifty years ago. Their founding leader, an Englishwoman named Ann Lee, preached Quaker ideals,

like pacifism and gender equality, but added collective ownership, a work ethic to embarrass Balzac, and, trickiest of all for a utopia trying to grow, celibacy. Shaker missionaries recruited eloquently, and by the middle of the nineteenth century thousands of believers lived in villages as far south as Florida. Today, the religion has a grand total of two members—not that expansion is the only measure of success. No society chooses its legacy, and the fact that “Shaker” never became a slur like “Puritan” or a punch line like “Amish” has a lot to do with the slender, unembellished loveliness of their furniture. Shaker chairs are among the few art works that I would describe as tenderly severe. Looking at one hurts my back and soothes every other part of me.



But this show is not about chairs, except for a single introductory piece. It is about watercolor, and ink, and paper, and how a group can embrace the visual with a bottomless appetite and somehow be world-famous for simplicity. To describe one work as Sister Polly Jane Reed’s drawing of the house of Holy Mother Wisdom, a Shaker spiritual entity, would not be incorrect. You should know, however, that there is a large blue eye staring out from the roof, and a tree growing there, and a compact cosmos of rainbow shapes surrounding the house, including a squelchy-looking thing that resembles a sea anemone but is really, per Reed’s tireless labelling, the trumpet of wisdom. Those labels! They pant after the pictures, sometimes

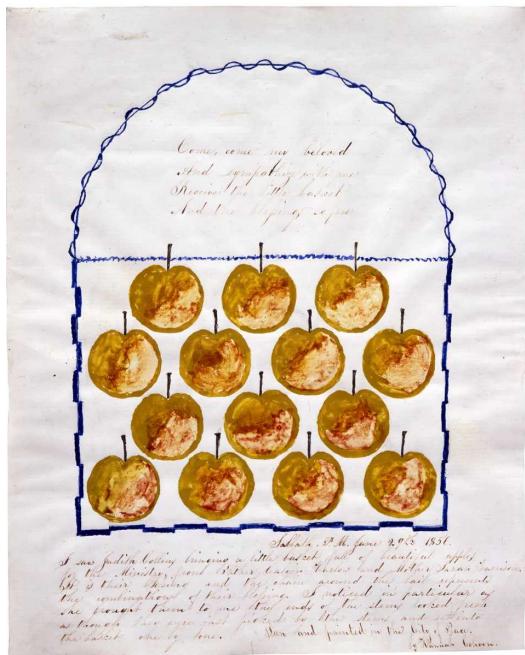
explaining what's what but always ornamenting with little confetti bursts of letters. Passing that chair on your way out, you may feel that the Shakers were abstemious in so many respects because they were already blazed on divinity. Furniture doesn't need to be comfortable when everybody is too ecstatic to sit.

The organizers have put together a small but expansive display of small, expansive work. There are only twenty-one Shaker gift drawings on view, all borrowed from the same collection, in Massachusetts, but there are only about two hundred known gift drawings in existence. Most were made by mid-nineteenth-century women who reported visions of the spirit realm. Drawings were not owned by their makers but passed on from spirit to individual or, sometimes, to community. Visionaries were called "instruments," not artists.

That the World—Shaker lingo for non-Shakers—knows so little about gift drawings today is no shock; more surprising is that the Shakers seem not to have known much else. Their literature, according to the historian Edward Deming Andrews, "is almost totally silent on the subject." One approach is to view the images as mirrors, both of Shaker doctrine and of other kinds of Shaker art. Many instruments were talented textile-makers, and some of their drawings could almost be quilts: flat, matter-of-fact figures without a drop of perspective. (Depicting Heaven in 1854, Polly Collins stacked Eve, Ann Lee, and St. Peter like cereal boxes at the supermarket.) Other instruments spoke in tongues; my pick for the most ravishing work in this show, a geometric "Sacred Sheet," by Semantha Fairbanks and Mary Wicks, is a pen-and-ink version of the same ritual—a drawing in tongues, almost, with thousands of tiny licks that look like letters but aren't.

None of this is obvious as you begin drinking the image in. The first shapes you're likely to see are circles and crosses that float between two long intersecting diagonals, but eventually you realize that there are barely any solid forms or straight lines here, just licks doing impressions of both. It is the only abstract drawing in the show and one of very few that don't explicitly address religion. It's also the one I would use to explain what the Shakers were all about. Clean, simple things are made of an endless wriggle of parts. The parts have no particular beauty on their own, but whatever beauty the over-all composition has would be duller—nonexistent, actually

—without their chaos to overcome. Simplicity, understood like this, is complexity well tended, just as a long, graceful line is a collection of stubby ones, tamed but not deadened.



That may sound theoretical, but the big conundrum for Shaker society was, you could say, how to impose some Christian straightness onto the curves of human nature. Geometry is practically theology in Hannah Cohoon's "A Little Basket Full of Beautiful Apples" (1856), a hybrid work that combines ink, precisely applied to paper with a pen, with the blotched unpredictability of watercolor. Though the image has more shading than almost any other in the show, it is also, paradoxically, one of the flattest: each fruit struggles for roundness but ends up caked and freckled in its own distinct way.

Everything works out, you'll be glad to know. Circular handle joins with square container, apples form pert rows of three and four, individual finds perfection in collective. And look at the stems! Each points straight to Heaven, with no sign of rupture from the tree. Shaker villages, keep in mind, relied on endless supplies of outcasts and orphans. Polly Jane Reed, who joined Mount Lebanon at the age of seven, after crossing seventy miles of snow, claimed that she'd left home with her parents' blessing. I can't help thinking that the truth was less sunny, but no backstories, in any case, darken

Cohoon's fruit utopia. The apples have reached their basket; where they came from doesn't matter anymore.

Beyond the basket, of course, things weren't so orderly. Shakers rejoined the World all the time, and the unwanted-baby pipeline flowed both ways. Writers such as Andrews, Thomas Merton, and Guy Davenport have praised the religion's sheer industriousness, but in the long run few believers were overjoyed about waking up at 5 A.M. The same urges that eat at all of us nibbled them down to single digits.

You barely need to search to find signs of those urges in gift drawings. An apple stem will never be perfectly straight, and a genuine artist will never be a passive instrument, even if she wants to be. I would guess that Hannah Cohoon sometimes did and sometimes didn't—this would explain how she created some of her era's strongest expressions of Shaker faith but had no trouble signing her art, breaking the bans on pride and property. For all their isolation, Shakers' visions of the spirit world bore a strong resemblance to the World. The use of bright colors was hyper-regimented in their villages (every meetinghouse blue, every bedstead green), but visionaries employed whatever colors they pleased, and some of their drawings showed the gold and jewels that no believer was permitted on earth. For a quarter of a millennium, we have stared at the Shakers, and they have stared longingly back.

Same old story: repress human nature too much and disaster follows. What's eerie—or, if you're so inclined, inspiring—is how little disaster seemed to bother the Shakers. One drawing, by Miranda Barber, depicts a perfect rectangular storm of blood reddening the world's rivers. It's not in this exhibit, but it would have made a good partner to "Sacred Sheet," completed the same year in the same community: here again, what looks like a solid shape turns out to be a collection of short, rough lines. The image is a cousin of Sister Hannah's basket, too, an apocalypse as placid as an afternoon of apple picking. Condescending to Shakers has always been easy for the World, more so now that there are billions of us and two of them. But every society dies one way or another. Can anybody picture ours going so peacefully? ♦

Musical Events

A Mesmerizing New Opera About a Sonic Cult

In Missy Mazzoli’s “The Listeners,” a group of suburbanites hear a low, pervasive hum that others cannot.

By Alex Ross

October 07, 2024



Claire Devon, the protagonist of Missy Mazzoli’s seductively nightmarish opera “The Listeners,” is living contentedly as a suburban schoolteacher somewhere in the Southwest when she is beset by an inexplicable, inescapable sound. It is described as a “dull hum,” an “aggressive drone,” which renders daily existence intolerable. As she searches for the source of the noise, her life unravels by degrees. She develops an ill-defined, ill-fated attachment to one of her students, who also hears the hum. Her husband and her daughter move out; the school fires her. She falls in with a psychiatrist, Howard Bard, who presides over a cultish association of Listeners—people attuned to the hum. When one of them, a conspiracy theorist, fires a gun at a cell tower, the police spring into action and violence ensues. The ending is

as unexpected as it is unsettling. Instead of fleeing the cult, Claire takes control of it, the hum having awakened charismatic powers within her. “We all need a family that understands us,” she intones, as Listeners crowd around her.

“The Listeners,” which had its première at the Norwegian National Opera, in 2022, and travelled to Opera Philadelphia last month, tells a familiar story of virulent environmental anxiety, in the vein of Todd Haynes’s 1995 film, “Safe.” What gives the opera peculiar potency is the way Mazzoli embeds the hum in her score, letting it represent something bigger and more pervasive than a chat-room delusion. At first, we hear a series of high-pitched, metallically ringing chords, not entirely unpleasant in character. Then, as Claire looks into the eyes of a coyote and senses chaotic energies rising within her, the hum gravitates downward, with double-basses and piano slithering across the classically diabolical interval of the tritone. Mazzoli piles unstable harmonies on top of that fractured foundation; trombone glissandos add a demonic sneer. This mesmerizing sonic shadow suggests the way sounds can alter our being and bind us into groups, for good or for ill.

In the past decade, Mazzoli, a forty-three-year-old native of Lansdale, Pennsylvania, has moved to the forefront of American opera composers. Her first effort, “Song from the Uproar” (2012), is a dreamlike portrait of the Swiss adventurer Isabelle Eberhardt. There followed “Breaking the Waves” (2016), a reshaping of the film by Lars von Trier, and “Proving Up” (2018), a harrowing tale of Nebraska homesteaders. Mazzoli has also adapted George Saunders’s novel “Lincoln in the Bardo,” which the Metropolitan Opera plans to stage in 2026. She is now composing “The Galloping Cure,” an update of Kafka’s “Country Doctor” for the opioid-epidemic era. Her librettist for all these projects has been the Canadian-born writer Royce Vavrek, who fuses gritty realism with apocalyptic fantasy.

“The Listeners” is based on an original story by Vavrek’s fellow-Canadian Jordan Tannahill, who subsequently developed the material into a novel, also called “The Listeners,” published in 2021. News reports of people hearing a low hum—in Taos, New Mexico, among other places—inspired Tannahill to create a deft sendup of digital-age paranoia and perennial mystical longings. Vavrek’s libretto, likewise, has satirical touches: there are references to

Facebook Live, the dark Web, dick pics, herbal tea. But the artifice of operatic singing prospers on more elemental, mythic terrain, which Vavrek artfully supplies. “I like the wild in you, / Brings out the wild in me,” Claire sings to the coyote. “We’re not so different.” Tannahill’s novel ends with the protagonist more or less restored to normalcy. Opera, naturally, wants it darker.

Mazzoli’s score is perhaps her most original work to date. While her previous operas contain periodic reminiscences of composers from Britten to John Adams, “The Listeners” is pretty much all Mazzoli: sinuously songful vocal lines; furtively expressive instrumental solos, especially for the woodwinds; a harmonic language that finds newness and strangeness in the interstices of traditional tonality; unerring narrative pacing. Above all, Mazzoli is a once-in-a-generation magician of the orchestra. Wagner commented that in opera the orchestra should act as a medium of premonition, indicating what is foreordained but not yet foreseen. Mazzoli does this instinctively, making our hackles rise.

The Opera Philadelphia Orchestra, under the baton of Corrado Rovaris, revelled in Mazzoli’s billowing sonorities. Lileana Blain-Cruz, who directed the show, and Adam Rigg, who designed the sets, expertly summoned the opera’s modern-day settings, from Claire’s drab suburban house to the sleek desert villa where Bard preaches to his flock. At times, I wanted an edgier, spookier take on the story; the scene featuring Bard’s Facebook Live broadcast, with crass comments projected on a screen, was played too much for giggles. Kevin Burdette, who played Bard, is a brilliant comedic singer, but he could have conveyed more of the character’s pompous menace. Nicole Heaston, as Claire, delivered a vocally pristine, emotionally scouring portrayal, showing how pain and loss can evolve into cold rage.

Future productions of “The Listeners” should reveal deeper layers. In many ways, it’s an opera about music itself: Bard, molding an ensemble of hummers, resembles an imperious maestro. As the chorus takes refuge in syrupy concords, I suspected Mazzoli of satirizing contemporary choral music of the blissed-out, post-Arvo Pärt variety. She herself generates gorgeous textures, yet she does so in the knowledge that no sounds are innocent—that music can be as lethal a weapon as any in the human arsenal.

“The hum is cruel but kind,” Claire sings. “We are just notes in the bigger chord.” The last thing we hear is a towering dissonance, bordering on noise.

Jeanine Tesori’s “Grounded,” which had its première at Washington National Opera last year and is now playing at the Met, aspires to the same sort of cultural currency that Mazzoli and Vavrek attain with ease. The libretto, which George Brant adapted from his play of the same name, tells of Jess, an ace F-16 pilot who is reassigned to ground duty guiding a Reaper drone. She suffers a breakdown, haunted by aerial footage of people being blown to bits. Her flannel-wearing rancher husband, Eric, consoles her with homespun wisdom. The production, by Michael Mayer, reaches for tableaux of all-American realness: a Wyoming bar with a Coors sign, a Las Vegas mall with a Cinnabon. People say “fuck” a lot.

But it all rings false. The opening scenes resemble a misbegotten “Top Gun” musical, with choristers in fighter-pilot suits swaying from side to side and holding their arms in wing formation. “You’ll never have a sweeter ride / Forever wear that suit with pride,” they sing. Jess is saddled with lines such as “My mind should be on Mosul / Not Eric” and “I’ve never been good at goodbyes.” The pacing is fitful: only toward the end of the first act does the central conflict emerge. Above all, Tesori’s facelessly eclectic approach is inadequate to the subject. In 2012, the Belgian composer Stefan Prins wrote a piece titled “Generation Kill,” which used video-game technology to dramatize the harnessing of high-tech pop culture to military brutality. No such resourcefulness is evident in Tesori’s score, which wavers between mid-century film-music heroics and sentimental lamentations, with tame avant-garde gestures popping up here and there. The mezzo-soprano Emily D’Angelo was tremendous in the lead role, yet the notes evaporated from the mind as soon as she sang them.

New opera is generally thriving. On the East Coast, the last week of September brought not only “Grounded” and “The Listeners” but also Meredith Monk’s “Indra’s Net,” at the Armory; Paola Prestini’s “Silent Light,” at National Sawdust; Michael Hersch’s “and we, each,” at Baltimore Theatre Project; and David T. Little’s “What Belongs to You,” at the University of Richmond. Amid the surfeit, duds are inevitable. The sad thing was to see the nation’s biggest company lagging so far in the rear. Not for

the first time, the Met was outclassed by Opera Philadelphia, which operates on about one-thirtieth the budget. The hum is cruel but kind. ♦

The Theatre

Doppelgängers Abound in “The Hills of California” and “Yellow Face”

In Jez Butterworth’s melancholy drama and David Henry Hwang’s mischievously postmodern play, stardom is both a lure and a lie.

By Helen Shaw

October 03, 2024



The setting for “The Hills of California,” Jez Butterworth’s often comic, secretly heartsick drama, now at the Broadhurst, is an unfashionable guesthouse in the seaside resort town of Blackpool, in the North of England. Do not go in expecting a hill, or the sunny American West: the title comes from a Johnny Mercer song, which we hear during the play, in assorted wistful strains. (“The hills of California are somethin’ to see / the sun will kinda warm ya—” the song promises ambivalently.) The astonishing Laura Donnelly, who starred in Butterworth’s Tony Award-winning tragedy, “*The Ferryman*,” plays the guesthouse’s owner, Veronica Webb, a martinet we meet issuing orders to her four teen-age daughters in the nineteen-fifties. Veronica is a mum on a mission: she’s determined to launch her daughters as

a close-harmony act, a note-for-note imitation of the Andrews Sisters—a reference that she doesn't realize may be sliding out of date.

Butterworth does not disguise that “Hills” echoes Arthur Laurents’s musical “Gypsy”—in “Hills,” the hard-charging stage mother’s favorite and most gifted child is fifteen-year-old Joan (Lara McDonnell), just a vowel shift away from June, one of the child-actor siblings in “Gypsy.” But Butterworth, among our most sophisticated structuralists, also builds a complicated temporal armature for the familiar tale of a deluded, fame-hungry stage mother. We see the characters in two eras, played by two groups of actors: in 1955, as tap-dancing, ditty-crooning adolescents, and in 1976, as adults, when they come home to Blackpool to see their mother on her deathbed.

Butterworth is preoccupied with doubles, particularly the kind of copy that has the power to sap its original. (“I feel like someone xeroxed me across the planet,” one of the sisters drawls, weary after a trip.) The grownups are bitter—and bitterly funny—mimeographs of their brighter young selves: shy Jillian (Helena Wilson) never left home; Ruby (Ophelia Lovibond) scarcely uses her thrilling, throaty singing voice and sort of despises her sad-sack husband, Dennis (Bryan Dick). “You know if Dennis were to walk out of here and become a missing person, and I had to describe him to the police, I genuinely wouldn’t know where to start,” she cracks. Vicious Gloria (Leanne Best, in stunning dragon mode) has an even sadder, sackier husband, Bill (Richard Short). Joan, the only one who went into show biz, is mostly a glamorous absence: she left after a mysterious family rupture, and she’s supposed to be flying in from California for her first visit in twenty years. The sisters wait for her, as they mostly avoid their dying, now alcoholic mother, who remains upstairs, out of sight. Gloria, having looked in on Veronica’s sickroom, describes her, horrifyingly, as a “skull with a rag hanging out of it.”

Time flows back and forth. Via a revolving set, we alternate between the guesthouse’s two sides—the family’s private kitchen and the public front room—and the soda-pop fifties and the acidic seventies. How much of what the sisters say is accurate? Memory is another bad copy. A lecherous old piano tuner (Richard Lumsden), one of several goatish men, reminisces about a rather different Veronica than the bluff and bustling woman we keep meeting over her own kitchen table. During the adult sisters’ overnight

deathwatch, it's hellishly hot in the un-air-conditioned rooming house. To emphasize the purgatorial atmosphere, the director Sam Mendes, who also directed "The Ferryman," uses the composer Nick Powell's eerie underscoring, and the set designer Rob Howell creates a stack of Escheresque staircases, which zigzag uncannily above the first-floor rooms. When Joan finally does return home, her adult self is played by a much transformed Donnelly; Joan is Veronica's warped reflection. Even the town's name—Blackpool—suggests looking into a dark mirror.

For "The Ferryman," Butterworth adapted an incident from Donnelly's own Northern Irish family's experience in the Troubles. At the beginning of that play, her character has spent a decade as a sort of half widow; her husband, who had disappeared ten years earlier, has finally been found, mummified in a peat bog. In "The Hills," Donnelly again plays a maybe-widow: Veronica tells people, variously, that her husband's naval destroyer was torpedoed, that he died on the beach at Normandy, or that he was lost at El Alamein. Butterworth and Donnelly are partners in life, and he seems to like marrying her fictional versions to phantoms—but he's also mining a vein here, of family secrecy and suspended rot.

Donnelly's particular strength is in seeming at once vulnerable and absolutely terrifying, while speaking a mile a minute; in the play's best scenes, Butterworth pushes Veronica's tempo to its maximum. At one point, she even outtalks a laddish motormouth comedian, a tenant (Bryan Dick, again) who owes her rent. Despite all the showboating badinage—characters throw jokes and local references out so quickly that you miss the first just in time to be run over by the next—this play isn't Butterworth's finest writing. For one thing, it's a drama in search of an ending. I saw "Hills" in London earlier this year, when it had an overstuffed third act. Though this streamlined version is more muscular, some of the playwright's cuts have unbalanced his structure: the main dramatic pivot rests on the show's wobbliest scene, and grownup Joan's late-play entrance cues a series of diminishing returns. Still, Butterworth and Mendes display a wonderful theatrical intelligence throughout, particularly in the little showstoppers—musical performances, or arias of insult—that punctuate the night. And craft is always a comfort, right? Veronica does badly in many ways by her girls, particularly Joan, but the sisters do learn harmony. Even toward the end,

they're still finely dovetailing their voices in an aural herringbone, modulating beautifully as their lives fall out of tune.

Speaking of doppelgängers, David Henry Hwang's postmodern comedy "Yellow Face," from 2007, has come, at last, to the Roundabout's Todd Haimes Theatre, nearly twenty years after its Off Broadway première, at the Public. Even now, Hwang's interweaving of fact and invention feels audacious and fresh: he draws from the record while also sneaking in plenty of fictional mayhem.

Daniel Dae Kim informs the audience that he is DHH, a playwright famous for writing the breakthrough Broadway hit "M. Butterfly" and for leading protests against cross-racial casting in "Miss Saigon," which notoriously featured a white actor in a "Eurasian role." That's all true of the real David Henry Hwang. But, according to this play, history then repeats as farce: in his follow-up to "M. Butterfly," DHH accidentally casts a white guy, Marcus (Ryan Eggold), as his Asian leading man, and he has to scramble to cover up the gaffe.

Hwang, like Butterworth, is interested in doubles—truth and falsehood, yes, but other pairings, too. The real drama of "Yellow Face" lies with DHH's optimistic father, Henry (Francis Jue), who makes hilarious calls from California: he keeps volunteering DHH to get people tickets to the problematic "Miss Saigon," and rhapsodizing about the American promise of transformation. "So beautiful!" Henry sighs, about basically everything. Meanwhile, DHH confronts a *Times* reporter (Greg Keller) over racist portraits of Chinese Americans in the media, the kind of warped mirroring that can do real harm.

Leigh Silverman directs a rigorously unspectacular production, with an almost dogmatic refusal to add any Broadway razzle. The dazzle, therefore, is reserved for the actors. The ensemble, particularly Kevin Del Aguila, makes all kinds of mischief, and Kim excels at seeming harried. But it's Jue who walks off with the show. He is most moving during a speech in which Henry remembers being a frustrated "second son" in China and watching American movies. "All those movie stars—Humphrey Bogart and Clark Gable and Frank Sinatra—they were the real me," Henry says, wistfully and

a little proudly. Sometimes illusions aren't poisonous, he suggests. The hills of California are somethin' to see. ♦

Poems

- [“The Baltic Seas”](#)
- [A Dream Dreamt by Fernando Pessoa in Which I Play the Role of Fernando Pessoa](#)

Poems

“The Baltic Seas”

Robin Robertson’s new translation of a modern epic—first published, in Swedish, fifty years ago—traverses the shifting borders and legacies of a world at war.

By Tomas Tranströmer

October 07, 2024



+++dropcap I first read Tomas Tranströmer in a class taught by the late [Lucie Brock-Broido](<https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/lucie-brock-broido>)—either the poetry workshop that I took with her my freshman year of college or her more advanced workshop called Radical Heat, which was organized around an idea she later wrote of as “a nonchemical energy transfer with reference to a temperature difference between a system (The Poet) and its surroundings (The Poem).” Alchemy, autumn, and Emily Dickinson were Lucie’s muses. Tranströmer, with his plainspoken, even stark, lyricism, seemed to me at first quite the opposite of heat. “[Windows and Stones](<https://www.amazon.com/Windows-Stones-Selected-Poems-Poetry/dp/0822952289>)”: his writing charts the movement of thought, how certain distances and cool contemplation could form a universe. But Lucie knew, and I soon learned, that behind his sometimes closed doors hid

burning insights. In that moment, long before he won the 2011 Nobel Prize in Literature, his work won me over. +++ A rethinking of our world and its future pervades “The Baltic Seas,” Tranströmer’s long poem, here translated by the poet Robin Robertson. In Robertson’s rendition, the poem cascades between telegrams and wonderings—“Did he keep a map of the maze in his head?”—between walks with the dead, tilted gravestones, and sea-bound logbooks. Tranströmer’s poetic seas are a place “where thoughts are constructed with emergency exits, / where a conversation between friends becomes a test of what friendship really means.” The effect is meditative and moving, an urgent quietude not always found in the Sturm und Drang that attends both our contemporary poetry and our politics. This is to say that the revelations of “The Baltic Seas”—written and published in Swedish fifty years ago, during the Cold War—endure, as pointed as they ever were. “No side is the lee side. Everywhere is risk. / As it always was. As it is.” Tranströmer’s stoic yet encompassing recounting of history indeed remains radical, his pocket epic reminding us of the stakes of war and the national borders that we draw, even across our warming seas. (And, to quote the inimitable De La Soul, “Stakes Is High.”) His “dry sighing / of huge doors opening, huge doors closing” echoes across the decades. —[*Kevin Young*] (<https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/kevin-young>) *** I This was a time before radio masts. Grandfather was a pilot, newly licensed. In his almanac he logged each craft he guided— its name, destination, draught. Some examples from 1884:

Steamer Tiger	Capt. Rowan	16ft
Hull Gefle Furusund Brig Ocean	Capt. Andersen	8ft
Sandöfjord Hernösand Furusund Steamer	St Petersburg	Capt.

Libenberg 11ft Stettin Libau Sandhamn He took them out into the Baltic, through the wonderful labyrinth of islands and water. And those people who met on board and were carried together for a few hours, a few days, how well did they get to know each other? Talking in misspoken English, understanding and misunderstanding, but with no real deceit. How well did they get to know each other? Thick fog: half-speed, and almost zero visibility. Out of nowhere, the headland came with one huge stride, and was right on top of them. A long blast on the foghorn every other minute. His eyes reading straight through the void. (Did he keep a map of the maze in his head?) Minutes passed. He had those shallows and skerries off by heart, like the verses of a psalm. And that feeling of “we’re here, *right here*” that you have to hold on to, carefully, like you’re carrying a pail, full to the brim, and

you daren't spill a drop. A glance down into the engine-room. The compound engine, as long-lived as a human heart, labouring in huge, tender, pumping motions—steel gymnastics—the aromas rising as if from a kitchen. [#clip: /clips/66634c57cae92d15af711af6] II The wind walks through the pine forest. Heavy seething; light breathing. In the middle of the island the Baltic is also sighing; deep in its forest you're out on the open sea. The old woman loathed that sound in the trees, and she stiffened with sorrow at the rising wind: "You have to think of them—out there in the boats." But she heard something else in the sighing—we both do, being kin. (We're walking together now, though she's been dead these thirty years.) The wind sighs yes and no, understanding and misunderstanding. The wind sighs three strong children, one consumptive and two gone. The gust that breathes life into some flames, blows others out. The conditions. The wind sighs: Save me, Lord, for the waters have compassed my soul. You walk on, listening, for a long time, finally reaching a point where the boundaries open out or rather when everything becomes a boundary. An open place sunk in darkness. And from the dimly-lit buildings all around it, people streaming. Murmuring. A fresh gust, and the place falls empty again, and still. A fresh gust, that sighs of other shores. It speaks of war. It speaks of places where citizens are controlled, where thoughts are constructed with emergency exits, where a conversation between friends becomes a test of what friendship really means. So when you're with someone you don't know well: *control*. Some frankness is fine, as long as you don't lose sight of what's drifting there on the edges of the conversation: that darkness, that dark stain—it can drift in and destroy everything. Don't let it out of your sight. What is it like? A mine? No, that's too solid. Almost too peaceful—around our coasts the stories about mines are frightening at the start, but they all end happily. This one, for instance, from the lightship: "It was the autumn of 1915 and we slept uneasy . . ." etc. A contact mine was spotted drifting towards the lightship, dipping and rising in the swell, sometimes hidden by a wave, then glimpsed, briefly, like a spy in the crowd. The panicking crew were shooting at it with rifles. Useless. Finally, they put out a boat and tied a long line fast to the mine and towed it, slowly, carefully, back to the experts. Later, the black, spiked, empty shell was displayed in a sandy garden, as a decoration, surrounded by *Strombus gigas*, pink conch shells from the far West Indies. And the wind walks through the dry pines beyond, scurrying over the cemetery sand, past the leaning stones, the names of the pilots. The dry

sighing of huge doors opening, huge doors closing. III In the half-dark corner of the Gotland church, in the soft, mildewed light, stands a baptismal font of sandstone—twelfth century—the stonecutter's name still there, bright as a row of teeth in a mass grave:

HEGWALDR

the name still there. And his tableaux here and on the sides of other vessels, crowds of figures swarming out of the stone. The eyes like split kernels of good and evil. Herod at the table: the roasted cock flies up, crowing “Christus natus est” (the servant is taken out and killed) while, close by, the child is born under clustered faces as serious and helpless as young monkeys. The fleeing footsteps of the pious echoing over the dragon-scaled mouths of the drains. (These scenes are stronger in memory than when you're actually there, strongest when the font revolves slowly in the mind like a rumbling carousel.) No side is the lee side. Everywhere is risk. As it always was. As it is. Only inside is there peace, in the unseen water held in the vessel—but outside, the battle rages. Tranquillity can come, drop by drop, at night perhaps, when we know nothing, or when we're taped up to a drip in a hospital ward. People, beasts, ornaments. There is no landscape. Ornaments. Mr B——, my fellow-traveller—delightful, exiled, freed from Robben Island—remarks: “I envy you. I feel nothing much for nature. *People in a landscape*, though—that speaks to me.” Here are some people in a landscape. A photograph from 1865. The channel steamboat sits at the dock in the sound. Five figures. A lady in bright crinoline, like a bell, a flower. The men like extras in some folk play. They're all handsome, vague, beginning to fade away. They step ashore for a moment. They're fading away. The steamboat is a discontinued model—high funnel, awning, narrow hull—completely bizarre, like a docked U.F.O. Everything else in the photo seems shockingly real: the ripples across the water, the opposite shore—I can feel the rocks' roughness with my hand, hear the sighing in the firs. It is here. It is now. These waves are today's. Now, it's a hundred years later. The waves come in from no-man's-water and break against the stones. I walk along the shore. Walking along the shore is not what it was. You have to stretch your mouth too wide, keep too many conversations going at once; your walls are thin. Everything has grown a second shadow behind its first, and even in the utter darkness you hear it dragging after you. It's night. The strategic planetarium rotates. The lenses stare into the dark. The night sky is packed with numbers, all being fed into a piece of furniture like a flickering cabinet holding the energy of a locust swarm, stripping Somalia

bare in half an hour. I don't know if we're at the beginning, or coming to an end. No conclusion can be made; no conclusion is possible. The conclusion is the mandrake (see the compendium of myths and magic):

MANDRAKE the miracle root which shrieks so loud when he pulled it from the ground that the man would die—so a dog had to do it). IV From the lee side, some close-ups. Bladderwrack: The kelp forests gleam in the clear water; they are young and fresh and you want to go there to live, to stretch out on your own reflection and sink to a certain depth—the weed streaming upright on air-bladders—just as we are buoyed up with ideas.

Bullhead: The fish that is really a toad that wanted to be a butterfly, but only made it a third of the way; he hides himself in the weeds, but is lifted up in the net, snagged by his pathetic barbs and carbuncles—your hands, when you untangle him from the mesh, are shimmered with slime.

Rocks: Insects tick over the sun-warmed lichen, quick as second hands—the pine throws a shadow, it moves slow as the hour hand—inside me, time stands still: endless time, the time it takes to forget all speech and create perpetual motion. On the lee side you can hear the grass growing, a faint thrumming from far below, the faint *flume* of millions of miniature gas flames underground—the sound of grass growing. And now: the wide stretch of open water, without a door to be seen; the open boundaries that grow broader and broader the further you reach out. There are days when the Baltic is a calm, unending roof. Dream innocently of something out there, pawing its way over it, trying to sort out the flag-ropes, trying to hoist the rag—the banner so frayed by the wind, so smoke-blackened and sun-bleached it can belong to us all. But it's a long way to Liepāja. V 30 July.

The straits are behaving oddly—today, for the first time in years, teeming with jellyfish, pumping themselves along, calmly and carefully; they all belong to the same shipping company, *Aurelia*, and drift like flowers drift after a sea-burial; if you take them out of the water they lose their shape—just as when an indescribable truth is drawn up from the silence to be laid out in a lifeless mass—so they are untranslatable, and must stay in their own element. [#clip: /clips/6658ece94b9c0898e06d48c8] 2

August. Words want to be said, but won't agree on an order. Words can't be said, *aphasia*, no words, then, but perhaps a style . . . Sometimes you wake up at night and scribble down the words on any scrap, the edge of a newspaper perhaps (the words effulgent with meaning), but in the morning, those same words say nothing: scribbles, slips of the tongue. Or

fragments, perhaps, of some high style that slid by in the night? Music comes to a man. He's a composer, whose work is performed; he has a career, he becomes director of the conservatory. Conditions change, the authorities' praise becomes blame. They set up his pupil, K——, as prosecutor. He's threatened, demoted, expelled. After some years the disgrace diminishes and he's rehabilitated. Then comes the stroke: paralysis of the right side, with aphasia—he can only manage short phrases, can only say the wrong words. Cannot, because of this, be ever touched again by praise or blame. But he still has the music, and he goes on composing in his own way: a medical phenomenon to the end of his days. He wrote music to texts he no longer understood—in the same way we express something with our lives in that humming chorus of misspoken words. The death-lessons went on for several terms. I attended along with people I didn't know (who are you, anyway?) then everyone sidled off on their own, became profiles. I looked at the sky, at the earth, and straight ahead and, ever since, I've been writing a long letter to the dead on a typewriter with no ribbon, just the line of the horizon where the words hammer away, but never stay. I stand with my fingers resting on the doorknob, taking the building's pulse. The walls are so full of life (the children are scared to sleep alone upstairs—what makes me safe makes them afraid). 3 August. Out there in the damp grass slides a greeting from the Middle Ages: the Burgundy snail in his jaunty shell of subtle greys and glimmering golds, introduced by monks who liked their *escargots*—yes, the Franciscans were here, they broke stone and burned lime, this island became theirs in 1288, a gift of King Magnus ("These charities and others like them / will be repaid in heaven") —the forest fell, the ovens burned, then the lime was shipped out for the building of their monasteries. . . .

Sister snail almost motionless on the grass, her feelers retracting and stretching out—her searching just like mine in its disturbance and hesitation. The wind that's been blowing so fastidiously all day (each blade of grass on the far skerries has been counted) has lain down peacefully in the middle of the island and gone to sleep. The match-flame stands to attention. The sea painting and the forest painting darken, bleed into one. The greenery of the five-storey trees is all turning black. "Every summer is the last summer." Empty words for the creatures in the late-summer midnight where the crickets treadle furiously on the sewing-machines of themselves and the Baltic's near and the solitary water-tap rears among the wild roses like an equestrian statue. The water tastes of iron. [#clip:

/clips/6658ed14fd686eb6929255] VI Grandmother's story, before it's forgotten. Her parents die young, her father first. When the widow senses the disease would take her next she goes from house to house, island to island with her daughter. "Who will look after my little Maria?" A strange house on the other side of the bay accepts her. They are well-to-do, but that doesn't make them good. The usual mask of piety, the usual cracks. Maria's childhood is over, early, replaced with unpaid servitude. Perpetual cold, year after year. Perpetually seasick behind the oars; terrorized at table: the way they stared at her, the way the pike-skin crunched in her mouth: *be grateful, be grateful*.

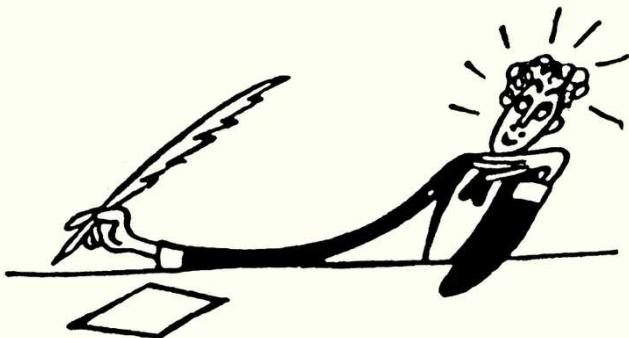
She never looked back but, because of that, she could see The New and she took it. Took herself out of the noose. I remember her. I used to squeeze in close to her and at the moment of death (the moment she passed over?) she sent out a thought so that I, the five-year-old boy, understood what had happened half an hour before the phone call. I remember her. In the next brown photo is the one no one knows— someone mid-nineteenth-century, I'd say, by the clothes. A man about thirty: strong eyebrows, face looking straight at me, straight in the eyes, just whispering: "Here I am." But who this "I" is no one in the world remembers. No one. TB? Isolation? Once, he stopped on the stone and hot grass sloping up from the sea and felt the black blindfold at his eyes. Here, behind dense undergrowth—is this the island's oldest building? The low, two-hundred-year-old fishing hut in its shaggy grey wood: its heavy logs, notched and cross-jointed. The modern brass padlock has clicked everything shut, shining like the ring in the nose of an old bull who refuses to get up. So much huddled wood. And, on the roof, the ancient tiles have slipped down and over each other (their original pattern erased by decades of the earth's slow turning), it reminds me of something. . . . I was there. . . . wait: it's the old Jewish cemetery in Prague where the dead live closer together than they did in life, the stones crammed, rammed in. So much love enclosed here! These tiles with their lichen-script in an unknown hand are the markers in the ghetto graveyard, the people of the archipelago, the raised stones and the fallen— This ruin glows with the light of all those people drawn by a certain wave, a certain wind, out here to meet their fates. *Translated, from the Swedish, by Robin Robertson, with assistance from Karin Altenberg.*

[#image: /photos/6658edc90dd5aedfedff66b]

A Dream Dreamt by Fernando Pessoa in Which I Play the Role of Fernando Pessoa

By Momina Mela

October 07, 2024



Even here I can't stop arguing with myself
I have mouths to feed in my sleep—they jostle and hover for nights at a time
They live in different countries and aren't even from here
I pray for soft bridges and leeches at nightfall—I pray to God knows what
I make lavish announcements about reality here, about how good we have it there
I advocate for my waking selves like talking through a hole in a mirror
But enough about me
There's the man who lives downstairs, up here
Rattling on about his lost receipt—of course it's not really him but his essence
Which becomes mine and it practically diffuses me

The look of him fumbling in the bushes of a street neither of us lives on
Either of us could be either of us, our souls tasteless by grand design of
cruelty

I am already on my last nerve

Nobody wins an argument here

You perfect one rationale and another one emerges

Most of the time, you're just hauling in smoke jars from places you ought to
be yet

Your clothes are not yours, not even your culture is yours

The cigarette in your mouth is made of glass—

When it breaks, you awake and the whole world cracks.

Puzzles & Games

- [The Crossword: Wednesday, October 2, 2024](#)

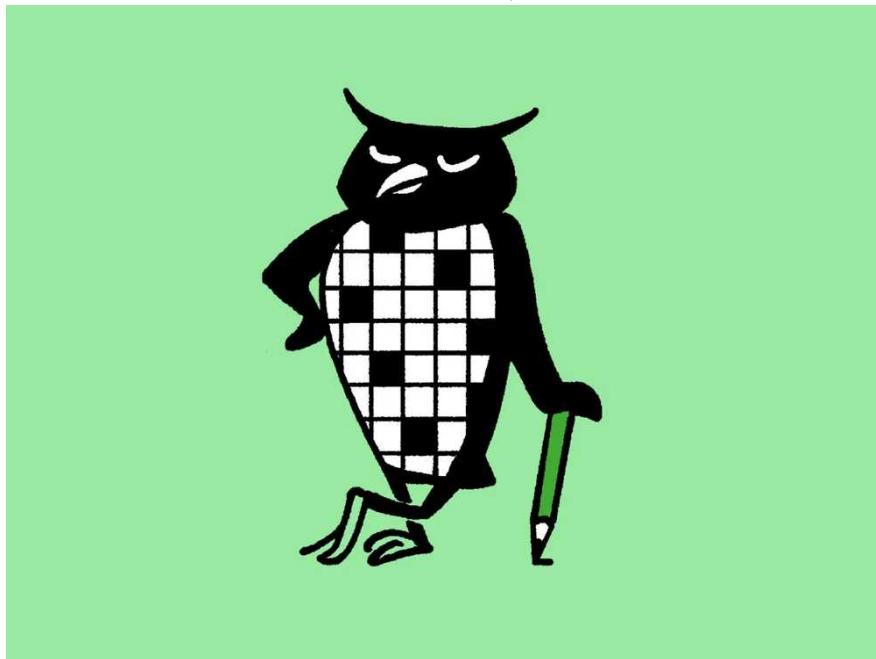
Crossword

The Crossword: Wednesday, October 2, 2024

A beginner-friendly puzzle.

By Robyn Weintraub

October 02, 2024



The Mail

- [Letters from Our Readers](#)

The Mail

Letters from Our Readers

Letters respond to Manvir Singh's essay about morality, Ben Taub's investigation of Russia's espionage war in the Arctic, and Sarah Chatta's piece about donkey rights.

October 07, 2024

What's Good

As a scholar of philosophy, I sympathize with Manvir Singh's unsettling acceptance of moral nihilism ("The Post-Moral Age," September 16th). I experienced a similar reckoning nearly two decades ago. I now call it my anti-epiphany.

Singh writes about how, despite his intellectual qualms, he ultimately made peace with a particular response to moral nihilism known as moral fictionalism, according to which we pretend as best we can that there really are objective moral truths, because it is eminently useful to do so. What that approach overlooks, however, is that a belief in objective morality also has considerable downsides. In a meta-ethical sense, it encourages hypocrisy, arrogance, and the adoption of intransigent positions that promote endless conflict. Fortunately, a number of ethicists have come to the conclusion that humans have sufficiently robust mental resources to adopt an alternative way of thinking. I, for one, would have us rely on our considered desires. The cultivation of rationality and compassion can go a long way toward remedying and even precluding various human behaviors and societal ills without the superfluous discord that moral judgments and attitudes so often introduce.

*Joel Marks
Milford, Conn.*

Memory Wars

Ben Taub's alarming report from the front line of Norway's spy war with Russia reminded me of my own Cold War childhood, in the nineteen-sixties and seventies, in Shetland ("The Dark Time," September 16th). Just as Russian vessels linger today in the port of Kirkenes, Eastern European fish-factory boats, some of which were known to be used for espionage, ringed the Shetland Islands.

The article discusses how Soviet forces helped to wrest Finnmark from the Nazis during the Second World War, and how, today, Russia has manipulated the memory of that period to suit its long-term military objectives. Readers who are interested in this history should be aware of a lesser-known campaign by Allied forces in northern Russia toward the end of the First World War, which came after Lenin made peace with Germany. This episode, too, touched upon my family: in 1918, my father, a member of the Royal Naval Reserve, boarded a gunboat on its way to join American, French, and other Allied contingents to fight against Bolshevik forces in Murmansk, one of the towns featured in Taub's piece. In a sense, this incursion marked the beginning of the Cold War.

*Michael Peterson
Lerwick, Shetland, U.K.*

Eat Bray Love

As a devoted keeper and friend of two rescued donkeys, Miles and Zephyr, I have to commend Frishta Qaderi for her efforts to petition DreamWorks to give proper credit and compensation to Perry, the donkey whom animators sketched and studied while developing one of the most beloved characters in "Shrek" (The Talk of the Town, September 16th). Although donkeys are gaining some popularity and acknowledgment through social media and film, the reality is that they remain at the low end of the spectrum of respect when it comes to the genus *Equus*. They have been used as beasts of burden for thousands of years—hauling goods, protecting herds, carrying Jesus into Jerusalem. But even that holy duty hasn't been enough to earn them an exalted status. I hope that Perry's story brings a little more recognition their way.

*Abby Rhoads
Lincolnville, Maine*

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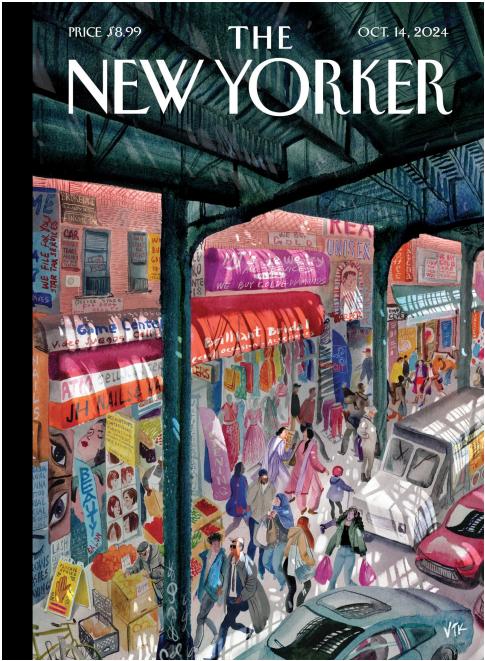


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