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THE

APRIL 14, 2025

# THE NEW YORKER



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# **Goings On**

- [The Evolution of Dance Theatre of Harlem](#)

By [Marina Harss](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Vince Aletti](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Inkoo Kang](#), [Taran Dugal](#), and [Rachel Syme](#)

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

**From the start, Dance Theatre of Harlem's** history has been a cycle of struggle and triumph. The dancer Arthur Mitchell founded it in 1969, in response to the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. The company thrived, until it didn't, and was forced to shut down, in 2004, for almost a decade. In 2012, the former D.T.H. company member Virginia Johnson, one of the great American ballerinas of the nineteen-seventies and eighties, revived it, and, with grace and care, led the company back to stability. Two years ago, she handed D.T.H. off to Robert Garland, who, like Johnson, has spent practically his entire career there, first as a dancer, and later as a teacher and a choreographer. Garland knows the company inside and out, and knows what the dancers are capable of, and how to nudge them toward it.

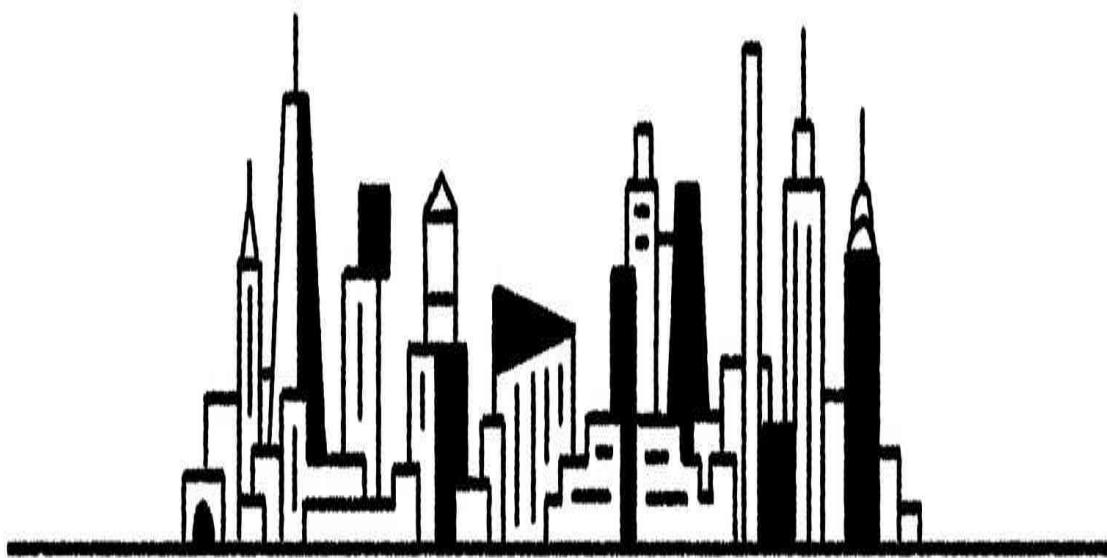


*Photograph by Jeff Cravotta*

This year, the company's season, at City Center (April 10-13), includes a work by William Forsythe, a choreographer who, in the late nineties, expanded the technique of ballet to new extremes, adding to it an edge of risk and sass. The work, "The Vertiginous Thrill of Exactitude," from 1996, is one of his most famous. As its title implies, it is a ballet that exalts everything that the art form, and the dancers, can achieve: lightning speed,

knife-edge precision, expansive physical range, and rigorous geometries, combined with the ability to distort those geometries at will. Forsythe was building upon the innovations of George Balanchine, whose works are embedded in D.T.H.'s DNA—Mitchell danced for Balanchine for more than a decade. So it makes sense that Balanchine also appears in the season, in the form of his ballet "Donizetti Variations," a work that combines brilliance and an infectious bubbliness. And from Garland, whose dances have a way of celebrating the individuality of the company's performers, a new work, "The Cookout," set to music by, among others, the neo-soul singer Jill Scott and the funk band Cymande.—*Marina Harss*

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## About Town

### Hip-Hop

As a teen-ager, the Chicago rapper **Saba** performed at open-mike nights at the YOUMedia center, and for Young Chicago Authors, slowly unspooling a tightly wound wordplay. His début, in 2016, "Bucket List Project," established a fluid, sinuous style, but his creative awakening occurred amid tragedy, in 2018: "Care for Me," which wrestled with the murder of his cousin, the rapper John Walt, delivered a gorgeous meditation on loss,

memory, kinship, attention, and custody. His new album, “From the Private Collection of Saba and No ID,” a collaboration with the home-town producer known for his work with Common and Kanye West, feels like the history of Windy City rap pulled through a point, with Saba a shining symbol of No I.D.’s lasting influence.—*Sheldon Pearce (Blue Note; April 11-13.)*

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## Classical

One doesn’t need to have synesthesia to experience color in Schumann—just in the opening of the A-minor piano concerto, we go from sharp scarlet to rumbling whirlpools of deep maroon. It is only fitting, then, that the composer would be featured in the Met’s “**Sight and Sound**,” a lecture and performance series. For a pairing with the exhibition “Caspar David Friedrich: The Soul of Nature,” the Met highlights Schumann’s “Rhenish” Symphony. Written after the composer relocated to Düsseldorf, the piece features a folkish, almost pastoral seed sown by his new surroundings. The conductor and music historian Leon Botstein leads musings on these two artists and the symbiotic relationship of their art forms, with music performed by the Orchestra Now.—*Jane Bua (Metropolitan Museum of Art; April 13.)*

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## Art



"*Brothers After Wake, Louisiana*," from 2020. Photograph by Rahim Fortune / Courtesy Sasha Wolf Projects / Howard Greenberg Gallery

**Rahim Fortune** combines black-and-white photographs from two books—"I Can't Stand to See You Cry" and "Hardtack"—for a show with the punch of engaged reportage and the intimacy of a family album. He finds nearly all his subjects—mostly Black and Indigenous family members and friends—in Texas, at rodeos, in farmyards, and in church. Even when the setting isn't religious, Fortune's rural community comes together in strength and resilience. His unsentimental landscapes underline this sense of shared history, recalling the human cost of every plot of land. A closeup of a young man's forearm with a fading tattoo of the state of Texas slashed by a freshly stitched scar captures the mixed emotions that charge Fortune's best work.—*Vince Aletti (Greenberg; through May 24.)*

**For more:** read Andrea DenHoed on [Fortune's Texas homecoming](#).

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## Broadway

A profusion of flowers—exploding from vases, jackets, and couches—riots against the darkness of Kip Williams's astonishingly inventive solo adaptation of "**The Picture of Dorian Gray**," Oscar Wilde's story about an increasingly decadent man whose portrait ages as his own face remains youthful. Sarah Snook plays twenty-six parts as videographers and dressers

swarm around her; her live-captured virtuoso performance appears on huge, gleaming black screens, often playing opposite her prerecorded self. “Gray” held the mirror up to Victorian hypocrisy; here, Williams focusses on present horror. Closeups let us see how Snook’s beautifully mobile expressions defy today’s “norm” of frozen, chemically induced perfection. Her lack of vanity in a work *about* vanity emphasizes Wilde’s critique: a society that insists on gorgeousness grows uglier in secret.—*Helen Shaw (Music Box; through June 15.)*

**For more:** read [Shaw’s interview with Snook](#), about her preparation regime, her resemblance to Leonardo DiCaprio, and the time she experienced a “benevolent haunting.”

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## Movies



Karen Black in "Born to Win." Photograph courtesy Criterion Collection

The Criterion Channel’s April offerings include the program “Fun City: NYC Woos Hollywood, Flirts with Disaster,” chosen by the critic J. Hoberman, featuring seventeen movies from the nineteen-sixties and seventies. One of the highlights, “**Born to Win**,” from 1971, stars George Segal as Jerome, nicknamed J, a middle-class heroin addict with motormouth charm. The comedy that launches the action—J’s meet-cute with a woman called Parm (Karen Black) while stealing her car—soon

curdles into cruel absurdity as policemen (Ed Madsen and a young Robert De Niro) force J to become an informant. It's the first American movie by the Czech director Ivan Passer, who films the city's street life with fascination while grimly observing the law's oppressive authority—and J's moral degradation through lies and betrayals.—*Richard Brody*

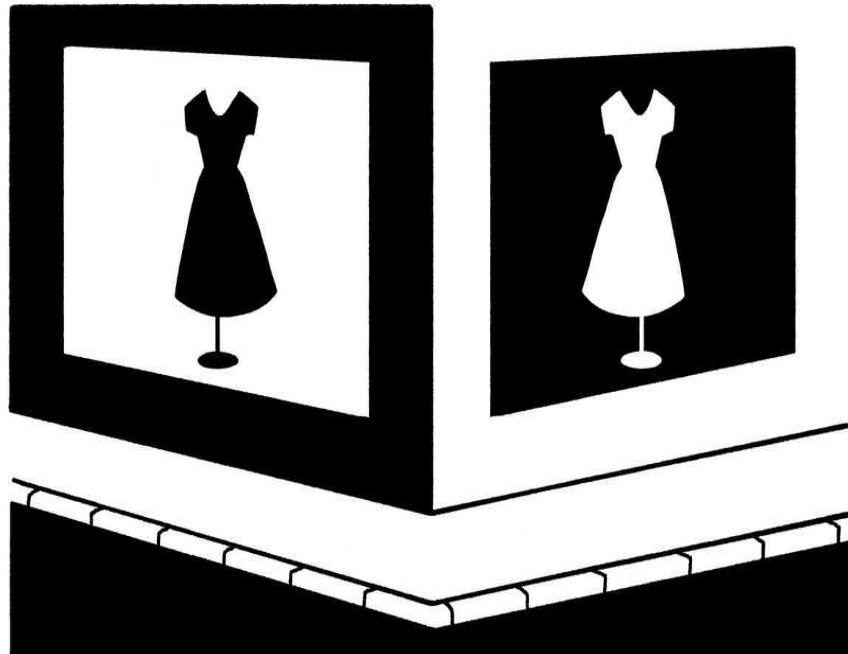
**For more:** read Margaret Talbot on the “time-travelling sort of intimacy” of [Karen Black’s lost music.](#)

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## Television

Minutes into the new Netflix drama “**Adolescence**,” a thirteen-year-old boy, Jamie Miller (Owen Cooper), is arrested for murder. By the end of the interrogation scene that ensues, it’s incontrovertible that Jamie killed one of his classmates, a girl named Katie. The U.K.-set limited series is not a whodunnit but a “whydunnit,” told mostly from the points of view of the adults around him: his parents (Stephen Graham and Christine Tremarco); a clinical psychologist (Erin Doherty); and the lead detective, Luke Bascombe (Ashley Walters). “Adolescence” is an expression of parental panic, an effort to grapple with the crisis of boys and tech-addled masculinity today. And though it pays lip service to Katie’s neglected humanity, its true sympathy lies less with the victim than with the grownup bystanders trying to make sense of it all.—*Inkoo Kang*

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## On and Off the Avenue

*Rachel Syme on the latest in charms.*

A few weeks ago, I was browsing in the *MOMA* Design Store, in SoHo, for a housewarming gift, when my eyes warmed, instead, to a pair of earrings that I knew belonged in my house. They were long and dangly, composed of teeny, mismatched, New York City-themed charms, each about the size of a pinkie nail. The charms were like no others I'd seen—made of shrunken photographs coated in clear resin, like insect wings trapped in tree sap. These glassy encasements elevated each itty-bitty snapshot of kitschy urban ephemera (a taxi cab, a bodega coffee cup, a slice of pizza, a smiley-face plastic shopping bag) to a surprising elegance—undercut with impish humor. They reminded me of the sort of moony collage a teen-age girl in the suburbs might make after deciding that a cosmopolitan life was her fate; I know this because I was that girl once, forging my way toward an identity with a stack of fashion magazines and a glue stick.

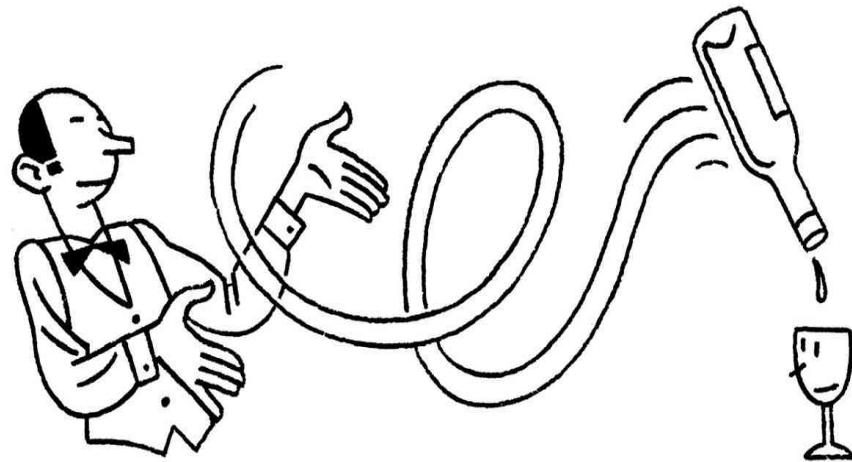


Illustration by Min Heo

I was delighted to discover that the brand behind the earrings, [Haricot Vert](#), opened a brick-and-mortar location in Williamsburg (119 N. First St.) in the spring of 2024—and I was doubly delighted to find that the storefront is even more whimsical and nostalgia-inducing than I'd expected. The founder of Haricot Vert, twenty-eight-year-old Kelsey Armstrong, told me that she'd fallen for mixed-media art as a marketing student at the American University of Paris. There she studied collage, découpage, and assemblage, finding that she had a knack for combining disparate ideas. After college, Armstrong moved to New York, where, she said, "I began to think, *How can I take the art of collage, which I love so much, and turn it into jewelry?* And the picto-charm was born." Armstrong spent a year experimenting to develop the proprietary picto-charm process, which involves nine steps and several days. "It's closer to making ceramics than working with Shrinky Dinks," she said. Armstrong launched Haricot Vert from her living room in Queens, in 2019; soon sales exploded online (Emma Roberts and Gigi Hadid were early fans). She then moved into a small studio in Greenpoint, in 2020, and found that her customers delighted most in putting together their own custom charm concoctions. When Armstrong opened the Williamsburg store, she leaned heavily into the "charm bar" aspect of the business. The airy space, which she has nicknamed dreamworld, features broad, undulating tables full of picto-charms and invites long visits; each shopper is encouraged to place a mishmash of charms on a tray and bring them to a

consultant who helps lay out a necklace, bracelet, or key ring, fashioning the piece on the spot (single-charm pendant necklaces start at \$38). Armstrong recently converted the store's third floor into a "craft nook" aerie, offering classes (\$18-\$88) on collage, jewelry construction, and dollhouse miniatures. It is, in a word, charming.

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## Bar Tab

*Taran Dugal finds turtle races and strong drinks in Bed-Stuy.*



Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

Should one find themselves in Bed-Stuy on the first Sunday of the month, searching for a contest with the gladiatorial trappings of a prizefight—save for grace, glory, and good will—they ought to make their way to **Turtles All the Way Down**. There, under dim amber lights, they will find a scene not unlike that of a particularly feral frat party: unquantifiable amounts of light beer, twenty-tens hip-hop playing at earsplitting volume, and an allowance of personal space that could only reasonably accommodate someone with the build of a sheet of loose-leaf paper. On a recent weekend, two newcomers entered the fray, hoping to catch the main event: the dive’s renowned turtle races, featuring Vita and Ja Rule, the red-eared sliders who live in a tank in the back. The first race, scheduled for four o’clock, had been delayed. In the back yard, hordes of patrons queued up to buy tickets. Rumors circulated. “I heard that one of the turtles just died,” a woman wearing sunglasses said. (It had not.) “I’ve been pregaming since noon,” one especially friendly attendee announced. (It was now four-thirty.) Another chimed in: “The best part of this bar is how strong the drinks are.” The newcomers agreed. One long hour later, tickets finally in hand, they elbowed their way back inside, where they were greeted by a man holding a QR code. “Scan this to watch the race,” he said. “Odds are, you won’t be able to see it from where you’re standing.” The newcomers glanced at one another, then toward the turtles (still in their tank), and, finally, down at their bone-dry cups. They held up their tickets to a couple who had just walked in. “Do you

want these? We were just about to head out.” Slow and steady, it seems, does not always win the race.

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### **P.S. Good stuff on the internet:**

- [“Relatable Mom,” by Curtis Sittenfeld](#)
- [A day with the best school-lunch chef](#)
- [What’s it like being a girl in America?](#)

By Marina Harss  
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By Elif Batuman  
By Richard Brody  
By Nathan Heller  
By Nikil Saval  
By Anna Wiener  
By Alexandra Schwartz

## The Talk of the Town

- [At the Smithsonian, Donald Trump Takes Aim at History](#)
- [Seth Rogen Has Some Notes](#)
- [Another Round with Peter Wolf](#)
- [Protecting the National Airspace, Post-DOGE](#)
- [Your Handy Road Map to Authoritarianism](#)

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# At the Smithsonian, Donald Trump Takes Aim at History

The urge to police the past is hardly an invention of the Trump Administration. It is the reflexive obsession of autocrats everywhere.

By [David Remnick](#)



Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs (left to right) by Kevin Dietsch / Getty; Carl Court / Getty; Beata Zawrzel / NurPhoto / Getty; WPA / Alamy

In the very first paragraph of [Project 2025](#), the Heritage Foundation's operating manual for a second Trump Administration, battle lines over history are drawn: "America is now divided between two opposing forces: woke revolutionaries and those who believe in the ideals of the American revolution." Three weeks after [Donald Trump](#)'s election, Mike Gonzalez, a contributor to Project 2025, and Armen Toolooe, the former chief of staff to the right-wing activist [Christopher Rufo](#), elaborated on the new Administration's martial maneuvers, writing in the *Wall Street Journal* that, in order "to put a spike through the heart of woke," the White House was duty bound to "retake control of museums, starting with the [Smithsonian](#) Institution."

During the campaign, Trump professed ignorance of Project 2025. “I’ve never read it, and I never will,” he said. This was hard to parse. While it really was difficult to imagine Trump hunched over his desk, underlining passages in the report’s nine hundred-plus pages, he obviously had what is known in Washington as a “situational awareness” of its prescriptions to maximize executive power, [slash government agencies](#), punish perceived enemies, intimidate dissenters, and rule as an autocrat. Trump is enacting Project 2025 nearly to the letter, deploying [executive orders](#), lawsuits, and rhetorical bombast in an effort to force judges, [law firms](#), cultural institutions, [university presidents](#), and [press barons](#) into postures of pitiable obedience. He has even taken time to bring to heel that center of Brechtian cultural rebellion, the [John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts](#).

As is true of autocracies everywhere, this Administration demands a mystical view of an imagined past. In late March, Trump issued an executive order called “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History.” Its diagnosis is that there has long been among professors and curators “a concerted and widespread effort to rewrite our Nation’s history, replacing objective facts with a distorted narrative driven by ideology rather than truth.” It continues:

Under this historical revision, our Nation’s unparalleled legacy of advancing liberty, individual rights, and human happiness is reconstructed as inherently racist, sexist, oppressive, or otherwise irredeemably flawed. Rather than fostering unity and a deeper understanding of our shared past, the widespread effort to rewrite history deepens societal divides and fosters a sense of national shame.

The Smithsonian, the vast complex of museums that millions of Americans visit every year to see [Lincoln](#)’s top hat, the Spirit of St. Louis, [Harriet Tubman](#)’s shawl, a [moon](#) rock, and Dorothy’s ruby slippers, is at the center of the executive order’s indignation. The order takes particular issue with a sculpture exhibit at the Smithsonian American Art Museum called “The Shape of Power,” saying that it pushes “the view that race is not a biological reality but a social construct.”

Perhaps it is rude or “revisionist” to question the scholarship of an executive order, but the curators got it right. As a wall text at the exhibit points out, human beings are “99.9 percent genetically the same.” The opposing view,

racial essentialism, is hardly benign; it is the underpinning of virulent bigotry, from the description of Jews as vermin in *Der Stürmer* to the assertions in white-nationalist manifestos that Black people are cursed with inferior I.Q.s.

The [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#)—which, until recently, was run by *The New Yorker's* poetry editor, [Kevin Young](#)—comes in for particularly splenetic denunciation. Trump, in his first term, expressed a modicum of admiration while visiting what is affectionately called the Black Smithsonian. It is a spectacular museum, one that richly represents the story of African American struggle, suffering, and achievement. Daily, adults and schoolkids take in exhibits about chattel slavery and Jim Crow, [Reconstruction](#) and the [civil-rights movement](#), and leave with a deeper understanding of American history in all its darkness and its promise. But in a culture war that demands that political opponents be branded, en masse, as “woke revolutionaries,” there can be no complexity. And it will be the job, according to the executive order, of Vice-President [J. D. Vance](#), who sits on the Smithsonian’s board, to make matters simple. Vance is charged with leading the effort to remove from the museum what is called, in exquisite Orwellese, “improper ideology.”

This urge to police the past is hardly unique to the Trump Administration. It is the reflexive obsession of autocrats everywhere. The history museums that were once a feature of many Soviet cities did not interrogate the life of Lenin. They were places of orthodox worship. His typescripts and teacups were sacralized, like the Shroud of Turin. More important, his ideological tenets were not left open to discussion. For decades, the second-most important figure in the Communist Party, after the General Secretary, was arguably the chief ideologist, who had the final word over what could and could not be said about history.

When [Mikhail Gorbachev](#) set out forty years ago to democratize the Soviet Union, one of his boldest moves was to encourage revisionism—or, better, free heterodox argument. This led to the sanctioned publication of countless previously censored writers, including Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, who described in “The Gulag Archipelago” how Lenin had initiated a system of labor camps from Moscow to Magadan. Such historical revelations, belatedly publicized and debated, were necessary, yet immeasurably painful.

Among the more hidebound leaders of the Party, this new liberalism—call it late-Soviet wokeism—was intolerable. At the time, one of Gorbachev’s rivals in the Party, Yegor Ligachev, [complained to me](#) (in tones that anticipated Project 2025) that when history was taken out of the hands of the Party it created a “gloomy” atmosphere in society. “People are longing for something positive, something shining,” he said. “Yet our own cultural figures have published more lies and anti-Soviet things than our Western enemies ever did.”

Ligachev, who died in 2021, lived to see the last embers of Russian liberalism extinguished. [Vladimir Putin](#) lacks a Heritage Foundation, but he has made do. In 2013, he complained that Russia’s short-lived period of historical pluralism led to textbooks replete with “internal contradictions and ambiguous interpretations.” His culture-war commissars took the cue, and approved a textbook filled with unquestioned assertions of official history: “Russia is a country of heroes.” And “Ukraine is a neo-Nazi state.” In the same spirit, according to *Foreign Policy*, the Chinese leader Xi Jinping oversaw the establishment a few years ago of a “historical nihilism” hotline so that citizens could rat out anyone who shared “wrong ideas and viewpoints.”

Trump’s executive order on history does not repeat precisely the tactics of Putin or Xi. But it rhymes. ♦

By David Remnick  
By Nathan Heller  
By Jay Caspian Kang  
By Charlie Tyson  
By Molly Fischer  
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By Katy Waldman  
By Alex Scardelis  
By Susan B. Glasser  
By Benjamin Wallace-Wells  
By Ruth Marcus  
By John Cassidy

[Dept. of Suits](#)

## Seth Rogen Has Some Notes

Over a power lunch with some of his castmates from “The Studio,” the actor considers the job description of a studio head: must love movies but be willing to ruin them.

By [Michael Schulman](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Seth Rogen’s first exposure to Hollywood executives was at the age of seventeen, when he was starring on “Freaks and Geeks.” His mentor, Judd Apatow, had invited him to listen in on a notes call with the network. “Judd was, like, ‘These people are going to sound crazy, but just know that they could be fired at any second, and they’re operating from a place of sheer panic,’ ” Rogen recalled the other day. Over the years, he got to know this strange L.A. species. Three days into Apatow’s “The 40-Year-Old Virgin,” a Universal executive halted production because she thought that Steve Carell looked like a serial killer. Around that time, while Rogen and his writing partner, Evan Goldberg, were working on a screenplay, one suit confided, “I got into this because I love movies, and now it’s my job to ruin them.”

The line appears, almost verbatim, in “The Studio,” a new Apple TV+ comedy directed by Rogen and Goldberg. Rogen plays Matt Remick, the

beleaguered head of the fictitious Continental Studios. His first task is to come up with a Kool-Aid movie, for which he somehow enlists Martin Scorsese. Running a studio is a tragic job, Rogen said, “because it’s inherently conflicted. They love Martin Scorsese, and they have to tell Martin Scorsese news that he doesn’t want to hear.” He chuckled his trademark chuckle. “I remember seeing an executive physically hiding in his office from one of the stars of his movies, because the movie was tracking badly. I remember being, like, ‘What a funny job! You got into this because you love this actor, and now you’re hiding in your en-suite bathroom.’ *Heh heh.*”

Rogen had joined some of his castmates at Michael’s, the midtown power-lunch spot popular, in decades past, with such players as Barry Diller and Michael Ovitz. “The Studio” had débuted that day, and he was already getting texts from Hollywood executives, many of whom he and Goldberg had interviewed for research: “I’ve heard a lot of, like, ‘I love the show and am traumatized by watching it.’ *Heh heh.*”

His power-lunch companions included Kathryn Hahn, who plays Continental’s aggro marketing chief, and Ike Barinholtz, who plays Matt’s hard-partying No. 2. “I remember one guy on a TV show got so drunk at a wrap party that he was banned from visiting set ever again,” Barinholtz said. The Continental execs face such quandaries as: Is it racist for the voice of the Kool-Aid Man to be Black? Or is it more racist for him *not* to be Black? “The most common note given by studios is, ‘Can he shave his beard?’ ” Rogen said. Things got meta when the Apple people gave him notes on “The Studio”: “They didn’t love the Jew jokes.”

Chase Sui Wonders, who plays a junior exec angling for a better parking spot, had just been on a set where a studio head helped her choose a pair of sunglasses for a scene. “After the shot, she was, like, ‘I’m so glad you went with those sunglasses!’ ” Wonders said. “You can see the love of film that they all have—and have to repress to keep their jobs.”

“Except for a few coke-fuelled years in the eighties and nineties, it’s always been an industry that’s in existential crisis,” Rogen said. The show’s direct forebear is Robert Altman’s 1992 film, “The Player,” which starred Tim Robbins as a slick exec named Griffin Mill. (As an homage, Rogen and

Goldberg gave the same name to Continental's C.E.O., played by Bryan Cranston.) Back then, the status symbols were double-breasted suits and car phones. These days, it's zip-up fleeces and corner tables. "Nice watches. Membership clubs," Hahn said.

"I think the biggest status symbol is who your friends are," Rogen added. "I was at Charlize Theron's party one year, and Donna Langley"—Universal's chairwoman—"was there. Part of me was thinking, *That would drive some of these other studio heads insane to know.*"

Nothing encapsulates the faded glory of the studio head more than the fact that David Zaslav—the C.E.O. of Warner Bros. Discovery, infamous for shelving a Batgirl movie as a tax writeoff—now owns the former home of the late Robert Evans, the legendary Paramount producer behind "The Godfather." (Zaslav had texted Rogen, too: "He loves it.") When Evans was producing Hahn's first big movie, "How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days," he invited the cast to watch "Midnight Cowboy" in his screening room. "I brought two litres of Diet Coke," Hahn said, blushing.

Barinholtz: "That's the most Ohio story I've ever heard."

As the restaurant filled up, its proprietor, Michael McCarty, came by and dispensed business cards. He pointed out Peter Cuneo, a former C.E.O. of Marvel Entertainment, at Table 27. McCarty opened the original Michael's, in Santa Monica, in 1979. "You'd have Lew Wasserman in one corner, Spielberg in another," he recalled, then wandered off.

Rogen said, "Even *he*'s nostalgic! *Heh heh.*" ♦

By Michael Schulman  
By Michael Schulman  
By Doreen St. Félix  
By Michael Schulman  
By Charles Bethea  
By Diego Lasarte  
By Alex Scordelis  
By Justin Chang  
By David Remnick  
By Naomi Fry  
By Kyle Chayka  
By Emma Allen

[Around the Saloon](#)

## Another Round with Peter Wolf

In a corner of McSorley's, the J. Geils Band survivor unspools some tales: sharing pants with Bob Dylan, being David Lynch's art-school roommate, and putting away a record thirty-seven mugs of beer.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

A framed gold record of the J. Geils Band's 1980 album, “Love Stinks,” hangs in the back room of McSorley's Old Ale House, on East Seventh Street. It's there because Peter Wolf, then the Geils Band's lead singer, was, for decades, a McSorley's regular who sometimes brought along his bandmates and friends. He grew up in the Bronx and took the subway down to the bar when he was a kid. “I used to come here when I was fourteen,” he said on a recent afternoon. “Because they didn't give a fuck about your age.”

Wolf, now seventy-nine, was at a table up front, presiding over a menagerie of mugs, empty and full, of ale light and dark. He'd come from the Strand, where he'd purchased two books of letters, of Raymond Chandler and Truman Capote. He wore a black peacoat, a baker boy's cap, and tinted glasses. Around the time of “Love Stinks,” he recalled, he'd won a beer-drinking competition here. There was some question as to whether the

winning number of mugs was more or less than thirty-seven, perhaps not as ludicrous a total as it seems: the mugs are small, and Wolf, to go by his memoir, “Waiting on the Moon,” out last month, hides hollow parts in his lean, rubbery frame.

In the book, he and his cohort drink a lot, as he chances or charms his way into one indelible/surreal/intimate encounter/collaboration/relationship after another with a murderers’ row of complicated geniuses: Bob Dylan (he sends Wolf his leather pants), David Lynch (his art-school roommate changes the lock on their apartment, because Wolf was chronically late with rent), Muddy Waters (his band members stay with Wolf in his next tiny apartment), John Lee Hooker (they watch “Lassie” together), Ed Hood (Wolf’s “literary mentor,” who introduces him to Andy Warhol). Van Morrison, Alfred Hitchcock, Robert Lowell, John Lennon, Julia Child, Tennessee Williams, the Stones, Sly Stone, Aretha Franklin, Merle Haggard. To name just a few. Wolf also chronicles his marriage, in the seventies, to Faye Dunaway, including a tumultuous time during the shooting of “Chinatown.”

“I didn’t want to make this book ‘Oh, I met so-and-so,’ ” Wolf said. “Nor did I want to make it kiss-and-tell. I also didn’t want it to be about me. I wanted it to be about *them*. ” You could say it’s all of the above, in the best possible way.

A waiter named Richard Walsh came by, with a plate of saltines and cheese.  
“What say, Peter? It’s so great to see you.”

They talked about some old-timers: the guy who married a Ukrainian doctor and moved to Connecticut and had twins; the poet who never came back after *COVID*.

“He’s over seventy,” Walsh said.

“Still with the handlebar mustache?”

“Yeah.”

“What about Brendan, the waiter?”

“That’s my uncle. He comes in at six. You’re always in our thoughts here, Peter. Your gold album’s still in the back.”

Wolf said, “One day, there was a bunch of guys in here, and they tried to rip it off, because they thought the gold album was made of gold.”

“They don’t make it out the door, anybody tries to take something out of here.”

Wolf asked, “Were you here the night we had the beer-drinking contest?”

“That could be any night. I started here in 1979.”

“Maybe it was Brendan.”

Another old bartender, Scott Pullman, appeared: “My man!” He pulled a copy of Wolf’s book from his backpack. “Last time I saw you, I said, ‘For every story you tell me, I owe you a beer.’ Well, I owe you a shitload of beer now.”



*“So the bread is my body, the wine is my blood, and the chocolate bunny is a fun springtime treat.”*  
Cartoon by Adam Sacks

Wolf signed the title page for him and asked, “Scotty, were you here the night we had the beer-drinking contest?”

“I don’t know. You been here a lot.”

“I loved it when you guys shut down and locked up and put the chairs up on the tables, and we all got to stay and just tell stories,” Wolf said. “It’s like when guys were in the Army together. You build a camaraderie. You wouldn’t be friends with each other otherwise. Who was the little guy with the glasses who used to sweep up?”

“Kevin. He wound up as a professor of mathematics, at Rutgers. He’s retired. Can we have one together later?”

“Maybe I’ll come for a nightcap,” Wolf said. “In fact, I think I will.”

“I’ll stay open,” Pullman said, and went to get ready for his shift.

“In the seventies, I made a trip to Nashville to meet my favorite songwriters,” Wolf said. “Harlan Howard and I shared many a drink over three days. He’s the one who came up with the saying ‘Three chords and the truth.’ He said to me, ‘The greatest thing you can do is go into a bar and find your place and listen, and you will hear an entire catalogue of songs, just from the pieces of conversation.’ ”

Employees and patrons came over to pose for pictures with Wolf. A woman nearby asked him, “How come everyone wants to take your picture?”

“Because I’m Henry Winkler,” Wolf said.

A barrel-chested, silver-haired gent in a fisherman’s sweater approached the table. “My brother!” he said. It was Brendan. Brendan Buggy. “It’s great to see you! Why haven’t you come down here more often lately?”

“I’ve been this, I’ve been that. Busy, I guess.”

“Why didn’t you call us, and we come see you?”

“You don’t have a phone in this place!”

“I’ll give you my goddam number. We’ve known each other since 1975.”

“Fifty years,” Wolf said. “Brendan, were you here the night we did the drinking competition?”

“I was here every fucking night. And some nights we want to forget we were here.” ♦

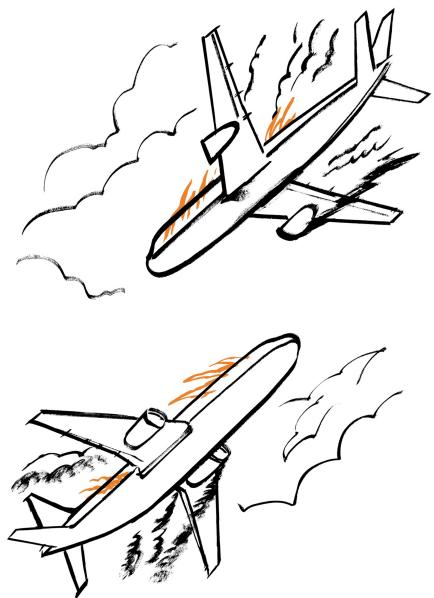
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[Dept. of Airspace](#)

# Protecting the National Airspace, Post-DOGE

For nearly seventy years, the F.A.A.'s experimental safety lab near Atlantic City has run turbulence tests, set fire to seat cushions, and dropped crash-test dummies. Will it survive Elon Musk?

By [Robert Sullivan](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The Federal Aviation Administration's William J. Hughes Technical Center is a five-thousand-acre campus in Egg Harbor Township, New Jersey, a few miles from the end of the Atlantic City Expressway. In contrast to the casinos across the bay, where risk is valued, the engineers, mathematicians, and chemists at the tech center work to eliminate risk, testing and researching airplane and airport design and managing safety in what the F.A.A. calls the National Airspace System, or *NAS*. In February, Sean Duffy, the new transportation secretary, tweeted about Elon Musk, who runs the Department of Government Efficiency, as well as Starlink and SpaceX: "Big News - Talked to the DOGE team. They are going to plug in to help upgrade our aviation system." Shortly thereafter, a Starlink antenna was reported sprouting from the Jersey tech center's roof, and a dozen or so Hughes

workers were fired. (So far, more than a hundred people have died in twenty-three U.S. aviation incidents in 2025.)

On a recent weekday morning, workers were getting coffee at the Wawa on Amelia Earhart Boulevard, while, overhead, an F-16C from the New Jersey Air National Guard took off seaward. “The history here goes way back,” Stan Ciurczak, the center’s unofficial historian, said, in a booth at JJ’s Diner, down the road from the research campus. He started in 1990 as a program analyst; his first assignment was to take a warehouse full of desktop computers and put them on everyone’s desktops. “Look at this,” he went on. “Somebody mailed it to me.” He presented a menu from January 14, 1960, when the center was known as the National Aviation Facilities Experimental Center, or *NAFEC*, and engineers at the on-site social club could order, for a dollar, the Homer Cole Special, a steak-and-kidney pie named for a pioneering air-traffic controller.

Back then, Ciurczak explained, the F.A.A. had only just taken over the airfield from the Navy, which had taken it over from Atlantic City, on the cusp of the Second World War. From two runways cut out of the Pine Barrens by the W.P.A., pilots trained to take off from aircraft carriers, while C-47s transported wounded soldiers from Europe to Atlantic City, where they recuperated in hotels converted to hospitals. (Pilotless Hellcats, controlled by radio, were tested at the airfield for Operation Crossroads, which detonated atomic bombs on the Marshall Islands, in 1946.) The F.A.A. was established in 1958, after two commercial airliners collided over the Grand Canyon, killing all hundred and twenty-eight passengers; the air station at Egg Harbor then became *NAFEC*—“aviation’s most extensive proving ground.”

A nineteen-sixties Hughes brochure shows experimental antennae-equipped jets and turbulence-testing facilities. Plenty of things exploded or burned during testing. “They used to say that you knew the center was open when you saw huge clouds of black smoke,” Ciurczak said.

In its current fire-testing facilities, researchers burn planes, or parts of them, to determine how to make them less flammable. Fire tests at Hughes in the nineteen-eighties led the F.A.A. to replace six hundred and fifty thousand cabin seat cushions; these tests are still cited as a safety triumph. “Most

jetliner evacuations occur within one to five minutes, and our cushion gives passengers an extra forty to sixty seconds to escape a burning aircraft,” a technical-center fire-safety expert said at the time.

Recently, the F.A.A. changed the center’s brief. “Our mission now encompasses rockets,” Ciurczak said. “I mean, before *DOGE* ever showed up, we were working with SpaceX.” Since *DOGE* landed, the Egg Harbor area has been on high alert, and the engineers are hoping airline-safety work will be deemed critical. But Ciurczak focusses on the past: in February, when a jet flipped upon landing in Toronto and everyone survived, tech-center employees remembered their evacuation tests. “It’s absolutely miraculous, but it’s not a miracle,” Ciurczak said. “It’s a moment that reflects good engineering.”

Much of the center’s work on the future of aerospace is based on what the F.A.A. calls NextGen, an air-control modernization program scheduled to be completed in 2030. With an increasing number of expected space launches, not to mention projected pilotless cargo planes and self-driving air taxis, the *NAS* is being redesigned. Air travel will shift from something like a radar-monitored highway system in which control towers radio directions by voice to a fully automated airspace where planes signal directly to other planes—innovations to be tested at Egg Harbor.

Ciurczak, who’d just had his official retirement lunch, reminisced about the so-called drop tests that were common thirty-five years ago. “We would get a plane and lift it,” he said, “and they would fill it with dummies that were wired—I guess we call them anthropomorphic test devices now—and they would drop them inside the plane and collect all this data to see, you know, did their heads hit the window? Did the plane catch on fire? And they did that for years and years. Then they stopped it. I think they’d collected so much data, they kind of decided, we’re good.” ♦

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Profiles

## Sayaka Murata's Alien Eye

The author of “Convenience Store Woman” has gained a cult following by seeing the ordinary world as science fiction.

By [Elif Batuman](#)



Murata writes “for the sake of the novel,” not “for the sake of human beings.” Photograph by TOKI for *The New Yorker*

One Sunday morning in May, 2023, I arrived at a literary agent’s Manhattan apartment, bearing a lemon tart, to attend a brunch in honor of the author Sayaka Murata.

I rang the doorbell. There was a long pause before anyone answered, and a longer pause before I was buzzed in. When I reached the top of the stairs, the agent, Nicole Aragi, with whom I was previously unacquainted, came to the door wearing orange plush tiger slippers.

“Elif, the brunch was yesterday,” she said. “But come in and have a cup of tea.” Aragi and her partner, the editor John Freeman, who has published Murata in both *Granta* and *Freeman’s*, ended up inviting me to join them on an afternoon outing they had planned with Murata to the Museum of Modern Art. Casting a wistful look at the lemon tart, I left the apartment and, having time on my hands, went to the midtown branch of Kinokuniya, the Japanese

bookstore chain. The store had a big display of Murata's English-language books, all translated by Ginny Tapley Takemori and published by Grove Press: the story collection "Life Ceremony," from 2022; the darkly comic novel "Earthlings," from 2020; and, of course, "Convenience Store Woman," which won Japan's prestigious Akutagawa Prize and, in 2018, became Murata's first book to be translated into English. It has sold more than two million copies worldwide.

The book's narrator, Keiko, is a misfit in her family and at school; she first experiences a sense of belonging at eighteen, when she gets a part-time job at a convenience store. At thirty-six, she's still in the same job, and an identity that once seemed normal now strikes everyone as sad and weird. It's a classic novelistic premise. It's essentially "Don Quixote": where Quixote lives by the code of knightly romances, Keiko lives by the convenience-store employee manual.

Sensing, with panic, that she is no longer passing as a legible human, Keiko adopts a radical plan. She invites an ex-co-worker, Shiraha—a grievance-spouting incel, recently fired for stalking a female customer—to live with her. While he's taking a shower, she calls her sister and announces, "There's a man in my home now." After a pause, the sister bursts into effusive congratulations. "It's the first time you've ever said anything of the sort to me," she gushes. "Does that by any chance mean you're already thinking about getting married?"

It was a translation, into literature, of a painful and half-articulated life experience of my own: specifically, the dawning realization, in my mid-thirties, that it isn't actually O.K. to be an unattached woman who cares too much about work. It makes other people anxious. That's the point in the book when I swore undying loyalty to Sayaka Murata, whoever she was. Also: who was she? The publicity copy called the novel "the English-language debut of an exciting young voice," but surely this hadn't been a first book? In fact, Murata had written nine other books, while working in a convenience store. When "Convenience Store Woman" came out, she was thirty-six.

That afternoon, standing outside the museum entrance, I saw her approach, with Aragi and Freeman. I headed over to confront the eternal problem of

how to physically relate in a normal way to another human being. Murata was wearing a cool vintage-looking beige-and-green dress, with forest-green tights. In novelistic terms, the writer she most reminded me of was Tolstoy—the Tolstoy whose novella “Kholstomer” is narrated by a horse who struggles to understand the idea of private property. If I were meeting Tolstoy for the first time, I reminded myself, I wouldn’t hug him or compliment his outfit.

I had been studying Japanese for a few months, yet I couldn’t seem to say anything except “The apple is on the table.” Murata’s English was somewhat more advanced, but our conversation quickly stalled at the level of how we were both, basically, doing fine. A Georgia O’Keeffe exhibit—“To See Takes Time”—was too crowded to enter, and we wound up touring the permanent collection. I followed Murata at a distance, pausing, when she did, in front of a sculpture. It looked like a track-and-field hurdle, with two metal legs and a horizontal wooden bar; impaled on the wooden bar was a large rock.

“I love it,” Murata said, her face shining.

The wall text identified it as a 1962 work by the Japanese American sculptor Isamu Noguchi: “Stone of Spiritual Understanding.”

“It’s Isamu Noguchi!” I announced.

“Yes,” said Murata, who apparently hadn’t yet learned how to say “duh” in English.

Noguchi’s sculpture, I later found out, was inspired by the eighteenth-century Chinese novel “Dream of the Red Chamber.” In his recollection of the book, a sentient stone overhears two philosophers “discussing this new thing that happened to be called earth,” and decides to pay it a visit—a premise reminiscent of Murata’s novel “Earthlings.”

In May, 2024, I reconnected with Murata in Turin, at Italy’s largest book fair, where she was presenting “Parti e Omicidi”—the Italian translation of her 2014 novella, “Satsujin Shussan.” (Takemori, who hopes to translate it into English someday, suggested the possible title “Breeders and Killers.”)

The novella is set in an alternative reality where artificial insemination has replaced sex as the default means for procreation. To offset the population drop caused by “the absence of unwanted pregnancies,” the government institutes a “breed to kill” system: a person who bears ten children is entitled to kill one person. Thanks to artificial wombs, anyone can bear a child, and homicide is now viewed as “wrong” only insofar as it decreases the population. The narrator, Ikuko, starts out as a “breed to kill” skeptic. By the final pages, she is enthusiastically stabbing a work acquaintance to death.

After I spent twenty minutes wandering through the giant former Fiat factory—once Europe’s largest car-manufacturing plant—where the Turin book fair takes place, I located Murata’s sold-out event. Crowds of young people stood outside, clutching worn copies of “La Ragazza del Convenience Store.”

Midway through the event, the writer and journalist Irene Graziosi, who was interviewing Murata, made the kind of striking literary observation that sounds obvious the minute it’s spoken: Murata’s characters are never angry, not even when they suffer or feel despair. And yet the anger was there somewhere, hovering. “Sometimes,” Graziosi said, “I feel as if I have to project it myself.”

Murata, sitting very upright, began her answer, in which I occasionally made out the assonant phrase *kodomo no koro* (“as a child”).

As I waited for the translation, I thought of Murata’s story “Transmogrification,” in which young people feel confused by “angry scenes in old TV dramas and films”: “Why do they have to open their eyes and mouth wide and shout?” I thought, too, of Tolstoy’s horse Kholstomer, when he learns, *kodomo no koro*, that he is somebody’s property: “I was quite in the dark as to what they meant by the words ‘his colt,’ from which I perceived that people considered that there was some connection between me and the head groom.” The Russian formalist critic Viktor Shklovsky used that passage to illustrate “defamiliarization”—a “formal technique” for making the reader see the world as if for the first time—which he considered to be the essence of literary creation. It occurred to me now that defamiliarization, a pivotal technique in Murata’s work, presupposes a certain suspension of anger.

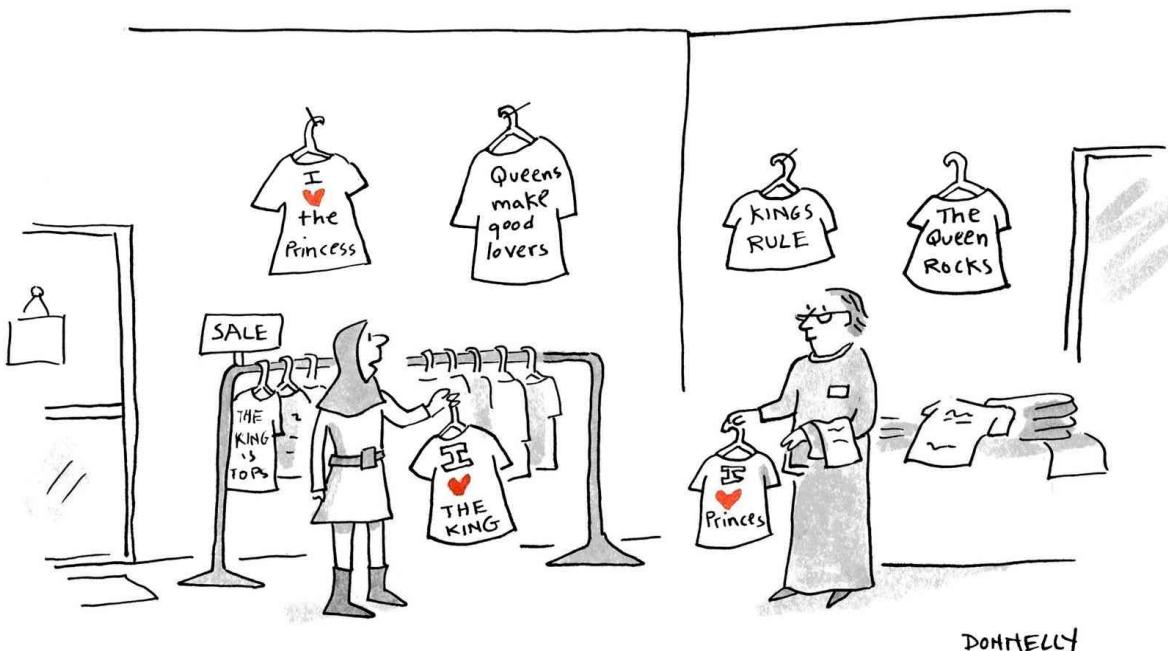
When the interpreter translated Murata’s answer into Italian, I found that it was less about formal techniques than about Murata’s own cognitive reality. As a child, she said, she had had a “bad experience,” leading to a problem with her throat that made her temporarily unable to express herself, or to communicate anger. Later, she found that she had lost access to anger altogether. Probably, Murata concluded, her novels worked unconsciously to transpose that missing anger into a new form; she thanked Graziosi for putting this into words. The audience broke into applause. Someone sitting near me shouted, “Brava!”

At dinner that evening, Murata seemed to know more English than she had a year earlier. She said that she was nearing the end of a new novel, “World 99,” her first serialized work, which had been coming out in installments in the literary magazine *Subaru* since 2020.

“Wow, how long is it?” I asked.

“Very, very long,” Murata replied.

I was curious about what books had been important to her when she was a student. Murata named Albert Camus’s “The Stranger” and Osamu Dazai’s “No Longer Human”: two nineteen-forties novels about alienated outsiders, guys who can’t manage “normal life” or show appropriate filial emotions. Both ultimately cause a human death. One ends up in prison, the other in a madhouse.



"Do you have anything that isn't pro-monarchy?"  
Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

DONNELLY

Already, in childhood, Dazai's narrator worries about being detected as a fake and expelled from humanity—just like Murata's Keiko. When she read the novel in college, Murata told me, *It's me.*

On April 15th, Grove will publish Takemori's translation of Murata's 2015 novel, "Vanishing World." Murata wrote it immediately after "Breeders and Killers," returning to, and expanding on, a world where artificial insemination is the norm.

The narrator, Amane, is raised by her mother in Chiba Prefecture, in a small house decorated completely in red—the color of love. Over and over, the mother repeats how much she and Amane's father loved each other before conceiving a baby together, and how someday the same thing will happen to Amane. Once she starts school, Amane learns that her mother's views are now considered archaic. ("You were born after your mom and dad did it, weren't you? That's incest," a classmate says, pretend-puking.) In current society, people still fall in love, sometimes with each other and sometimes with fictional characters from manga or anime, but sex is increasingly rare.

Nauseated by her mother's prophecy, Amane vows to keep her desires in line with norms. As a small child, she falls in love with a seven-thousand-year-old boy warrior from an animated TV show. By junior high, she is

“dating” other animated characters, and the occasional human boy. She carries the fictional boyfriends around with her, in the form of pictures and merchandise, in a drawstring purse. Her perfectly conventional life plan is to enter someday into a sexless marriage, have a child through artificial insemination, and live with her “family,” while continuing to date real or fictional boyfriends.

But by the time Amane is a married woman in her thirties, keeping her fictional lovers in a Prada pouch and living (chastely) with her husband in Tokyo, she realizes that marriage has become unfashionable—even potentially illegal. In Chiba Prefecture, now known as Experiment City, the family has been replaced by the “Paradise-Eden System.” Children, conceived through mass inseminations every December 24th, are collectively raised in a Center, and are known as *Kodomo-chan*. (*Kodomo* means “child,” and *chan* is a diminutive form of address.)

On an impulse, Amane and her husband move to Experiment City. First, following the city’s rules, they must dissolve their marriage. Once there, they report to a park to perform their civic duty, showering affection on hordes of nearly identical *Kodomo-chans* who shout “Mother!” at every adult, and run up to be cuddled. Amane, disconcerted, jokes that it’s “like a cat cafe.” Her ex laughs happily: yes, it’s truly a “large-scale baby cafe”!

In a climactic scene, Amane watches her ex-husband become the first man to successfully give birth (by C-section) to a human baby: a milestone in the technology of artificial uteruses. The doctor holds up the bloody infant. Amane’s ex—the Mother—lies there, beatific and exhausted, his penis dangling alongside his cut-open external womb, like a mashup of the Pietà and the Virgin Birth. Amane feels the new tableau searing her retinas, rewiring emotions she had believed to be “instinctive and physiological,” such as the unique powerful love she had imagined feeling for “her own” biological child. Gazing at rows of newborn *Kodomo-chans*, she understands that they are all truly her children, and feels overwhelmed by the “obligatory rightness of the spectacle of interconnected life.”

I’m not going to lie; I found a lot of this hard to read. The scene when Amane manages to love the *Kodomo-chans* felt uncomfortably resonant with the last line of “1984” (“He loved Big Brother”). For all Murata’s

engagement with doublethink, groupthink, and memory holes, though, I resisted the comparison to “1984”: a novel about, among other things, a man who subverts totalitarianism by having sex with a younger woman, waking up “with the word ‘Shakespeare’ on his lips.” Instinctively, I grouped Murata with more radical and less nostalgic thinkers: people like Michel Foucault, who showed that so many supposedly biological or universal phenomena—madness, sex, criminality, medicine—are socially constructed. Or like Shulamith Firestone, whose “Dialectic of Sex” explains human history in terms of a biological class inequality between women, who do reproductive labor, and men, who don’t. Firestone, who saw sexism as the source of all oppression, maintained that a new era of human freedom would begin when technologies of “artificial reproduction” enabled children to “be born to both sexes equally.” Children, perhaps raised in non-family groups of like-minded individuals, would be loved not as we love property (because it’s ours, because we earned it) but because of who they are. What, I wondered, would Shulamith Firestone have made of Experiment City, where so many of her proposed reforms had been implemented, with such grotesque results?

Murata’s newest novel, “World 99,” revisits the Firestone premise: this time, cute, alpaca-like house pets are co-opted to give birth to human babies. In a 2022 interview for *Wired*, Murata said that her plan had been to relieve women of the burden of pregnancy. “But it just got more and more hellish,” she said. “I didn’t solve anything.”

On a rainy morning this past January, Murata and I met near Tokyo’s Suidobashi Station and took a series of trains to Tsukuba, a university town in Ibaraki Prefecture, to visit Ginny Tapley Takemori. Murata was carrying a number of heavy-looking tote bags, one of which turned out to contain the thousand-page galley proofs of “World 99.” Her revisions were due in two days. (She works only outside her apartment, in cafés, in restaurants, or at her publishers’, and likes to carry her drafts and writing materials with her.) With us was Naoko Selland—an associate professor at Tokyo Woman’s Christian University, a legal interpreter, and a longtime Murata fan.

Takemori lives in a Japanese-style house with elaborate tile roofing, built using components from a decommissioned temple. For lunch, she had made a salad with edible flowers and a chicken stew with a corn crust. Takemori,

who grew up in East Africa and England, and has lived in Japan for the past twenty years, said that she had learned to cook from her mother. Murata's own memories of being taught to cook were tinged with anxiety. She remembered her father sometimes sitting down at the dinner table and not eating. Why? "There aren't any chopsticks." Her mother would bring the chopsticks. These days, Murata rarely cooks. She keeps a vase on top of her rice cooker.

In 2011, Takemori had been given a list of stories and asked to pick one to translate, for a bilingual anthology to benefit the victims of that year's earthquake-tsunami-nuclear disaster. She chose Murata's "Lover on the Breeze," in which a little girl develops first romantic and then sexual feelings for the curtain on her bedroom window. (It's an unhappy love triangle, narrated by the curtain.) Takemori later translated another story, "A Clean Marriage," for *Granta*, which brought her Facebook messages from readers wanting more. Next came the commission to translate "Convenience Store Woman."

Takemori said that Murata, in "World 99," had "dived far deeper than ever before" into the issues that recur in her work. "Themes become like old friends," she observed. The setting is based on Murata's home town: the Chiba New Town development, one of several planned communities founded near Tokyo during the postwar boom.

Murata was born in 1979, and her childhood was largely defined by gender roles. She has early memories of relatives commenting on her "easy birth hips." Still, she didn't envy her older brother, who, to her, seemed under pressure to get into an élite university. (Her brother, age fifty-one, works in finance. Like Murata, he doesn't have children.)

In elementary school, Murata was introverted and quick to tears, sometimes hiding in the bathroom and crying until she threw up. Writing became her obsession around age ten. She called it a church, and still talks about the process as a holy world governed by a light-filled entity she calls "the god of novels." When Murata was about twelve, her mother got her a word processor—a Fujitsu *OASYS*—which Murata believed was connected directly to the god of novels, who decided which novels got published. She

would look for the novels she wrote in bookstores. “I thought they might have been chosen,” she said.

Murata’s father was a district-court judge. “The law was his Holy Bible,” Murata said. “It didn’t matter whether the person was right or not—it mattered what the law said.” Murata also became fixated on the idea of “justice.”

When I asked about her early influences, Murata rattled off a long list of titles and creators of children’s novels, manga, and anime, including a show from the early nineties, “Nadia: The Secret of Blue Water” (from a concept by Hayao Miyazaki, inspired by Jules Verne), featuring a mysterious dark-skinned heroine. After watching an episode in which Nadia experiences racial discrimination, Murata wrote a story about “a protagonist suffering from racism.” “The idea of racism had been installed in me,” she said. Later stories involved discrimination against a disabled character and against a drug addict. In junior high school, Murata felt “disgusted” by these works, and threw them out. She was constantly doubting herself. In the end, she said, “I doubted justice itself.”

Murata described junior high, when she was bullied, as particularly difficult. She had gotten through it by writing up to ten hours a day. “As a child, many people told me to die. Maybe I was dead,” Murata said matter-of-factly. “I survived through the power of the novel.”

The following day, I headed to the Tokyo offices of Bungeishunju, the publisher of “Convenience Store Woman.” On the same floor as the conference room where Murata and I were meeting, an employee in the rights department, Saho Baldwin, showed me a room with a bed, a desk, and a shower, where writers can isolate themselves from distractions, in a process known as *kanzume*, or “canning.” Murata emerged from an identical room next door, pulling a wheeled suitcase; she had the room reserved till midnight, to work on “World 99.”

High school, she told me, had been a pleasant surprise. She had new classmates, and made friends. On the writing front, she discovered the concept of *buntai*—literary style—and realized that *that* was what she wanted. She mentioned two writers: Amy Yamada, whose “Classroom for

the Abandoned Dead” (1988) was one of the first Japanese novels about school bullying, and Yukio Mishima. It had been painful for Murata to accept that you couldn’t jump into somebody else’s style. You had to find your own, starting from zero.

Hiroshi Arai, the head of foreign rights at Bungeishunju, stopped by to give me a crash course on the Japanese literary marketplace. Arai described Murata’s career trajectory as “very typical” for a writer of “pure literature” (as opposed to “entertainment literature” and manga, which brings in the vast majority of publishing revenue).

Murata made her début in 2003, when the magazine *Gunzo*—one of five big literary magazines, each of which is associated with a book publisher—recognized her novella “Breastfeeding,” about a student who breastfeeds her private tutor. It was published first in the magazine, and then expanded into a book under the corresponding imprint, a process that was repeated for new works with other publishers. Because writers’ rates tend to be uniform in Japan, most literary writers don’t use agents or form exclusive relationships with publishers. Some consider it a sign of prestige to work, as Murata has, with multiple publishers.

It’s hard to make a living from “pure literature” alone. Murata, who has a horror of being told how or what to write, preferred to keep working part time in a convenience store, as she had been since her student days at Tokyo’s Tamagawa University. (She obtained a degree in art curation.) When the store closed, she was transferred to a new location; this happened several times. The work gave her a sense of connectedness, and a routine. She typically got up at 2 a.m. and wrote until six, before working her shift from eight to one. Then she would write in a cafeteria until it was time to go home.

After she won the Akutagawa Prize, in 2016—one of the judges was her high-school hero Amy Yamada—Murata was occasionally recognized by customers in the convenience store. One man began following her around and writing her letters. Sensing her co-workers’ discomfort, Murata quit. Some time later, the manager called: “Murata-san, you can come back! He found a new target.” Her stalker had become obsessed with a woman who worked nearby. Unreassured by the news, Murata didn’t return.

“I loved it,” she told me, in English, about the convenience store. I commented that it was sad that writing can take you away from things you love. “It’s sad!” she exclaimed in English, in exactly the same tone as I had said it.

Murata’s first convenience store was in Arakicho, not far from her parents’ current apartment, where she lived well into her thirties. She now lives in a studio apartment nearby. When I asked why she hadn’t moved out sooner, she cited financial concerns. “I took advantage of their existence,” she said, of her parents.

“They were probably happy,” I blurted, apparently unable to tolerate this level of unsentimentality. Murata looked pensive. “I don’t think that my mother was that happy,” she said. She thought that her father, a traditional person, might have expected her to take care of him when he was old. “So he seemed to be happy,” she said.

Later, I met with Makoto Kawamura, a former MTV producer whose first feature film, an adaptation of “Vanishing World,” will première in the fall. Kawamura told me that the novel had shaken him to the core. He saw it less as science fiction than as “a mirror,” reflecting social realities like “a declining birthrate, disinterest in dating and marriage, sexlessness, and romantic relationships with anime characters,” all trending subjects in Japan. While writing the screenplay, he had thought about “1984,” and also “Brave New World,” “Never Let Me Go,” and “The Handmaid’s Tale.” Yet fundamentally he thinks that Murata’s novel “isn’t a dystopia,” because Amane never resists the government, or believes in a transcendent or ahistorical “right.” She wants to love whatever order she lives in.

For Kawamura, Murata was offering a corrective to “a worldwide trend, especially on social media,” of believing totally in the self-evident rightness of current norms. I recalled blood-soaked Ikuko, in the last scene of “Breeders and Killers”: “Even if in a hundred years all this were to be considered pure madness, right now, in this precise moment, I want to be part of today’s normal world.”

I also found myself thinking of Viktor Shklovsky, the critic who wrote about defamiliarization. In his book “Third Factory,” published in 1926, after

Lenin had died and Stalin had taken over, a main metaphor is that the writer is like a flaxseed being “processed” in a factory, and the factory is time. “The time cannot be mistaken; the time cannot have wronged me,” Shklovsky wrote.

Murata, too, has spoken of being “placed in the world, especially in Japanese society, as a tool or as material for writing novels.” Like Shklovsky—and unlike the heroes of most English-language dystopian novels—she doesn’t experience her placement as a nightmare to be escaped. If “the world is experimenting by putting me in the Japanese context,” as she once phrased it, she herself wants to learn the results. At the end of Murata’s novel “Earthlings,” the central characters vow to live as though they “just crash-landed on this planet,” and Murata herself shares something of their resolve: to “see everything with the alien eye.”

Although Japan has a venerable history of prose narratives—“The Tale of Genji” was written in the eleventh century—the tradition of the modern Japanese novel began during the Meiji Restoration, in the late nineteenth century, when Western novels began to be translated into Japanese. Because Japanese grammar includes numerous indicators of the relationship between the addresser and the addressee, omniscient narration posed a particular problem for translators. Some critics have linked these features of Japanese grammar to the Meiji-era development of the “I-novel,” in which the protagonist shares autobiographical circumstances, and sometimes a name, with the author. (Dazai’s “No Longer Human,” a touchstone for Murata, is written in this tradition.) When I brought up the I-novel to Murata and her editors, they were adamant that she didn’t write them. Murata told me that, notwithstanding her great admiration for people who could “sublimate their experience to fiction,” she herself had to start from “a clean, sanitized aquarium.”

More than once, Murata drew me a diagram illustrating her writing process. It showed a standing figure (“novelist Murata”) at a table in a lab; lying on the table was an identical figure, cut into pieces (“human Murata”). Various boxes contained body parts and organs. At the top of the page was a glass cube: the clean, sanitized aquarium. The way it worked, Murata explained, was that novelist Murata dissected human Murata. Aspects of human Murata “crystallized” in the aquarium, where new characters came to life and

interacted. The characters, the story itself, were living. “They wriggle, they move, they surprise me,” Murata said.

Murata seemed ready to concede that anything I saw in her books was probably there, because the basement of the lab was connected to “a big unconscious world.” But there was, it seemed, little use in asking her about it. At one point, she tapped the figure of novelist Murata with her pen, as if to say, “You’re talking to *that* person.” I had the terrifying thought that maybe the one who knew the answer was the other Murata—the one lying in pieces on the table.

On another day, we went to a place where Murata likes to write: Kanda Brazil, an old-school Japanese coffeehouse with a smoking section and a long menu of single-origin coffees. While we waited for a friend of hers, the writer Kanako Nishi, to join us, I decided to ask again about a subject I had been puzzling over for some days: Murata’s relationship with aliens.

In interviews, Murata had described an incident, when she was about eight, in which an alien came through her bedroom window and took her to a distant planet, where she felt welcome and safe. Since that time, she had accumulated about thirty more alien friends and often visited them.

In an earlier conversation, Murata had told me that she was O.K. talking on a general level about the aliens, but she preferred not to get into specifics. Once, the sight of some online comments about her relationship with “fictional characters” had nearly caused her to pass out. The framing of these beings as “imaginary,” she explained, was “life-threatening,” because they had helped her, since childhood, to “coexist with suicidal thoughts.”

Murata had said that, shortly after her 2003 literary début, an older editor assigned to work with her had advised her to “stop writing novels.” This had precipitated a frightening period of paralysis and dissociation, during which Murata fluctuated between suicidal and homicidal thoughts. She eventually recovered, with psychiatric treatment. The psychiatrist had advised her not to specifically describe the aliens. Murata singled only one out for mention, referring to him as “A,” for whom she felt love and sexual desire.

From an early age, she has had a tendency to fall in love with nonhuman entities. “Fictosexuality is very strong in me,” she said. I had never heard the term, but I immediately thought of Amane, in “Vanishing World,” who by adulthood has forty animated lovers. At the time Murata wrote “Vanishing World,” she hadn’t heard the word “fictosexuality,” either.

In the coffee shop, I asked her about a 2022 *New York Times* article I had encountered on fictosexuality in Japan. It described a woman in her twenties who had married, in an unofficial ceremony, Kunihiro Horikawa, a fictional character from the Touken Ranbu game franchise; he often joined her and her parents for dinner, in the form of a tiny acrylic figure next to her rice bowl. At the mention of the acrylic figure, Murata became enthusiastic and started rummaging in one of her bags. “I usually have one with me,” she said. One of her favorites was of Figaro, a youthful-looking two-thousand-year-old doctor from a mobile game called Promise of Wizard. For some time, she had done her best to date men, but had given up with relief in her mid-twenties, when she realized that it was O.K. to just be with “A” or with Figaro.

In “Vanishing World,” Amane draws a contrast between “love with real people,” which tends to feel like “following a manual,” and “love with nonreal people,” which always starts “with figuring something out.” The fictosexual love scenes express a pure sensual pleasure that is rare in Murata’s work, occasionally reminding me of Céline Sciamma’s film “Portrait of a Lady on Fire,” in which the two female leads invent new modes of erotic union. (“Do all lovers feel they’re inventing something?” one of them murmurs, before rubbing a hallucinogen into the other’s armpit.) Murata, like Sciamma, is remaking the traditional love story, transcending the constraints dictated not by gender but by embodied corporeality itself.

“For me, the sex drive is not always about sex,” Murata said. It was visual and emotional, she said, not necessarily physical. I brought up the philosopher Herbert Marcuse and his notion that, in a truly non-repressive society, “genital supremacy” would fall away, and the whole body would become re-sexualized as an instrument of pleasure.

“It took me an extremely long time to know it, but I feel it is right for me not to have a special drive from the vagina,” Murata said.

We were joined by Nishi, who had written a short story called “VIO,” translated by Allison Markin Powell, that I was eager to discuss. In it, a bar worker, Lina, redeems a coupon for laser hair removal in her “VIO area” (a real term in Japan): “The V is for the front . . . the I is for down there, and the O is, well, you know.” The beautician puts white stickers on Lina’s moles, explaining that the laser will burn only dark things. Imagining this melanin-targeting technology being turned into a weapon, Lina begins obsessively researching historical massacres. Hitherto, when she typed “ge,” her phone suggested “gel nails”; now it suggests “genocide.”

I had always experienced Murata’s work as being, on some level, about genocide: the way “society” and its microcosms close ranks against foreign elements; the blind, insectlike concern with reproduction and one’s own genetic material.

“My life would be way easier if I had never met her,” Nishi remarked. Murata’s books made her question all her beliefs, even her love for her child: what exactly made it so strong?



*“Now read me the names of the unpopular bands at the bottom.”*  
Cartoon by Jonathan Rosen

Murata declined to draw any connections between her novels and real-world events.

“So you don’t experience your own novels as political at all?” I asked. The moment the words left my mouth, I understood that she was going to bring up the aquarium.

“I do not want any human thoughts to soil my aquarium.”

“I do not want . . . any human thoughts . . . to soil my aquarium,” I repeated, jotting the line in my notebook.

On our last day together, Murata took me to visit Chiba New Town: the place where she, and implicitly many of her protagonists, grew up. (On the train, I found myself thinking of Mirai New Town, the setting of “Earthlings.” The protagonist, Natsuki, likens the town to a human-breeding factory—each home is a nest containing a “breeding pair” and their young—and realizes that someday she, too, will become a reproductive tool of society. Later, during a harrowing scene of sexual abuse by a teacher, Natsuki comprehends that she is already one of society’s tools.) In Murata’s more speculative novels, Chiba Prefecture tends to be the site of institutions of reproductive control, like the hospital in which Amane’s ex-husband gives birth.

Murata and I—accompanied by Selland, the interpreter, and Baldwin, from Bungeishunju—emerged from the Chiba New Town train station onto a large, strikingly charmless plaza, surrounded by apartment buildings and shopping centers. There, we met Takemori and her husband, who had driven up from Tsukuba. Everyone wanted to see Experiment City.

Our first stop was lunch at Saizeriya, an Italian-style chain restaurant. It was in a giant shopping mall, on a floor devoted to children, near a department store (“Kids Republic”), a hair salon, and a display of giant, dead-looking teddy bears. Murata placed her go-to order: sautéed spinach with bacon, and focaccia. The best thing I can say about my own choice, the penne arrabbiata, is that a generous portion cost approximately two dollars and thirty cents.

Afterward, we walked twenty minutes to Murata's former middle school: a long, squat two-story building. I felt a leaden sickness in the pit of my stomach, just as if I were standing outside my own middle school.

"I hated middle school," Murata said. "There was a girl who was bullying all the students, one by one. I was also a target." Led by the bully, the whole class would ignore the target, except to say things like "You deserve to die." At home, Murata says, she didn't find the "affection which would have allowed me to recover." Somehow, she got hold of a manual with instructions for suicide. The manual recommended death by freezing. Murata made a countdown calendar to a date when she could carry out the plan, deep in the mountains.

By that time, she had already lost the capacity for anger. (It had been "damaged," she said, as a result of dynamics within her family.) She viewed the bully in a spirit of scientific inquiry, wanting to understand her behavior. She followed her home, and "researched her relationship with her mother." She didn't find a reason. "I didn't see her being punched by her father or harassed by her parents."

Murata now blamed herself for having looked for a story about a "sad perpetrator." "I had a mind-set like the mass media," she said. "I find that terrifying." I wasn't sure what she meant. What was wrong with wanting a reason—or with expecting that reason to be sad? "I was trying to invent her life, for the sake of my mind. That's brutal violence."

We kept walking. I felt rattled. What had Murata done that counted as brutal violence? She had created, and tried to verify, a sad story about a lonely or mistreated child. What if I was doing the same thing here, researching her childhood? To what extent was she protesting not just the story she had made up about the bully but the story she surely knew that people made up about her?

We came to a residential area with compact trees and small prefabricated houses. One of them had a nameplate that said "Murata." Murata unlocked the door.

Built in accordance with Japanese postwar aspirations, the house had two floors and three bedrooms, yet felt cramped and overstuffed. Nobody had lived there for a long time. Numerous aspects of the décor were pointed out to me as “very Showa.” (The Showa period lasted from 1926 to 1989; I often heard it used to refer to the postwar period, in particular.) Glass boxes contained blank-faced dolls in kimonos. In the kitchen, an appliance resembling a tombstone turned out to be a Showa toaster. A lone toothbrush stood in a cup near the sink. Murata said it was possible that her parents still sometimes stayed here.

Upstairs, Murata’s brother’s old room was full of sound equipment. On a shelf, Takemori noticed most of Murata’s published works. Murata wasn’t sure how they had gotten there. Her début, she explained, had involved “a sad mother-daughter relationship,” and she had worried that reading it would kill her mother. “So I told my mother, first, it has nothing to do with you. And, second, it’s better for you not to read it.” Since that time, her mother has not read any of her books.

We came to her parents’ bedroom. Murata said, in English, “When I was a child, I sleep between my parents, *kawanoji*.” *Kawa*, the character for “river,” is drawn as three vertical lines, and is used to describe two parents and a child sharing a bed. It was a traditional tatami room. Every morning, they folded up the bedding and stored it in the closet. Murata showed us the closet. Standing in the empty bedroom, I realized that what had initially seemed like a key question about Murata’s life—where exactly her parents fit into the picture of her childhood unhappiness—had come to feel less important. The unhappiness spoke for itself. (I did later ask a close friend of Murata’s, the novelist Mariko Asabuki, to tell me about Murata’s parents. “I have heard both funny and horrific stories,” she replied. “I think there are things that Sayaka would like to write when her family passes away.”) In the meantime, she added, “there is nothing that I, as her friend, can say.”)

In Murata’s bedroom, we saw the curtain that had inspired “Lover on the Breeze.” Against the wall stood the narrow desk where Murata had written her early novels.

“This is a very Art Nouveau, middle-class, Showa-style lamp,” Selland remarked, about a flower-shaped glass fixture that hung over the room’s

twin beds.

“It was probably my mother’s dream to have a cute girl who lives under this light,” Murata said.

“What does it feel like, being here?” I asked.

She seemed to consider this. “It hasn’t changed,” she said finally.

Before heading back to Tokyo, we returned to the mall near the train station. Over tea, I asked Murata about her acceptance speech at the Akutagawa Prize ceremony. According to Kanako Nishi, Murata had said something like “Even if my work betrays humanity in the future, I will write it.” Murata explained: “Everyone seemed to be happy and everyone was smiling,” and she had wanted them to know that someday she would betray them. She had also spoken those words for herself, she added—so that she could “write cheerfully,” in clear view of the consequences: “I may be excluded from human beings.”

The sentence gave me a jolt. Was that the fear lurking at the back of every writer’s mind? How calmly she put it into words. I felt that she wasn’t bluffing.

Readers sometimes tell Murata that her novels changed their lives, or saved them. Murata feels moved, but she tries to push those feelings away. She has to write “for the sake of the novel,” she said, not “for the sake of human beings.” I asked what she makes of her recent popularity. It was one of the few times I saw her look truly flummoxed. “People are out of their minds,” she said. ♦

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Onward and Upward with Technology.

# Bluesky's Quest to Build Nontoxic Social Media

X and Facebook are governed by the policies of mercurial billionaires. Bluesky's C.E.O., Jay Gruber, says that she wants to give power back to the user.

By [Kyle Chayka](#)



*Jay Gruber, the C.E.O. of Bluesky, wants to liberate social media from the "self-styled tech monarch." Photographs by Balazs Gardi for The New Yorker*

Jay Gruber, the C.E.O. of the upstart social-media platform Bluesky, arrived in San Francisco the Sunday after Donald Trump's reëlection and holed up in a hotel room. She'd spent the previous days road-tripping down the West Coast from her home, in Seattle, stopping at beaches and redwood groves along the way, and in San Francisco she'd hoped to remain half in vacation mode. But now Bluesky was seeing a surge in new users, and it was looking as if she'd need all hands on deck. "There was momentum," Gruber recalled recently, adding, "It was just picking up day by day."

Since launching, in early 2023, Bluesky had positioned itself as a refuge from X, the site formerly known as Twitter. For nearly two decades, Twitter had been considered the internet's town square, chaotic and often rancorous

but informative and diversely discursive. Then, after the tech billionaire turned Trump backer Elon Musk acquired the platform, in October of 2022, it devolved into a circus of right-wing conspiracy theories. Liberals began fleeing, and Bluesky in turn accumulated more than ten million users by the fall of 2024, making it one of the fastest-growing social networks. But the post-election influx proved to be of a different order, turning Bluesky into what one tech blogger compared to a Macy's at the start of Black Friday sales.

Graber put in sixteen-hour days overseeing Bluesky's twenty-person staff, taking calls with prospective investors, and recruiting new hires, leaving her hotel room only to pick up DoorDash deliveries in the lobby. In Seattle, Bluesky's chief technology officer set up an automatic "failover" so that if one of the company's servers crashed another would take its place. A team of engineers took shifts to insure that someone was on duty at all hours, battling to keep the overwhelmed servers online—"like firefighting," as one put it. On November 14th—two days after Trump announced the creation of the Musk-led Department of Government Efficiency—Bluesky staffers stayed late, in a virtual "situation room," to watch the day's sign-up ticker hit a million. In a matter of two weeks, Bluesky's population doubled. Today, it has a user base of more than thirty million.

Disaffected X users gravitate to Bluesky as a throwback to a gentler, saner social-media experience. Being on the site feels like a mixture of Twitter in 2012, when it was a haven for internet nerdery, and in 2017, when it was a seedbed of anti-Trump #Resistance. The Bluesky interface reassuringly resembles Twitter's, down to the winged blue logo (a butterfly instead of a bird) and the character limit on posts (three hundred rather than early Twitter's hundred and forty). The platform is theoretically open to all, but some *MAGA* trolls have reported that their accounts have been blocked. Discourse is solidly left-leaning, and disagreements tend to be internecine. The most followed account belongs to Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez. As if to consummate Bluesky as a successor to the liberal Twitter of yore, Barack Obama recently joined and, in his first post, celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of the Affordable Care Act.

The platform is not yet populated enough to qualify as the internet's new town square. Even after the Musk-induced exodus, X reports that it has more

than five hundred million active users per month; Threads, Meta's self-fashioned Twitter alternative, has around three hundred million. Yet Bluesky wields outsized influence in the social-media landscape because of the innovative infrastructure on which it's built. All the giant social networks are what's known as centralized platforms: most aspects of user experience, from content moderation to algorithmic recommendations, are dictated by the corporation that runs the platform. Bluesky, by contrast, originated as a radical side project within Twitter under its co-founder and former C.E.O., Jack Dorsey, to create a decentralized social-media model. Where X or Facebook runs primarily on proprietary technology, Bluesky is powered by an open-source protocol, a sort of instruction manual and set of data standards that allows anyone to build compatible software on top of it. As a result, users can customize the algorithms and content-moderation rules that govern what appears in their feeds—and, if they don't like Bluesky, they can take their followers and their archive of posts and build or join another site running on the same protocol. The power that typically lies with corporations is thus redistributed to the users themselves.

With its post-election boom, Bluesky has become by far the largest decentralized social network and Gruber (who, citing privacy concerns, gives her age as "around thirty-three") the most high-profile female head of a social network in an industry known for eccentrically megalomaniacal men. With Trump and Musk in power, Silicon Valley leaders have taken a rightward turn. At Meta, Mark Zuckerberg has cut back on fact checking, abandoned D.E.I. efforts, and said that the corporate world needs more "masculine energy." Amazon's Jeff Bezos, who owns the *Washington Post*, has ordered that the paper's opinion pages publish only pieces that support "personal liberties and free markets." Gruber, who defines her politics as "anti-authoritarian," sees Bluesky as a corrective to prevailing social media that subjects users to the whims of billionaires. "Elon, if he wanted to, could just delete the whole X time line—just do these totally arbitrary things," she said, adding, "I think this self-styled tech-monarch thing is worth questioning. Do we want to live in that world?"

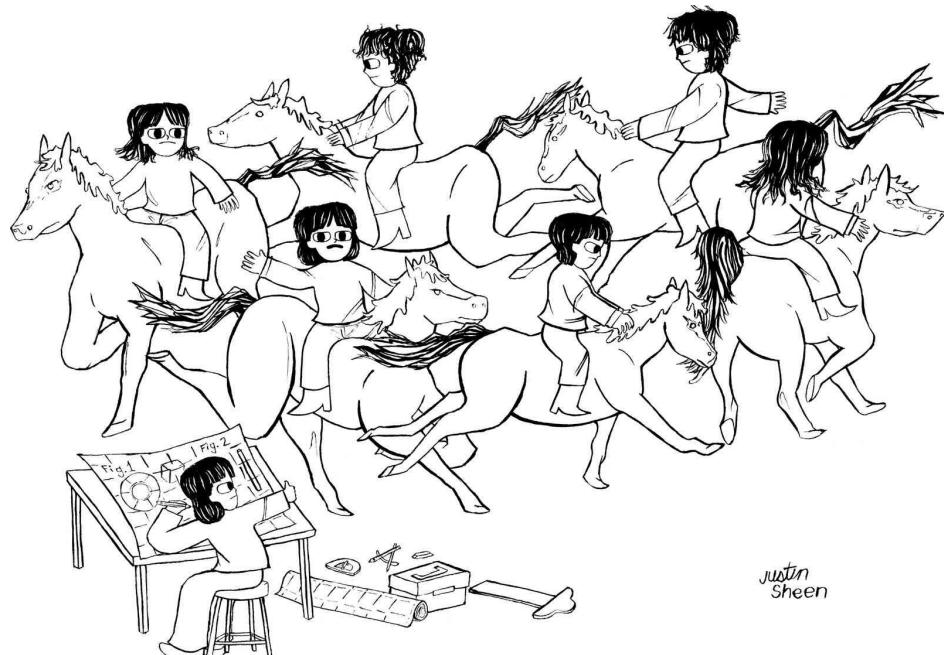
The Seattle area, home to Microsoft's and Amazon's headquarters, is perhaps the most significant American tech hub outside the Bay Area. You can't throw a Starbucks venti there without hitting a software engineer. But Gruber told me that she chose the city in part for its separation from Silicon

Valley, and for its “moody and majestic” landscape: “Some people said I moved here because I’m a moss maximalist, and they’re not wrong.”

Graber and several Seattle-based employees have desks in a co-working space with views of Puget Sound. One day in January, I met Graber there. Tall and willowy, with a halo of tight dark curls, she wore a hooded black coat from the Chinese brand JNBY which gave her high-cheekboned face a slightly witchy aspect. The workspace was bright and sparse, with motorized standing desks and scattered beanbag chairs. Graber’s station was in a pod of four cluttered with external monitors, Annie’s crackers, and spent coffee cups. Compared with most tech leaders, she has a low-key digital footprint. On her Bluesky account, one representative post features a photo of her arms cradling a hen, captioned “My favorite chicken.”

“Jay” is an adopted moniker. Bluesky was named before Graber became involved, but by coincidence her given name is Lantian—Mandarin for “blue sky.” Graber likes to say that her mother, an émigré from China, chose it to lend her daughter “boundless freedom.” Her mom, who worked as an acupuncturist, and her dad, a math teacher and a former lieutenant colonel, met at a Christian university in Oklahoma. They raised Graber, an only child, in a Baptist community in Tulsa. Growing up, Graber looked forward to Friday nights after church, when she was granted unfettered access to the family’s desktop computer. A formative internet experience was a game called Neopets, in which users raise digital creatures and connect with other players in a shared virtual village. As an adolescent, Graber kept a blog on Xanga, an early social platform, and taught herself rudimentary code so that she could customize her page with music and a zebra theme.

At the time, Graber identified less as a computer kid than as a bookworm, reading stories of scientific and mathematical discovery. “One thing that interested me was how a lot of inventions came through ordinary people trying things,” she said. “It wasn’t just the lone genius.” She read the children’s fantasy series “Redwall” and every “Robin Hood” book in the library; she grew to love such feminist sci-fi authors as Margaret Atwood and Ursula K. Le Guin, who, as Graber put it, excelled at reimagining “how society could look.” To this day, she remains an avowed fantasy devotee.



*"There must be an easier way to invent the merry-go-round."*  
Cartoon by Justin Sheen

In one corner of the Bluesky office sat a pile of padded training swords. Graber belongs to a club that re-creates medieval sword-fighting tactics, and the office had recently staged a tournament. She picked up a mock shortsword and extended it expertly in one hand. I grabbed another, plus a small plastic shield, and she led me in an impromptu battle. “A lot of men just rely on brute force to get through things,” she said. “When you learn that, you can still win, with better leverage and technique.” She raised her sword and mimed slashing it down toward my exposed neck.

After high school, Graber enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania, figuring that its combination of liberal-arts, engineering, and business programs would allow her to “maximize optionality.” She chose an interdisciplinary major called Science, Technology, and Society, and as part of her senior thesis designed an online time bank through which students could swap labor—taking photos for another person, say, in exchange for cooking lessons. Graber told me, “In some ways, it was like a social network.” When she graduated, she moved to an all-female coöperative in West Philadelphia and volunteered for local tech-policy projects, which led to a job as an organizer at Free Press, a media-advocacy nonprofit. But the policy world operated “at a high level of abstraction,” she said, and she found it unsatisfying: “Being able to make change directly has always been

really appealing to me.” On work trips to San Francisco, meeting with tech activists and hanging out in “hackerspaces,” she was drawn to the tech industry’s nimble immediacy.

In 2015, she enrolled in a coding boot camp in San Francisco, then landed a job at a startup that employed blockchain cryptography to track inventory for corporate clients. But she was restless there, too. According to Graber, her mother had hoped that she would become a doctor, and would tell her, contra the name Lantian, “You have too much freedom. You have to learn how to be more grounded.” In San Francisco, Graber started going by Jay. A blue jay, she reasoned, could navigate both sky and land.

A new crypto opportunity soon arose: a friend’s brother was running a bitcoin-mining operation in a defunct ammunition factory in rural Washington and needed help from someone with technical prowess and an appetite for grunt work. Graber moved to a house near the factory and, between shifts, spent hours studying code on her own. She described this to me as her “cocoon period”: “There were no distractions—no place to go, no parties, no friends.” Even in isolation, Graber displayed a future tech founder’s knack for self-invention. She wore earrings made out of salvaged memory sticks and dyed locks of her hair electric blue and purple. She began lifting weights and, for a brief time, tried an all-meat diet. “I’m pretty experimental,” she said. “I’ll try anything once.”

In mid-2016, Graber went to San Francisco to attend the first annual Decentralized Web Summit, hosted by the open-web organization Internet Archive. There she met Zooko Wilcox-O’Hearn, who was developing a cryptocurrency called Zcash. Wilcox-O’Hearn told me that Graber stood out for the contrast between her “youth and her seriousness,” and for her emotional intelligence. He hired her as a junior engineer, and she eventually rose to oversee developer operations. One early Zcash transaction became something of a legend within the blockchain community: in the memo field, the sender had encrypted a romantic message. Though people didn’t know it at the time, the note was for Graber, from a programmer paramour.

San Francisco was good for networking and dating, but Graber was spending all her money on rent. She founded her own startup, Happening, a kind of social network for event organizing, but it didn’t take off. “I was trying to

figure out how to get people to use a social app,” she said. “But starting from zero was really hard.” Then, in December, 2019, she saw a tweet thread from Jack Dorsey about a decentralized social-media project he was launching—Bluesky. Gruber told me that she felt a degree of so-called nominative determinism, pulled toward the project because it shared her name. “If fate doesn’t exist, then we must create it,” she said. “You can follow things that seem synchronous.”

On the internet, protocols are a bit like a city’s electrical grid—crucial to its functioning but invisible to most civilians. When you send an e-mail, you are making use of the Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP). When you visit any website, you are using Hypertext Transfer Protocol (hence the letters at the beginning of every address, HTTP). Because of SMTP, your e-mail account can send messages to any other e-mail account; you don’t have to be a Gmail user to e-mail a Gmail user. Daniel Holmgren, one of Bluesky’s head engineers, likened the company’s protocol—called the Authenticated Transfer, or AT, Protocol—to an “open data lake”: whatever is in the water is public property, and any boat on the lake can dredge it up. Conventional social media, by contrast, is siloed: a Facebook account cannot follow or message a TikTok account. In recent years, Google, Meta, Amazon, and Apple have all been targets of antitrust lawsuits. Protocols are anti-monopolistic by design, allowing stakeholders to build coöperative systems that run side by side. As the founder of Internet Archive, Brewster Kahle, put it in an influential talk in 2015, decentralized technology has the power to “lock the Web open.”

What piqued Dorsey’s interest, though, was a long 2019 essay by Mike Masnick, the founder of the blog Techdirt, titled “Protocols, Not Platforms.” The piece summed up a “crisis” that social-media companies faced with content moderation: caught between complaints that they allowed the spread of hatred and disinformation and complaints that they stifled free speech, they managed to please “almost no one.” The solution, Masnick argued, was to develop social-media protocols, which would allow individuals to design filtering tools based on “their own tolerances for different types of speech.” At the time, Dorsey was facing accusations that Twitter “shadow banned” content from conservatives; he’d been questioned by Congress about the company’s content-moderation practices. If Twitter were on a protocol and the work of content moderation were decentralized, then the company’s

leadership would no longer be the target of blame. (Dorsey did not respond to requests for comment.) Several decentralized social networks already existed, among them Mastodon, another Twitter-like platform, but none had broken into the mainstream. Masnick, who today is a Bluesky board member, told me that Dorsey contacted him out of the blue and said, “I’m convinced by your paper. I think we’re going to do it.”



*Graber likes to compare Bluesky’s decentralized structure to a hotel. Users are “going off and exploring custom rooms that people built, and maybe there’s another hotel out back.”*

Dorsey announced that Twitter would fund the development of a “decentralized standard for social media” which Twitter would eventually adopt. To kick-start the project, his team created a group chat on Matrix, another open protocol for digital communication, and invited select people who expressed interest in joining. Then Twitter’s C.T.O., Parag Agrawal, kept tabs on the group to see who would emerge as its leader. Graber joined and was struck by the rudderlessness of the conversation. New people would pop in, make a few unsupported suggestions, and then drop out. No broader vision seemed to be coalescing. She began collating papers that other group members mentioned and wrote an overview of existing open-source social-media protocols. She told me, “The way that you become a leader is you just add value—you just do things.”

In early 2021, Dorsey and Agrawal started conducting interviews with prospective Bluesky heads. Jeremie Miller, who created the pioneering

open-source instant-messaging system Jabber (and later became a Bluesky board member), sat in on the interviews as a consultant. He recalled that Graber easily became his pick. The Twitter heads had preconceptions of what Bluesky should be, he told me: “She didn’t give in to those and just propose the things that they wanted to hear.” Still, the search dragged on for months. In the meantime, Graber accepted a position at Twitter itself, working on blockchain technology. Then, in the summer of 2021, during onboarding, she got a call from Agrawal, offering her the role of Bluesky C.E.O. Put off by the protracted hiring process, Graber said that she’d accept only if Bluesky could exist separately from Twitter. Negotiating independence took another few months, but the decision proved pivotal. That November, after years of pressure from an activist investment firm, Dorsey resigned as C.E.O. and was replaced by Agrawal. Then, in January, Musk began buying up Twitter stock. By that April, he’d become the largest shareholder. Encouraged by a disaffected Dorsey, he offered to buy Twitter outright, for forty-four billion dollars.

Twitter had agreed to compensate Bluesky for constructing a protocol, with twenty-five million dollars over five years. Following a brief period during which Graber paid her first contractor out of her own pocket, Twitter executives made sure that an initial twelve million dollars went through. But Graber knew that, with Twitter’s leadership in limbo, she now had to think beyond Bluesky’s original goal of hosting Twitter. She put out feelers to other companies, including Reddit, about the idea of using Bluesky’s protocol. Then, in August, 2022, noting the dread on Twitter at the possibility of Musk’s takeover, she made another crucial decision: Bluesky would build not only a protocol but a social network to run on it. Doing so would offer a proof of concept, Graber said: “But it was also important in case we’re on our own and need to lean in on Plan B.”

That October, Bluesky débuted a landing page with a sign-up box. Within days, driven by word of mouth on extant social media, it had a wait list of more than a million e-mails. The next week, Musk officially became Twitter’s owner. When Masnick heard the news, he texted Graber some friendly advice: “Work faster.” The Bluesky team reached out to Twitter to ask whether Musk would continue to fund the protocol. Dorsey, who sat on Bluesky’s board, had urged Musk to make Twitter open source, so Graber held out hope that Musk would support the project. But they soon received

an e-mail from a “random dude with no Twitter e-mail address,” stating that their contract would be cancelled.

In late 2022, the writer Cory Doctorow coined the term “enshittification” to describe how social-media companies make changes that benefit them but gradually, inevitably degrade user experience. In recent years, Facebook and X have buried news by deprioritizing links to articles. Instagram and Pinterest have flooded feeds with surreally inane A.I.-generated content, making it harder to find posts of interest. Social-media users who voice dismay at such changes are accustomed to feeling as if they are petitioning uncaring gods. Bluesky staff members, by contrast, like to describe users of decentralized technology as “agentic,” a jargony way of saying that they get to choose what they see.

One January day, I met in San Francisco with Rose Wang, Bluesky’s C.O.O., and Emily Liu, its head of special projects, who spoke about the average social-media user in a way that evoked a factory-farmed chicken resisting going free range. With the advent of platforms such as Bluesky, users “don’t have to petition the mods or complain about the algorithm,” Liu said, using a shorthand for moderators. She added, “Hating the mods is an artifact of when mods had all the power.”

Wang, a longtime friend of Graber’s (and the co-founder of a line of snacks made with cricket flour), said, “Success is when users ask us to build tools so that they can go and create whatever experience they want.”

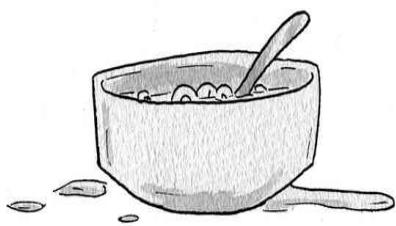
Decentralized social networks can take several forms. The most complex are peer-to-peer systems, in which each individual connects her computer directly to others using her own private server. Perhaps the most prominent example is Urbit, a blockchain-linked platform founded by the neo-reactionary programmer Curtis Yarvin, which has only around sixteen thousand accounts. A more accessible approach, employed by platforms such as Mastodon, which has some ten million registered users, is the federated model, in which some people build servers to host groups of accounts, forming a “federation” of user-hosts. (Last year, looking to break into the so-called fediverse, Meta took its first step into decentralized social media and began integrating some of Threads’ functions with the protocol that Mastodon runs.) On Bluesky, any user can host her own account on a

private server or join the server of another user-host. But the vast majority of users choose a default option that lets Bluesky's servers function as host. As a result, creating an account on Bluesky can be as easy as signing up for Facebook or X.

In the spring of 2023, Bluesky rolled out an invite-only beta version of its app. The first batches of invitations went out to just a thousand people from the wait list each week, but each new user was given invite codes to recruit others, and the population quickly diversified. Wrestlers formed an enthusiastic niche and soon attracted other sports subcultures. Brazilian Taylor Swift fans established a community. Early adopters came disproportionately from the groups most negatively affected by Musk's right-wing makeover of X—sex workers, trans people, people of color. X users in the media and progressive politics traded invite codes like passengers on a ship hijacked by lunatics, offering spots on the only lifeboat.

When I joined Bluesky, in April of 2023, the scene was underpopulated and raw. Content moderation was minimal. An optional What's Hot algorithmic feed collected content that was popular across the platform. The posts that qualified had as few as a dozen likes and were, as one user observed, roughly “1/3 nudes, 1/3 technical discussion of federated networks, and 1/3 pet photos.” Posts were dubbed “skeets,” for “sky tweets,” a term that has a double meaning as vulgar slang. Without the possibility of going viral (or attracting much attention, period), users’ only incentive was to entertain their fellow internet addicts. The poet and author Patricia Lockwood, a maestro of tweeting, had departed Twitter after Trump used the platform to incite the January 6th riot. She joined Bluesky in May of 2023 and began skeeting in her signature absurdist style. In one brief prose poem, she narrated tumbling down a hill: “haha—Yes! it will be the job of sisyphus, my sexual partner, to roll me up again.” Lockwood told me that Bluesky felt a bit like “returning to a second childhood,” striving to reclaim a social internet that was fun and freeing.

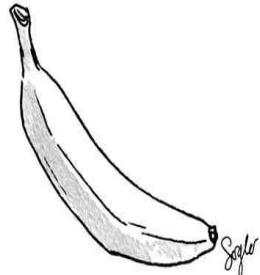
## BAD BREAKFAST BRANDING



COLD MILK SOUP



DRY RAISIN CUPCAKE



LONG YELLOW PEAR

*Cartoon by Sophia Glock*

The early enthusiasm allowed Graber to raise eight million dollars in seed investment that July, providing the team with the runway to keep growing. Then Bluesky's sign-ups slowed, in part because of competition from Threads, which debuted that month. In February, 2024, Bluesky's social platform became open to the public, yet it continued to feel like a digital backwater. I checked in sporadically that spring and summer and found little action; periodically, I posted messages into the void such as "btw I'm still on this site." In August, when X was briefly banned in Brazil for refusing to follow local moderation laws, a wave of Brazilians (among the world's most internet-savvy people) migrated to Bluesky. But the platform may well have remained as niche as Mastodon, which stalled out after experiencing a bump in popularity when Musk acquired Twitter. One feature that helped make Bluesky a viable X replacement was its "starter packs," offering user-curated lists of accounts to follow in certain areas of interest, so that new members didn't have to rebuild their online communities from scratch. Threads soon added the same feature.

When a user logs on to X, two tabs appear at the top of her feed: For You, which shows algorithmically recommended posts, and Following, which shows posts from accounts that you follow. The analogous features on Bluesky differ in significant ways. Where X's Following feed is crowded with ads and recommendations, Bluesky's contains only the things that

people you follow have posted, in reverse chronological order, as on early Twitter, giving Bluesky users a clearer sense of the conversation happening in real time. A Discover feed, meanwhile, custom-selects posts for each user according to an algorithm designed by the company; one of its advantages over X's For You is that you don't have to see Musk himself spouting an endless stream of *MAGA* propaganda and proudly puerile memes. But the site's biggest departure from X is its My Feeds tab, which allows users to select additional algorithmic feeds designed by fellow-users. At the Bluesky office, Gruber opened her laptop, which bore a large sticker of a vine-wreathed sword, and pulled up a test account, then navigated to the menu of feeds. She clicked on one called Science, moderated by a self-vetted crowd of science professionals, then on one called Fungi Friends, which filled the feed with photos of mushrooms. A Popular with Friends feed shows posts getting engagement from people you follow; Quiet Posters, conversely, brings up messages from accounts you follow that don't post very often.

Bluesky's head of trust and safety, Aaron Rodericks, previously worked at Twitter, until Musk dismantled its content-moderation team and eventually forced him out. Rodericks told me that Bluesky performs "a foundational layer" of moderation, with more than a hundred contractors working to remove such things as child-sexual-abuse material and threats of violence. But more fine-grained filtering decisions are made at the individual level. In Settings, users can choose from among hundreds of homespun labelling tools that flag or block certain posts in their feeds. The labels range from the straightforwardly functional (a red check mark for authenticated power users, akin to Twitter's old blue checks) to the idiosyncratically satirical (a label that identifies landlords, private-school graduates, and associates of Jeffrey Epstein). One of the platform's most prominent feeds, Blacksky, which draws more than three hundred thousand users a month, offers a tool to identify and block racism and misogyny. Bluesky as a company can afford to enable free speech because the platform's smaller, optional communities have the power to police speech however they choose. Blacksky's founder, Rudy Fraser, told me, "If anyone uses a slur anywhere—in a username, bio, in a post—we can get automatically alerted and take action." He added, of moderation decisions, "If you're making everyone happy, you're maybe not serving a community."

If there's a trade-off to nurturing insular online communities, it's that Bluesky as a whole still lacks the kind of cacophonous urgency that defined Twitter in its heyday. The dominant discourse tends to take place in a tone of cosseted aggrievement. On a typical day, a litany of posts might ask why "nobody is talking about" a given issue—the death toll in Gaza, the threatened defunding of NPR—although people are in fact talking about those very things on the same website. Even when it's politically diverse, social media too easily creates echo chambers. In time, if Bluesky wants to remain relevant, it will have to evolve beyond its relatively monocultural milieu.

Graber likes to compare Bluesky to a hotel: "We're trying to create a good time for people who step into the lobby," she said—though the lobby also contains construction materials, left there as a community resource. Users are "going off and exploring custom rooms that people built, and maybe there's another hotel out back." If the system proves successful, there will eventually be many hotels operating on the protocol. In the eyes of some of Bluesky's original supporters, though, the success of its social network has undermined its decentralized vision; its hotel grew so lively so fast that people didn't venture off to build their own.

Aaron D. Goldman, a former Twitter engineer who worked for Bluesky in its first year, told me that hosting millions of accounts on Bluesky's servers is costly and creates pressure for the platform to monetize its user base. "If we're going to have huge hosting costs, then we need a toll booth somewhere," he said. Graber has resisted replicating Twitter's advertising-driven model, and Bluesky's open-source structure obviates the possibility of licensing the platform's content to train A.I. programs, as companies such as X and Reddit have done. Bluesky currently has only one revenue stream, from hosting accounts on custom domains, but Graber envisions sustaining the business by eventually charging subscription fees, and by monetizing its marketplace of custom tools—users would pay, say, five dollars a month for Blacksky, and Bluesky would take a cut. Still, Goldman said that Bluesky, even with "the bones of a good decentralized system," has ended up with "the same incentives that led Jack to make Twitter very commercial." Goldman helped design Bluesky's protocol, but he and Graber later came to an impasse; he was let go in late 2022. (Graber ascribed their parting less to ideological differences than to Goldman's lack of productivity; he was "not

shipping like an engineer,” she said, and was “treating this more like a research project.”)

Last May, Dorsey revealed that he’d left his seat on Bluesky’s board. In an interview, he complained that Bluesky was “repeating all the mistakes” that Twitter had made, becoming “a company with V.C.s and a board.” He recommended Nostr, an obscure “censorship-resistant” social protocol to which he had donated five million dollars. Gruber told me that Dorsey’s departure actually “freed up” the company somewhat. Some prospective users had grumbled that Bluesky was still the pet project of a billionaire; without Dorsey’s involvement the allegation was moot.

Even on the decentralized internet, founders are not above competing for the primacy of their tools. Mastodon’s founder, Eugen Rochko, told me that last year he and Gruber discussed a collaboration that would have allowed their two protocols to interoperate, but each told me that the other seemed more interested in having the rival platform migrate onto their own protocol. Rochko did not see the point in Mastodon using AT Protocol, given that Bluesky already dominates it. “There isn’t really a lot of benefit to running your own app on it,” he said. “There would just be no place.” If the decentralized-social-media vision is realized, a single protocol might, like SMTP for e-mail, one day host an entire mainstream social internet: the next generation of Facebooks, Instagrams, and TikToks.

In January, Mallory Knodel, the executive director of the nonprofit Social Web Foundation, co-founded an initiative, Free Our Feeds, to foster the construction of more social networks on Bluesky’s protocol. The goal, as Knodel put it to me, was to “take them up on their offer to make it a truly decentralized platform.” Perhaps there will soon be a proliferation of other popular social apps operating alongside Bluesky. In the meantime, there are signs of growth. Flashes, an Instagram-like site that launched in February, has so far been downloaded more than a hundred thousand times. My favorite project besides Bluesky is a tiny site called PinkSea, a version of Japanese *oekaki*, bulletin boards for sharing digital drawings. I can log on to PinkSea using my Bluesky account information and post what I draw on both platforms simultaneously. In the Bluesky office, I pulled up PinkSea on Gruber’s laptop, and she said that she had never seen it before. It is not a digital town square; with perhaps a few hundred active users, it’s barely

even a digital dive bar. But its existence suggests the possibility of other creative projects on the protocol to come. Graber scrolled through the feed, which showcased both sophisticated anime figures and crude doodles, and her eyes lit up. “What excites me is new worlds emerging that I can’t imagine,” she said.

As the sun began to set, we walked from the Bluesky office to a pub. Graber, who doesn’t drink, settled into a dark nook and ordered a non-alcoholic Guinness. As Bluesky has become more mainstream, Graber has asserted herself more pointedly as a nemesis of social media’s Old Guard. For an appearance at South by Southwest in March, she wore a custom T-shirt that parodied one of Zuckerberg’s own design. Where his is emblazoned with the phrase “*aut Zuck aut nihil*,” a riff on the Latin “either a Caesar or nothing,” hers read “*mundus sine caesaribus*”—“a world without Caesars.” (The company started selling the shirts for forty dollars apiece and made more money in a day than it had in two years of selling domains.) In Bluesky’s founding documents, taking a lesson from Twitter’s history, Graber introduced a slogan: “The company is a future adversary.” In other words, they must design their platform today in such a way that, even if new leadership eventually jettisons their guiding principles, the thing they’ve created will remain impossible to abuse.

Graber seemed almost to welcome the idea that Bluesky’s legion of thirty million-plus users could someday disband; if people migrated elsewhere on the protocol tomorrow, it would only prove the viability of her vision. “Every centralized system faces the problem of succession, because leadership changes, and you eventually get someone not smart or not good,” she said. “Then users can vote with their feet, because they have their relationships and their data and their identity. Somebody else can come along and say, ‘Hey, I’m doing it better. Come over here.’” ♦

By Joshua Rothman  
By Sarah Larson  
By Charlie Tyson  
By Robert Sullivan  
By Joshua Rothman  
By Jon Lee Anderson  
By Julian Lucas  
By Kyle Chayka  
By David W. Brown  
By Andrew Marantz  
By Jaron Lanier  
By Adam Iscoe

[Annals of Zoology](#)

# The Dire Wolf Is Back

Colossal, a genetics startup, has birthed three pups that contain ancient DNA retrieved from the remains of the animal's extinct ancestors. Is the woolly mammoth next?

By [D. T. Max](#)



*Remus, at two months. Born to a mixed-breed dog, Remus has ancient dire-wolf DNA that was inserted with CRISPR. Photograph by John Davidson / Courtesy Colossal Biosciences*

Extinction is a part of nature. Of the five billion species that have existed on Earth, 99.9 per cent have vanished. The Late Devonian extinction, nearly four hundred million years ago, annihilated the jawless fish. The Triassic-Jurassic extinction, two hundred million years ago, finished off the crocodile-like phytosaur. Sixty-six million years ago, the end-Cretaceous extinction eliminated the *Tyrannosaurus rex* and the velociraptor; rapid climate change from an asteroid impact was the likely cause. The Neanderthals disappeared some forty thousand years ago. One day—whether from climate change, another asteroid, nuclear war, or something we can't yet imagine—humans will probably be wiped out, too.

The difference with humans is that we've been taking a huge number of species down with us. Starting about three hundred thousand years ago, we learned to hunt with spears and in groups. That gave us significant agency in

deciding which animals would disappear first—we chose them either because they wanted to eat us or because we wanted to eat them. The animals' demise, though, helped doom large predators that hunted our preferred prey. Among the casualties were sabre-toothed cats and dire wolves. Along the way, various other species also breathed their last: woolly mammoths, Irish elk, [dodos](#), carrier pigeons, Steller's sea cows, great auks, thylacines (Tasmanian tigers). The carnage continues. Last year, the slender-billed curlew, a bird that once ranged over much of Europe and Asia, was declared gone. And there are only two northern white rhinos left—both females.

People have been sad about driving animals into oblivion for nearly as long as we have been eradicating them. And in recent centuries humans have tried to address the problem. In 1886, British authorities in South Africa were shocked by the speed with which Boer farmers had decimated the quagga, a half-striped relative of the zebra, and tried to save the species from extinction with the Better Preservation of Game Act. (The measure came too late.) In 1973, the U.S. Congress passed the Endangered Species Act, in response to the decline of many iconic American animals, including the bald eagle and the grizzly bear. Despite such laws and other conservation efforts, the current rate of extinction is, by some measures, a thousand times what it would be without humans.

Since the nineteen-eighties, various attempts have been made to see if it might be possible, somehow, to reverse the process. In theory, at least, the technological know-how that helped us extirpate so much wildlife could be deployed to bring back a few of our victims. Humans who are pursuing this goal are essentially asking for something that nature has never provided: a do-over.

Most of these investigations have been made by academic scientists or environmentalists. But what if the person trying to reverse an extinction was a man with an enormous amount of money, a mistrust of institutions, and a love of pop culture? The kind of guy who wants to move fast and fix things—but also increase his net worth. What animal would such a person choose to revive first? I saw the answer in late February, when someone turned on his computer and showed me a photograph of two cute white dire-wolf pups sitting on an asymmetrical throne made of iron swords. At first glance, it

looked like an A.I.-generated image, but I was told that these were actual living animals. They were growing up at an undisclosed location, but in a few weeks he would let me go visit them.

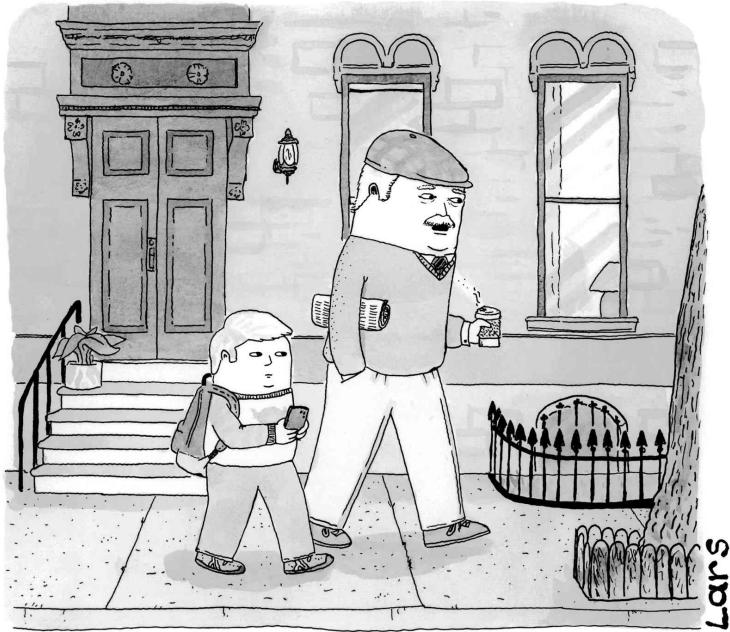
Ben Lamm is a forty-three-year-old serial entrepreneur who has already had five “exits”—acquisitions of startups by other companies. He lives in Dallas; his estimated net worth is \$3.7 billion. Lamm is dyslexic, and when he was younger he found reading difficult. He tended toward graphic novels and video games, but over time he taught himself, he says, to “read for concepts.” Today, he listens to a lot of podcasts devoted to bold new ideas. Among the interesting figures he has run across is George Church, a professor of genetics at Harvard Medical School. Church has endorsed using gene therapy to improve human resistance to radiation, thus facilitating interplanetary travel; he has also written about the possibility of cloning Neanderthals back into existence. A seventy-year-old with a long white beard and twinkling, wouldn’t-it-be-fun-to-try-that eyes, he is particularly admired among those who esteem speculative, gee-whiz thinkers; he has given half a dozen *TED* or *TEDx* talks. He likes to emphasize that he values the ways science can improve our lives. Church is also an accomplished lab scientist. He has more than a hundred and sixty approved or pending patents; among other things, he developed a process that allows *crispr*, the gene-editing technology, to be used to tinker with the human genome.

Soon after the pandemic hit, Lamm, who travels constantly, got *covid*, which led to a moment of introspection. He’d been founding companies since he was in college, and he’d made a lot of money, but had he made meaningful change? “Startups either grow and fail or grow and succeed,” he told me. Lamm had become interested in the way that various algae can capture carbon by absorbing it through photosynthesis before sinking to the bottom of the sea. Church had been part of a team that used *Crispr* to modify a blue-green algae’s genome so that it could sequester carbon twenty per cent more efficiently. Lamm called him and was excited by Church’s wide-ranging mind. “I’m really from the future, and I’m trying to let everyone catch up,” Lamm remembers Church joking. Lamm flew to Boston to visit him. Church talked about his myriad projects—he was using *Crispr* to help make pig organs suitable for transplants in humans, and to develop treatments for inherited diseases. Lamm found it all “pretty cool.” At some point, he asked Church which projects he would focus on if he had unlimited resources.

Church said that one of the things he most wanted to do was bring back the woolly mammoth. Lamm was thrilled by the answer.

The woolly mammoth, which was native to the Arctic tundra, became extinct relatively recently, in evolutionary terms—about four thousand years ago. “The Egyptians were already building the Pyramids then,” Lamm told me. In 2012, Church explained, he had begun working with a nonprofit called Revive & Restore, in part to try to bring the giant creatures back to life. But it soon became apparent that the necessary technology was not sufficiently advanced. Lamm asked Church what kind of money he had access to for the project. Lamm remembers Church telling him that the tech investor Peter Thiel had donated to his lab, providing “a budget of a hundred.” Lamm was used to big money—“I’m not a scarcity guy, I’m an abundance guy,” he told me—but he was daunted. *Fuck, I guess I could raise a hundred million dollars for this, too*, he recalls thinking. Church then clarified that Thiel had spent only a hundred thousand dollars on the project. In startup terms, this was a pittance. Church hadn’t had the money to get the mammoth effort going for real, Lamm felt. Now he would.

In 2020, Lamm and Church agreed to create a for-profit company, called Colossal Biosciences, whose showcase product would be the deextinction of animals. “We are currently the apex predator,” Lamm told himself. “Why not use our technology for good?” (Jennifer Doudna, one of the inventors of *Crispr*, doesn’t see it this way. She believes that the editing technology should be reserved for essential matters, such as helping people with severe congenital disorders. As she wrote in the book “[A Crack in Creation](#),” published in 2017, “If we can avoid altering nature more than we already have, shouldn’t we try to do so?”)



"When I was a kid, we didn't have smartphones. We had to come up with our own extremist views."  
Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

Lamm, who pitches as naturally as he talks, quickly raised sixteen million dollars from investors, promising them that Colossal would “spin the tech out” for a profit by, say, repurposing any advances that it achieved in genetic engineering for the benefit of human health. He rented space in Dallas and brought in about five million dollars’ worth of incubators and cell sorters. For embryology work, he installed a positive-pressure room, which prevents the inflow of possibly contaminated air from other areas. He assembled a team of computational biologists, cellular engineers, genetic engineers, and embryologists. Lamm would run the operation while Church did the deep thinking, the advising, and some of the lab work, along with lending the company his scientific prestige.

They made a shortlist of animals that Colossal would try to revive. The company would focus on what are known as “charismatic megafauna”—animals cute or scary or striking enough that their absence has left a significant mark on human consciousness. Lamm wouldn’t have been interested in starting on some tiny lizard or unloved beetle. The woolly mammoth was first on Colossal’s list. The next two were the dodo, whose extinction was facilitated by the arrival of Dutch sailors, who brought various invasive species on their ships, and the thylacine, a marsupial with the face of a fox and the stripes of a zebra. (Tasmanian farmers did not like

the thylacine's appetite for their animals, so the government paid for its slaughter; the last one died in a zoo in Hobart in 1936.)

Reviving an extinct mammal, Lamm told me, is essentially a high-tech challenge: you have to hack the problem with advanced tools. You need to collect DNA-fragment samples, typically from bones, and then synthesize the information from those samples in an effort to reconstruct the animal's genome, at least partly. After that, he said, "we need to create the right media to grow the cells. We need to do immortalization of the cells"—modifying them to overcome their natural limit on division, thus allowing them to replicate indefinitely. Lamm became even more technical: "We need to create induced pluripotent stem cells and see if we can use a process called gametogenesis to create eggs and sperm of those cells. And then, if we are successful in that, we'd need also to consider how to optimize genetic diversity." The ultimate goal, he emphasized, was not to create a one-off specimen but to have the species reoccupy its former habitat.

I asked Lamm whether Tom Chi, one of Colossal's first investors and a venture capitalist known for his environmental awareness, was putting his money in to help save the planet. "He did not invest in us for fun," Lamm said. "He invested in us because he thinks this company could be dual purpose—where it has a positive ecological benefit *but* it makes a fuck ton of money."

In 1984, researchers detected traces of mitochondrial DNA in the skin of a taxidermied quagga in a museum. It suddenly seemed possible to bring back species that had died out. At the least, the road map was becoming clearer. Even reviving dinosaurs appeared to be within reach when, a few years later, papers reported the presence of DNA fragments in the remains of ancient reptiles that had gone extinct eighty million years ago. These fossils all turned out to be contaminated with modern DNA—in some cases, the researchers had sampled traces of their own genetic material. DNA degrades over time, and scientists now believe that a usable sample probably can't be obtained from fossils much older than a million years. These constraints weren't yet known, though, when Michael Crichton published his 1990 science-fiction novel, "Jurassic Park." Lamm told me that, even now, one of the most frequent questions he gets is "Are you going to bring back the dinosaurs?"

In the nineties and two-thousands, researchers became better and better at extracting DNA, including from extremely small samples. In 2003, the human genome was sequenced—Church's own DNA was the first to be publicly released. Numerous animal genomes followed. In 2012, Jennifer Doudna and Emmanuelle Charpentier developed *Crispr*, which relies on molecular machinery borrowed from bacteria to slice out genetic material from the nucleus of a cell and replace it with different genetic code. In 2014, the *Times* published its first article on the technology, declaring, “A genome can be edited, much as a writer might change words or fix spelling errors.”

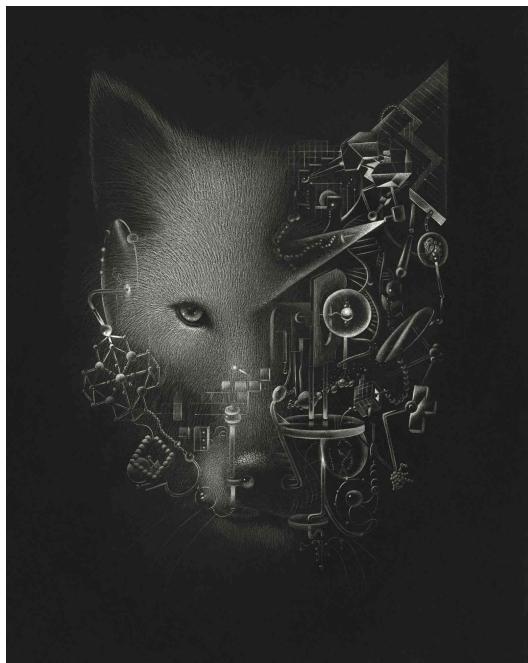
Some scientists realized that *Crispr* could be used to insert a replica of an ancient DNA fragment into the cells of a closely related modern organism. The resulting hybrid creature might not be an exact copy of an extinct animal, but it could look very similar to the ancestor and thrive in the same ecosystem. Scientists soon found, however, that playing around with ancient DNA was harder than they expected. The samples they recovered were often damaged or impure; removing DNA from a fossilized bone sometimes damaged it further. Trying to accurately re-create an ancient genome involved looking at a modern cousin and estimating, by reverse engineering, which gene went where. Beth Shapiro, a noted ancient-DNA researcher who is now the chief science officer at Colossal, said, “We have to figure out how to build a trillion-piece puzzle while working with pieces that were left outside during a hurricane, using the picture of a slightly different puzzle on the top of the box, and the contents of more than a hundred and fifty thousand different puzzles inside”—that is, the DNA of all the microbes and fungi that got into the animal’s bone after it died.

In 2003, a group of European scientists tried to clone a recently extinct mammal called the bucardo, a mountain goat from the Pyrenees. The group used DNA that had been taken from the last living bucardo and then cryogenically frozen. They inserted the nuclei of bucardo cells into the eggs of fifty-seven goats, and then implanted them. Seven goats became pregnant; six had miscarriages, but one kid was born—with a malformed lung. Ten minutes later, that kid died, making the bucardo the only species to have gone extinct twice.

While struggling with the science, researchers were also contending with ethical objections to such projects. What if an extinct species’ original

habitat was gone? Would you just be creating zoo animals? Was it immoral to alter an animal's genome? Might concocted creatures suffer in unforeseen ways from the genetic changes? As with the bucardo, would you be allowing the same tragedy to occur a second time? In 2018, Shapiro, who was then running a lab at the University of California, Santa Cruz, made a striking remark to the *Wall Street Journal*: "There is no point in bringing the dodo back. Their eggs will be eaten the same way that made them go extinct the first time."

Scientists such as Church were not daunted by the difficulty of the science or the ethical thicket involved. But in time they found a more persuasive framework for the deextinction concept which moved it out of the realm of fringe science. They emphasized that revived woolly mammoths, dodos, and the like would not just be curios. These creatures had once played valuable roles in nature, and their absence had left gaps. Returning the missing animals to their original ecosystems would help bring their habitats back into balance. Colossal, alert to this reorientation, focussed its ambition on species reintroduction.



*Colossal's focus is on reviving what are known as "charismatic megafauna"—animals cute or scary or striking enough that their absence has left a significant mark on human consciousness. In addition to the dire-wolf project, the company has teams devoted to bringing back the woolly mammoth, the dodo, and the thylacine, a marsupial with the face of a fox and the stripes of a zebra. Illustration by Armando Veve*

Scientists at the company decided to take inspiration not from "Jurassic Park" but from recent "rewilding" efforts. One project that they often cited

was the reintroduction of the gray wolf to Yellowstone National Park, in the nineteen-nineties. Headlines at the time had focussed on how angry the return of wolves had made local ranchers—gray wolves occasionally kill livestock, just as thylacines did. But, ecologists noted, the absence of wolves had left elk with few natural predators, and their population had exploded; their overgrazing had decimated vegetation that had sustained beavers and birds. Once the wolves were reintroduced, the number of elk declined and the park regained its equilibrium.

In interviews and at public events, Church emphasized that the reintroduction of the woolly mammoth could bring similar benefits to Siberia. By trampling shrubs, the beasts would encourage the growth of grasses that are good at absorbing greenhouse gases. In the winter, the mammoths, with their enormous weight, would tamp down snow, trapping methane—a greenhouse gas—that would otherwise be released by melting permafrost. Reviving the woolly mammoth, Church told CNBC in September, 2021, would bring Siberia “back to what, from a human standpoint at least, was a healthier ecosystem.”

Shapiro again played the skeptic. She opposed the idea of deëxtincting the woolly mammoth, arguing that creating one or two sample creatures would be cruel, given that they were likely highly social animals. She maintained that elephants do not do well in captivity or with assisted reproduction. And she insisted that elephants, instead of being impregnated with genetically edited embryos, “should be allowed to make more elephants.”

Shapiro is no longer Colossal’s gadfly. She started working with the company as an adviser in December, 2021, and became a full-time employee last year. Having pioneered techniques for the retrieval of ancient DNA and led a team at U.C. Santa Cruz that sequenced the dodo genome, she has a reputation in the world of genetics research that equals Church’s. But, if Church is deëxtinction’s id, Shapiro is its superego. She has expressed wariness, publicly, of projects that seem exploitative or merely flashy. Lamm began courting Shapiro soon after Colossal was founded. By that point, she had secured a lucrative appointment as an investigator at the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, so money wasn’t a strong lure. But she was impressed by how deeply he understood her work. He also caught her at a good time. She’d been instrumental in establishing the field of DNA

recovery, and had won a MacArthur Fellowship, but, she told me, she was worried that her specialty had lost its Indiana Jones glamour and had become “routine—just another application of evolutionary biology.” She had noted, with approval, Church’s shift away from deextinction and toward rewilding, to creating “*proxies* for these extinct species . . . so they are useful in some way to the ecosystem.” In the spring of 2024, she signed on as the chief scientist for Colossal. “The money is about the same, but I’m trading tenure for stock options,” she joked to me.

In February, Shapiro joined Lamm and three other Colossal scientists in a nondescript twenty-five-thousand-square-foot lab in the Dallas Market area. Two more researchers joined the meeting on Zoom. Lamm divides his staff according to the animal they are trying to revive: Michael Abrams is one of the heads of the woolly-mammoth team; Sara Ord leads the thylacine group; Anna Keyte is in charge of the dodo project. Shapiro supervises them all, on both scientific and ethical matters. Lamm explained to me that he ran his operation more like a tech startup than like a typical lab: “There’s a healthy competition between the species leads.”

The woolly-mammoth group began the meeting. Abrams said that the team was about to publish a paper about some thirty mice that had been given genes to replicate the hair-growth patterns and cold-resistance capabilities of woolly mammoths. Trying out their research on mice was easier than doing so on elephants—for one thing, the average gestation period for a mouse is three weeks, whereas an elephant’s is twenty-two months, the longest of any mammal. Abrams said that the paper—which documented “a lot of really cool technology”—would be posted online in two weeks, on a site that makes research studies public before they are peer-reviewed; Colossal would try to explain its techniques to other biologists at the same time that its publicity team lofted them into the news cycle. Of course, the paper might not be accepted by a peer-reviewed journal. Lamm was clearly comfortable with the arrangement.

Abrams’s colleague Austin Bow, who was on the Zoom screen, said that the mammoth group had just got their hands on a promising new fibroblast line “derived from an Asian-elephant skin sample.” Fibroblast cells, which produce connective tissue, are crucial to gene editing and are easy to obtain. They can be stripped down to basic, flexible cells that can then be turned

into any kind of cell in the body. A good fibroblast line maintains its genetic makeup over time even as it divides. The better the fibroblast line, the easier it would be to grow Asian-elephant cells that contained woolly-mammoth DNA and implant them in an embryo.

“Rocking the mammoth world here!” Shapiro said.

Ord, from the thylacine group, broke in with some news of her own. About a year earlier, the group, working in partnership with Australian researchers, had sequenced the animal’s DNA from a head preserved in ethanol at a museum in Melbourne. Colossal described it as the most complete sequencing ever done on an extinct nonhuman animal, mapping the thylacine’s genes with more than ninety-nine-per-cent accuracy. In October, 2024, Colossal announced that the group had successfully made three hundred edits to the DNA of a mouse-size marsupial called the fat-tailed dunnart, a living cousin of the thylacine with suction-cup ears and a ferocious appetite. The alterations would approximate aspects of the thylacine’s phenotype—the observable characteristics of a creature. The team had also discovered how to induce ovulation in the dunnart. The next step was to transfer a nucleus with the edited DNA into a dunnart ovum. But this was proving challenging. The mechanics of marsupial reproduction are not well studied. The exterior membrane of a dunnart ovum, which is about 0.2 millimetres in diameter, turns out to be very difficult to penetrate, Ord explained. The team had even used lasers to try to pierce the tissue. The ovum was so tough that they initially thought the laser was defective, but when they focussed the beam on a mouse ovum it “just blew up.”



*"What it lacks in flavor it makes up for in how much I made and don't want to waste."*  
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

That's when, Ord continued, a colleague on the team with a background in mosquito genetics suggested trying to penetrate the dunnart ovum with a probe made of quartz, which is one of the hardest minerals in existence. The probe worked. Ord showed a video of it piercing the wall of the cell. Everyone applauded. Now they could take the nucleus out of the ovum, insert the nucleus containing the thylacine genes, and watch an embryo grow.

"Speaking of difficult challenges, what's up with the birds?" Shapiro asked.

Keyte, the dodo director, reported that her group had been looking at the ninety thousand genetic differences between the dodo and its extant relatives, trying to map out which gene or genes were responsible for which characteristic. "I feel like a kid in a candy shop, because some of the genes that have come up on that are so cool," she said enthusiastically. One bird whose DNA they had looked at was the Rodrigues solitaire—like the dodo, a flightless bird that had lived on an island east of Madagascar. The solitaire went extinct at the end of the eighteenth century, roughly a century after the dodo. The two birds have closely related genomes; both are distant relatives of pigeons. "You have a flighted bird that goes to an island, and it gets larger—it doesn't need to fly anymore," Keyte said. She had found a flight-related gene that had become inactive, giving the team a clue as to which of the

genes in the dodo's nearest living cousin, the Nicobar pigeon, they would need to alter to make Colossal's avians earthbound, too.

Keyte added that her team was still a long way from bringing back the dodo. For one thing, the methods for growing and manipulating the embryonic precursors of avian sperm and eggs in a lab setting have been developed for only two birds: the chicken and, recently, the goose. Keyte said, "It's been almost twenty years since culture conditions for the chicken were established, and those culture conditions have not worked for other bird species, even ones that are really closely related, like quail." She added that, despite the dearth of related research, her team was getting better at growing the sperm-and-egg precursors in birds: "We've gotten to the point where we feel like we can start doing some migration assays"—a technique for studying how the cells in an early embryo begin to differentiate. Once the researchers got the basic method for growing bird cells down, they could use the technology not just to develop a dodo but also to help replenish populations of endangered birds. The team had already identified some species that could use the help.

"Awesome," Shapiro said.

After the meeting ended, Lamm and I returned to his office. Colossal's current lab space was just temporary—next door, the company was building a thirty-million-dollar state-of-the-art headquarters that is scheduled to open in June. Earlier, Lamm had walked me through the construction site, noting that the entrance would feature a ten-foot acrylic model of a woolly mammoth locked in simulated ice and shrouded in an emotive haze produced by a dry-ice machine. The model was being made by Wētā Workshop, the special-effects company that worked on the "Lord of the Rings" films. Peter Jackson, the director of that franchise, has invested several million dollars in Colossal.

In Lamm's office, a wilted T. rex-shaped helium balloon peered out from a corner. I noticed a copy of Church's book on deextinction, "Regenesis." It "wasn't easy going," Lamm told me. He gave me a book he loved, "The Next 500 Years," by Christopher E. Mason, a professor of genomics, physiology, and biophysics at Weill Cornell Medicine, in New York; it's about how to biohack humans so that we can travel to distant planets.

Colossal’s roster of investors includes not only Jackson—who told Lamm that the company’s work is as fun as making movies—but also Paris Hilton. Image is very important to Lamm, who explained to me that his backers want to be associated with something exciting and sexy. He showed me some promotional videos that the company had made. These videos seemed to be pitched at the casually interested viewer—perhaps the sort of student he was as a young man—rather than at the ecological faithful. The voice-over in the videos, which nodded ironically to the steely voices of old-fashioned science documentaries, urged younger viewers to think of deëxtinction technology as cool. One clip ended with a voice grab from HBO’s “Game of Thrones”—“Here’s to the young wolf!” No one was going to confuse Colossal with the Sierra Club. The video, which showed the mechanics of deëxtinction as if they were starships hitting hyperdrive, was made by the genre-film director Michael Dougherty. “Mike did ‘Godzilla: King of the Monsters,’ ” Lamm said, with pride. “He did ‘Krampus.’ ”

This sort of hype has made Colossal an object of wariness in the scientific community, which prizes rigor and transparency. Hank Greely, a Stanford Law School professor with an expertise in bioscience, told me, “I understand why businesses often want to avoid disclosing as much as a peer-reviewed publication might require,” adding, “I know and like Beth Shapiro . . . and trust her quite a bit.” Still, he concluded, he would be happier to see their data available for other scientists to evaluate.

To build bridges with conservationists, Colossal has partnered with dozens of environmental organizations and promises to share with them any new techniques it develops, free of charge. It has created a foundation to distribute spinoff technology and given it fifty million dollars in funding. Bringing Shapiro on board was an important part of this outreach effort. (The company currently employs a hundred and thirty-two scientists—a cohort larger than many university biology faculties. It also funds forty postdocs at other institutions.) Lamm has won over other important figures. Love Dalén, a top woolly-mammoth researcher and a professor of evolutionary genomics in Sweden, was at first put off by Colossal’s swagger, but he told me he became convinced that Lamm and his startup were “dead serious at giving deëxtinction the best shot they can.” He is now on Colossal’s board of scientific advisers. The money that the company has raised, he said, “could of course have been better spent in protection of

habitat, getting rid of invasive species, and combatting poaching.” But, he noted, “conservation funding is not a zero-sum game.” Lamm, Dalén felt, tapped funders who would not ordinarily give to, say, the World Wildlife Fund. The money invested in Colossal, he told me, would otherwise have gone to “some other tech companies, Bitcoin, the defense industry, or whatever.” And Colossal’s research is having valuable knock-on effects. Its work on woolly mammoths, Dalén said, is leading to a vaccine against elephant endotheliotropic herpesvirus, which, by some estimates, accounts for up to two-thirds of Asian-elephant deaths in captivity and a significant number in the wild. Ideas for the design of the vaccine, which is in field trials, came about through Colossal’s experience with mRNA manipulation and its research on the elephant genome. Mammoths appear to have been susceptible to the virus, too. (Lamm told me, with typical immodesty, “If successful, the vaccine will over time save more elephants than all of elephant conservation in history.”)

Lamm credits [Elon Musk](#) with stoking investors’ appetites to do “bigger things.” He adds, “I think people are, like, ‘Wow, we can do big, crazy things *and* there is a chance that we get a return on them.’” So far, Lamm’s investors have no reason to question their support. A month before I visited Colossal, the startup had completed its fourth round of funding. This time, it raised two hundred million dollars, adding to the two hundred and thirty-five million it already had. The company’s current valuation is \$10.2 billion—on par with Moderna, the vaccine company. (One person who might miss out on getting rich from Colossal is Church, who, during the initial steps of founding the company, opted for a direct investment in his Harvard lab rather than equity. He has no regrets. Referring to Lamm, he told *Forbes*, “The fact that I’m not a billionaire is almost as interesting as Ben being one.”)

Colossal has already birthed three startups. The first, Form Bio, is developing machine-learning technology that can help pinpoint the optimal cuts that *Crispr* can make while editing genes. This would have applications to, say, the attempt to treat genetic conditions such as sickle-cell anemia or Huntington’s disease, and also to drug discovery and development. The second startup, Breaking, is making use of the advances Colossal has made in gene manipulation to reengineer X-32, a microorganism that naturally degrades plastics, to increase its efficacy. “It takes plastics that have not

broken down ever before and breaks them down in twenty-two months,” Lamm boasted. The third spinoff, he told me, was still “in stealth mode,” and he would not talk about it.



*“Everyone’s just fishing for a thank-you card.”*  
Cartoon by Liana Finck

In truth, nearly everything Colossal is doing could find for-profit uses, since the attempt to genetically engineer, implant, gestate, and then birth an extinct animal touches on so many common health challenges. Currently, once the company has an embryo ready to grow, researchers insert it in a host animal, but such surrogates are limited in number and expensive to work with, and come with many potential health complications. Birth can also be traumatic—elephants rarely survive a Cesarean section, which is how many animals gestated in surrogates are born. So the company is working to replace the surrogates it would use—the Asian elephant for the woolly mammoth, for example—with artificial wombs. Lamm said, “We call it an exo-dev”—for “exogenous development”—“because it sounds less creepy.” (It didn’t.) Such technology could revolutionize human surrogate births, removing the ethical and emotional complications of the practice, not to mention the risks of pregnancy. “That field alone is a hundred-billion-dollar spinoff,” Lamm told me. An unaffiliated investment-advisory firm, Brownstone Research, has estimated that the “addressable market” for an exo-dev system for humans would be worth at least twenty billion dollars.

There is even money to be made in deëxtinction itself. While we were in Lamm's office, he pulled up a slide titled "Rewilding: Monetization," which showed a sketch of woolly mammoths in a chilly mountainous landscape. It was easy to imagine tourists gawking at the site.

"Jurassic Park!" I said.

"No, no, no, no, no," Lamm responded. "That was an exaggerated zoo. This is letting the animals *live* in their natural habitats." The distinction wasn't entirely obvious to me, but I let him continue.

He explained that I was looking at a plan for a restored ecosystem. It was also a perfectly adapted money machine. There was a large area where the ancient elephants could graze, and this would be funded, in part, by carbon-offset payments from governments and corporations. The carbon value of a single elephant is about two million dollars, he told me. (An elephant increases biodiversity, in part, by spreading seeds in its dung and by crushing dense vegetation on forest floors, giving slow-growing trees the space to survive.) He added that the interesting educational opportunities and "sexiness factor" of Colossal's creations would make its carbon credits "trade at a premium." Rewilding could also provide value for nations that host revived animals. Shapiro had told me that when she visited Mauritius, where the dodo once lived, officials expressed enthusiasm about the prospect of increasing ecotourism. Lamm said, "If we are increasing the G.D.P. from tourism because of dodos, then we should partake in that."

What about selling Colossal-created animals as pets? "We're not in that business," Lamm told me, adding, "I think you know us better than to even ask this."

It was nearly time to see Colossal's dire wolves. Since I was first shown the image of the two pups, I'd been told that a third had been born. She was equally cute. I'd also seen a photograph of one of the pups in the arms of [George R. R. Martin](#), the author whose books were the basis of the "Game of Thrones" series, in which dire wolves feature prominently. "I used to watch the show, and I didn't even think dire wolves were real," Lamm told me. The entire dire-wolf operation had been done in stealth mode, and everyone involved had to sign nondisclosure agreements, including Martin.

Before making my travel plans, I spoke with Colossal's chief animal officer, Matt James, who was low-key and modest compared with his voluble colleagues. "I just play with animals, mostly," he explained. He said that he had recently been at an enclosure where Colossal had birthed four cloned red wolves—an animal that, despite being protected under the Endangered Species Act, was becoming rarer and rarer in the wild. As far as he knew, these pups were the first cloned red wolves ever. He added that, for the cloning process, Colossal scientists had used a new procedure that was less stressful for the genetic-donor animal. Usually, a biopsy is required to get clonable cells, but the scientists had figured out a way to obtain them merely by drawing blood. The new technique had been perfected by the dire-wolf team.

In "Game of Thrones," the dire wolves are as big as lions. In reality, the dire wolf probably weighed about a hundred and fifty pounds, and it was only somewhat larger than today's gray wolf. It also had more powerful jaws and a bigger head than a gray wolf. Dire wolves became extinct some twelve thousand years ago, at the end of the age of giant mammals. Most likely, their vanishing was not the result of direct contact with humans but, rather, was caused by the depletion of the large animals that were key to their diet. Dire wolves mostly ate horses and bison, with occasional forays into giant sloths and baby mammoths.

I was curious about how the dire wolf had slipped onto Colossal's agenda, which was so clearly focussed on the three other extinct animals. Given Lamm's alpha personality, it seemed possible that he simply wanted Colossal to dominate the deëxtinction space: it had begun with three animals, but why not four? Or perhaps the company, having made huge promises, felt the need to give concrete proof that it was making progress. According to James, the woolly mammoth's due date had slipped from 2026 to 2028 after he pointed out the elephant's long gestation period and other reproductive challenges. (Lamm says that Colossal is on track for 2028.)

Questions about Colossal's timetables were evidently sensitive. During a tour of the lab with Lamm and the various species heads, I was escorted from workstation to workstation, so that I could better understand the high-tech genetic manipulations that would make the regenerated animals. It felt as if we were in the Central London Hatchery and Conditioning Centre in

“Brave New World.” I asked Ord, the thylacine-team head, and Keyte, the dodo-team leader, when their animals would be resurrected.

“This decade,” Ord told me.

“The dodo is on track for this decade as well!” Keyte answered, competitively.

“*No dates*,” Lamm shot back.

As for the dire wolf, Lamm told me that the decision to put it at the front of the line was not because the company was impatient with its difficult marquee projects. In 2023, at a two-day conference with the team heads and Colossal’s advisory-board scientists, the attendees had whiteboarded what other animals might fit their guidelines for deëxtinction, and the dire wolf had generated a lot of enthusiasm. Lamm said that he had recently been visiting with people from Indigenous tribes, and many spoke of missing wolves, which had been central to their cultures. “There was this desire to bring back what they called the Great Wolf,” he claimed. Another reason —“and this is *really* important,” Lamm said—was that dire wolves are top-line talent in pop culture. They aren’t just in “Game of Thrones.” Dire wolves have starring roles in the video game World of Warcraft, the collectible-card game [Magic: The Gathering](#), and the role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons. Lamm added that [the Grateful Dead](#) even have a song called “Dire Wolf.”

Colossal scientists began working on birthing a dire wolf in the summer of 2023. As I suspected, they were confident that the process would go faster than it was going with mammoths, dodos, and thylacines, in part because the genetics of dogs are among the best known of any nonhuman mammal. “It’s because people want to sequence their dogs and then talk about them,” Shapiro explained to me. Still, dogs and wolves split from each other some fifteen thousand years ago, and their genes have diverged over that time. “We had to develop a lot of resources for wolves, because they hadn’t been invented yet,” Shapiro said. “How to keep wolf cells healthy in culture, what to edit, et cetera. It’s still easier than a mammoth . . . but it’s orders of magnitude harder than a mouse.” Colossal hired experts in cell editing and wolf embryology and behavior.

The first problem the group encountered was where to get dire-wolf DNA good enough to use in sequencing the extinct animal's genes. Shapiro happened to know as much about the topic as anyone in the world—in 2021, she had co-written a paper that traced the dire wolf's lineage by using recovered DNA. While doing that research, she had examined the available dire-wolf fossils and found very little genetic material in them. But sampling techniques had grown more sensitive in the intervening years, and she decided to revisit the fossils. Two proved particularly useful. One was a piece of a dire-wolf tooth from Sheriden Cave, a late-Ice Age fossil pit in Ohio; the tooth was thought to be about thirteen thousand years old. The second candidate was a nearly complete skull from Idaho, found at the American Falls Reservoir. The skull was estimated to be more than seventy thousand years old, but contained an intact petrous—an inner-ear bone whose cells are densely packed, an arrangement that inhibits the entry of fungi and microorganisms that destroy DNA.

Because ancient-DNA reconstruction involves removing a small piece of bone, it puts delicate fossils at risk. Institutions aren't always eager to oblige. But Shapiro had the clout to get the tooth shipped to her lab in Santa Cruz, and she sent one of her students to the museum in Idaho where the skull was kept. Nevertheless, she was nervous to begin drilling. Lamm reassured her: "Beth, you're the No. 1 person in ancient DNA. I'm confident that you can do this. Like, you've done this a thousand times." She used a dentist's drill to make a small hole in the tooth and extracted powder containing billions of fragments of DNA. She then tagged each strand in such a way that a DNA-sequencing machine could read the order of the nucleotides—adenine (A), thymine (T), guanine (G), and cytosine (C)—well enough to provide a blueprint for engineering new cell lines. Lamm told me that the "Eureka moment" arrived when Colossal scientists realized that they would be able to establish much of the dire-wolf genome.(They ended up at ninety-one per cent.) Such efforts are never perfect. "There are errors in every genome that's been assembled," Shapiro pointed out.

The group then compared the DNA of the dire wolves with DNA sequences from gray-wolf cell lines. The gray wolf is the dire wolf's closest living relative—[they share 99.5 per cent of their DNA](#). If a gene does something in the gray wolf, the same gene in dire-wolf DNA likely codes for the same trait. The scientists' goal was to alter the gray-wolf genome in ways that

might make the resulting creature more like a dire wolf: principally, larger, with an increased head size and fluffy, light-colored fur.

The scientists could tell, based on the variation in key pigmentation genes, that dire wolves—like Ghost in “Game of Thrones”—had very pale coats. But the genes that guided coat color presented a problem: they carried with them a risk of blindness and deafness. (In humans, variations of these genes can lead to Waardenburg syndrome, which causes pigmentation deficiencies, among other problems.) So the group decided to edit a different gene that, when expressed in dogs, also codes for a lighter coat. This might make the dire wolf less authentic, but it would be better for the new creatures. “Otherwise, this animal is going to live out a suboptimal life because of choices *you made*,” Lamm pointed out. After almost a year of computational genetic analysis, Colossal researchers used *Crispr* to make twenty edits on fourteen genes. Fifteen edits were derived from Colossal’s study of the dire-wolf genome and five tweaks were derived from scrutiny of the gray-wolf genome. A Colossal-affiliated scientist spoke to me at length about which specific genes were altered, but the discussion was off the record, at the insistence of Lamm, who called such details the “company’s I.P.”

By mid-2024, Colossal researchers were watching thousands of edited cell lines grow in petri dishes stored inside incubators. Several cell lines stopped growing—perhaps because *Crispr* had mistakenly removed a bit of DNA or added code in the wrong place, or because the cell lines had other defects, or because they simply weren’t vigorous enough to keep dividing. By late summer, nuclei containing the edited genome were inserted into dog ova whose DNA had been removed. Forty-five embryos were placed inside two dogs. “Mutts, like a hound mix,” Lamm said. (Among other things, dog breeding is better understood than that of wolves.)

Only two embryos—one in each surrogate mother—grew to term. The gestation period was about sixty days, similar to that of gray wolves. The pregnant dogs were kept under supervision at a secure animal center and given weekly ultrasounds, starting about halfway through their term, to insure that the fetuses were growing normally. Lamm remembers “a chronic level of stress and anxiety knowing we were breaking new ground every day.”

On October 1, 2024, veterinarians—who had also signed N.D.A.s—delivered the pups, by Cesarean section. The team had hoped for vaginal births, James said, but as the weeks went on “there was a concern that there would be a size mismatch”—that the dire-wolf babies could be too big. When the pups were born, Lamm and Shapiro had just arrived in London for the première of a movie on ancient DNA. Lamm, whose first child had been born five months earlier, watched the dire-wolf births on FaceTime as James trained his phone on the operating table. The pups were large (one of them, James told me, was twice the normal weight of a gray wolf at birth) and white (gray wolves are born with very dark coats), with unusually robust heads. The pups were whining and crying. “I’m holding the first dire-wolf cubs in twelve thousand years,” James pronounced, adding, “It’s sort of surreal.”

For the first few days, the dire-wolf pups nursed on one of the dog moms, but, according to James, the mother “wasn’t able to keep up with their metabolic needs,” and they were switched to bottles. The two mutts were soon adopted by families, through the American Humane Society, without any mention of their role in lupine history. Lamm told me that he is very proud of how quickly the project came to fruition: “Within eighteen months of our putting the name ‘dire wolf’ down on a whiteboard, we birthed dire wolves!”

I asked Lamm when a university lab would have completed a comparable effort.

“Never,” he replied.

On March 25th, I went to meet the two older pups, named Romulus and Remus. (The third pup, named Khaleesi—for the light-haired protagonist of “Game of Thrones”—was not yet ready for visitors, I was told.) I was given directions to a one-acre enclosure at a location in the northern U.S. The dire wolves normally live on a two-thousand-acre property far from the spot where I was headed. “They live like kings there,” Lamm told me. As I drove up to the enclosure, I saw Church, looking like Gandalf, with a bushy white beard, and Lamm, who, with his luxuriant, glossy facial hair, resembles Jon Snow, Ghost’s master. Matt James was present, and a phalanx of animal-care officers stood in a corner, in case there were problems.

I suddenly saw two shocks of white—the young dire wolves. Both attentive and wary, the animals seemed not from this world. They were impressively large: roughly eighty pounds apiece, at five months old. Lamm told me that they would likely weigh about a hundred and forty pounds at maturity—at least twenty pounds more than a large adult male gray wolf.

James said, of the pups, “It’s hard to tell their girth, because they’re so hairy.”

Church recalled when he could almost hold a pup in each hand—he’d seen them twelve weeks after their birth.

Much of the dire wolves’ behavior reminded me of dogs’. Romulus and Remus rested on their haunches in the sun. They chased falling leaves; they chewed sticks. One peed, and the other hurried over to roll in it. Other aspects seemed wolflike—when Romulus got nervous, he did a sideways slide while facing us. (James explained to me that this maneuver is a way to both check out a threat and look as large as possible.) And, when the wolves ran, they loped as if their lower legs had an extra joint. They didn’t howl, and their footfalls were silent. Was this distinctive dire-wolf behavior? How could anyone say?



*“Your name doesn’t happen to be Pam, does it? Not a deal-breaker, but it would save me some time and money.”*  
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Though Romulus and Remus are identical twins—they came from the same engineered cell line—I could see that they were already behaving differently. Remus was braver. He would come up within ten feet of us, then think better of it. Romulus hung back. They both gave off a sense of biding their time; since nothing formidable had yet been asked of them, they had done nothing formidable. But they could; their bodies were clearly powerful. At one point, Remus seemed interested in getting behind us—he stopped when James looked at him—and I was reminded of the legend on the Dire Wolves card in Magic: The Gathering: “It’s amazing how scared a city kid can get at a dog.” I was told to keep a respectful distance. Lamm, though, seemed unafraid. “I pet Remus last week,” he said proudly. “But, you know, that’s because I’ve been around them forever.” (James says that around the time they enter puberty—at roughly a year old—they will likely be deemed too aggressive to be petted ever again. “We’re about to hit a trigger point,” he said.)

Church was eagerly looking for signs that the molecular engineering had done more than make Colossal’s wolves large and fluffy. The team had targeted an enhancer sequence that could produce the dire wolf’s pronounced muzzle and ears. James explained that cranial attributes take a while to develop. “I can hardly wait for the annual checkup,” Church said. “That’s where we’re going to learn, you know, where these phenotypes really distinguish them from the gray wolf.”

James said that Church would get his chance when the pups had full CT scans this fall, after turning one. “That’ll give us an opportunity to really look at musculoskeletal changes,” he said. Meanwhile, Lamm took more of a horse-breeder’s approach. The two wolves began to lope, then briefly run. “Watch! Watch the fur, watch the thickness,” he said. “You can see the musculature in the sun. Do you see it—shoulders? Side? Back? That’s not typical.”

“And the way the wind ruffles them,” Church added. “There we go. Watch the fur!”

Mike Dougherty had made a video for Colossal to proclaim the dire wolves’ birth. A voice declared, “We are pleased to announce that, for the first time ever in history, we have successfully resurrected a prehistoric pop-culture icon.” The dire wolves also got a boost from the Trump Administration. The

Department of the Interior had sent Colossal a draft statement heralding the births as proof that “innovation—not regulation—had spawned American greatness.”

After seeing the wolves, though, I wondered how many people would accept that what I had just seen was a resurrection. Romulus and Remus embodied a lot of breakthroughs. No one else, Colossal said, had ever made so many precision edits to an animal genome at once. Nobody had ever birthed a mammal that had ancient DNA in it. “This is the first time these genes have been expressed in over ten thousand years,” Lamm pointed out. But to what extent were the pups dire wolves—as opposed to, say, gray wolves with some of the dire wolf’s physical traits? Did they act like dire wolves? No effort had been made to try to identify genes for behavior. Did they think or smell or sound like the extinct animals? “It’s not possible to bring back something exactly the way it was,” Shapiro told me, several times. That was a childish goal of the sort that had led her to challenge deëxtinction for so many years. She pointed out that, even within species, there was genetic variability, and environment and nongenetic factors alter living organisms. You had only to look at Romulus’s and Remus’s different personalities.

I spoke to Elinor Karlsson, a program director at the Broad Institute, a joint Harvard and M.I.T. facility. An expert on wolf and dog genetics, she is a member of Colossal’s advisory board. But she told me that she has some doubts about the company’s messaging: “I ask Beth, ‘Why are you calling this a dire wolf when it’s a gray wolf with seventeen or eighteen changes in its DNA?’ ” Shapiro has countered that she did what she set out to do: “We’ve succeeded in creating the *phenotype* of a dire wolf.”

This battle over definition had gone through a trial run just a few weeks earlier. Colossal had announced the existence of the “woolly mouse” that Abrams had spoken about at the species-lead meeting. The story was picked up everywhere—there were five billion media impressions in two weeks, Lamm told me. John Oliver and “[Saturday Night Live](#)” each played off it. (Colin Jost: “Now it’s on to step two—getting it drunk enough to have sex with an elephant.”) *Mashable* wrote that scientists had “accidentally created the cutest mice in the world.”

Science journalists were more cautious. They took issue with the fact that Colossal had used analogous genes from mice, not woolly-mammoth DNA, to achieve the effect of long, thick hair. A professor of evolutionary biology at the University of Buffalo did tell the Associated Press that the work was “technologically pretty cool.” But *Nature* noted that a Maine research facility has been offering its own long-haired mouse strain, named Wooly, for sale to scientists for the past twenty years.

Lamm was irritated when I mentioned the response to him. “We are the most advanced multicellular-synthetic-biology company on the planet,” he told me. The science behind the woolly mouse had been extraordinary, he reiterated—researchers had successfully made multiple gene edits on a living organism at the same time, a precursor to the quadruple-axel gene editing used in re-creating the dire wolf. “It was the most unique germ-line edit in any animal to date,” he said.

I asked Lamm if perhaps some overpromising by the Colossal brand had tamped down the applause. The word “de-extinction” appears nearly five hundred times on the company’s website; ordinary people could be excused for thinking that the word referred to creating an exact genetic replica of a once alive animal. Lamm responded, “I was warned when I started this business that some of the scientific community will be, if we are successful, jealous and somewhat frustrated.” He added, “You would think spending half a billion on deextinction and conservation would get them excited.”

Shapiro was more philosophical: “The pushback that we’re going to get from everybody is that it is not a hundred per cent of the way to the dire wolf. But we want to say with confidence that we’ve done this *functional* deextinction, and I think we have.” She added, “You know, as a scientist, would I have wanted to add another hundred million edits to the genome, to see what happened? Maybe—I mean, I don’t know.”

Church, for his part, is still hoping for a day when an entire extinct-mammal genome can be synthesized. Building a complete genome would likely be vastly harder than sequencing one and then synthesizing only small portions of it, but Church thinks that it’s technically possible. If you had the whole genome of an animal, and you inserted it into an egg, you would essentially be re-creating an individual from that extinct species. He has run the

numbers. He told me, “The world has successfully synthesized a yeast genome, which is twelve million base pairs”—the fundamental units of DNA. The woolly mammoth had approximately three billion base pairs. “We’re only two-hundred-fiftyfold away!” he calculated. But Karlsson cautioned me, “We’re extremely far away from that goal now.” Lamm, not shy about big projects, said that filling in every gap in an extinct animal’s genome was “a cold-fusion-level problem.” He added that the difference between using a whole genome and using computational genetics to approximate the useful portions of a genome is “an academic distinction—which is probably why it interests George Church.”

Until the genome synthesis of mammals becomes a reality, Colossal’s dire wolf may be the closest we can come to the resurrection of charismatic megafauna. Lamm says that Romulus, Remus, and Khaleesi will not be allowed to breed; moreover, the company anticipates genetically engineering just three to five more of the animals. They will be kept on their preserve, protected by a ten-foot-high security fence and surveilled by drones—and visited, one suspects, only by the occasional billionaire. Colossal’s wolves are now at the age when their parents would teach them to hunt, but of course they have no parents; in fact, they have never seen other wolves. (There are some deer and squirrels on their two-thousand-acre plot, but that’s about it for other animals.) Perhaps a decade or so from now, when the wolves die—nature cares for nothing, all shall go—this genetic-engineering moon shot may, like the real moon shot, be remembered as much for the amazing new technologies it throws off as for the goal in itself. And the dire wolf may have the distinction, after the poor bucardo, of being the second species brought back to life only to die again. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misstated the current stage of research on using Asian elephants as surrogates for woolly mammoths.*

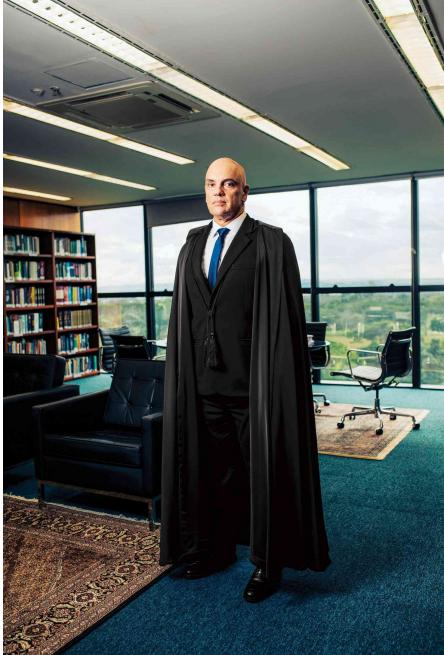
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[Letter from Brazil](#)

# The Brazilian Judge Taking On the Digital Far Right

Alexandre de Moraes's efforts to fight extremism online have pitted him against Jair Bolsonaro, Elon Musk, and Donald Trump.

By [Jon Lee Anderson](#)



*"If Goebbels were alive and had access to X, we would be doomed," de Moraes said. "The Nazis would have conquered the world." Photograph by Fábio Setti for The New Yorker*

The Brazilian Supreme Court, a wide, low, glass-faced building with swooping colonnades, sits near the national legislature and the Presidential palace, on a vast paved expanse known as the Three Powers Plaza. It is as public a place as you can find in Brasília. Still, few people seemed to notice when, on November 13th, a middle-aged man dressed like the Joker parked near the court, walked a few paces away, and set off an improvised explosive device inside his car, igniting a fireball that rose above the pavement. He made his way to the front of the court, where a sculpture of blindfolded Justice sits holding a sword across her lap. The man reached into a backpack, removed a cloth, and threw it at the statue, apparently intending to set it on fire. Then, as security guards approached, he hurled two more bombs at the building and opened his jacket to show that he was wearing a suicide vest. While the guards looked on, he lay down in front of Justice and

triggered another explosion, which thundered across the plaza, killing the man but leaving the statue unharmed.

The bomber was Francisco Wanderley Luiz, a fifty-nine-year-old locksmith from a small city in southern Brazil. When a police search team located the apartment where he had been staying, they sent in a remote-controlled robot first—a wise precaution, as it turned out. Wanderley had rigged a cabinet with another explosive device, which blew up when the robot approached.

In the febrile political atmosphere of Brazil, Wanderley’s public suicide inevitably had partisan implications. Investigators found that he had once run unsuccessfully for city council, as a member of the party dominated by the right-wing former President Jair Bolsonaro. For several years, Bolsonaro had engaged in a ferocious feud with the Supreme Court—and particularly with Alexandre de Moraes, a pugnacious jurist who is sometimes described as the second most powerful man in Brazil. After Bolsonaro took office, in 2019, de Moraes led an ever-expanding series of investigations into him and his family. As Bolsonaro’s supporters formed “digital militias” that flooded the internet with disinformation—claiming that political opponents were pedophiles, spreading blatant lies about their policies, inventing conspiracies—de Moraes fought to force them offline. Granted special powers by the judiciary, he suspended accounts belonging to legislators, business magnates, and political commentators for posts that he described as harmful to Brazilian democracy. His detractors called him a tyrant and an authoritarian, claiming that he was violating their rights.

In the fall of 2022, Bolsonaro ran for reelection against Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, a political veteran who has been the mainstay of the Brazilian left for decades. Bolsonaro insisted throughout the campaign, without evidence, that security flaws in voting machines made it possible to steal the election. At one point, he warned, “If need be, we will go to war.” After Lula took office, a mob of some four thousand Bolsonaro supporters gathered in the same plaza where Wanderley later blew himself up. In a spasm of rage, they trashed the Supreme Court, the legislature, and the Presidential palace—an uncanny reprise of the assault on the U.S. Capitol two years before.

Bolsonaro denied any involvement, and his supporters protested that he wasn’t even in Brazil at the time. But, to investigators, even his absence

from Lula's inauguration, the week before, seemed suspicious. Rather than observing the custom of handing the sash of office to the new President, Bolsonaro had flown to Florida, where he remained for three seemingly aimless months, meandering through Orlando malls and taking selfies with Brazilian expats.

Eventually, Bolsonaro returned to Brazil, and in June, 2023, he was found guilty of "abuse of political power" and the "improper use of communication channels" to sow distrust in the electoral system—not jailable offenses, but ones that barred him from office for eight years. His followers complained that he was the victim of a "lawfare" campaign, and Elon Musk took up the cause. On X, Musk repeatedly attacked de Moraes, referring to him as an "evil dictator cosplaying as a judge," and calling for his impeachment. At rallies, Bolsonaro's supporters waved banners with Musk's image and chanted, "Thank you, Elon!"

After Wanderley carried out his suicide attack, de Moraes described it as yet another manifestation of the virulent rhetoric that had permeated the Brazilian internet. "It grew under the guise of a criminal use of freedom of speech to offend, threaten, coerce," he said. The chief of the federal police, Andrei Passos Rodrigues, made it clear that he agreed. "Even if the visible action is individual, there is never just one person behind that action," he said. "It's always a group, or ideas of a group, or extremism, radicalism." Both suggested that Brazil was engaged in a war over who held the power to determine political reality. On one side were de Moraes and his allies. On the other was an international coalition of right-wing influencers, including Bolsonaro, Musk, and, increasingly, President Donald Trump.

De Moraes rarely speaks to journalists, but he agreed to meet with me to talk about what he calls "the new extremist digital populism." The first interview took place six weeks before Wanderley's attack, in de Moraes's office—an airy space with a wall of windows that look out toward Lake Paranoá. Since the spring, he had been clashing with Musk over social-media accounts that de Moraes said spread hate speech and malicious propaganda. When de Moraes called for their removal, X refused. When he imposed fines, they went unpaid, and eventually he froze bank accounts belonging to X and Starlink, Musk's satellite network. In August, de Moraes increased the financial penalties and implemented a nationwide ban on X. Musk briefly

circumvented the ban through Starlink, which provides internet service to many Brazilians, but he was evidently rattled. His representatives soon assented to de Moraes's orders, including taking down the offending accounts and paying the fines. De Moraes collected five million dollars and lifted the ban. Still, he knew that the battle with Big Tech was not over.

In his view, the fight over the internet began a decade and a half ago. “The far right noticed, during the Arab Spring, that social media could mobilize people without intermediaries,” he said. “At first, algorithms were refined for economic purposes, to captivate consumers. Then people realized how easy it was to redirect this toward political power.” He cast social media as a defining force of our time. “If Goebbels were alive and had access to X, we would be doomed,” he said. “The Nazis would have conquered the world.”

De Moraes told me that Brazil offered a significant testing ground for efforts to assert political power through the internet. Brazilians are particularly active online—they are among the world’s heaviest users of X and WhatsApp. And, unlike in other countries, the judiciary runs elections. “The far right wants to seize power—not by saying they oppose democracy, because that wouldn’t gain public support, but by claiming that democratic institutions are rigged,” de Moraes said. “It’s a highly structured, highly intelligent populism. Unfortunately, in Brazil and in the U.S., we haven’t yet learned how to fight back.”

Brazilians often refer to de Moraes as Xandão, or Big Alex, but he is not especially tall. He is, however, conspicuously fit; he runs, lifts weights, and spars with a Muay Thai partner several times a week. At fifty-six, he has a shaved head and a face that seems made for cross-examination, with a heavy brow, sharp cheekbones, and a jutting chin. He stares without appearing to care whether he’s being rude.

In our first meeting, de Moraes recalled that Musk had described him as “a cross between Voldemort and a Sith”—that is, between the bald “Harry Potter” villain and a bald “Star Wars” villain. “He mixed the two and said that’s me,” de Moraes told me, and laughed. “To be honest, I find it amusing.” He did seem offended, however, by Musk’s refusal to obey his orders: “Like all other companies, this one must comply with Brazilian law. The one who escalated the disobedience was the company under the direct

command of its largest shareholder. And at that moment Musk became personally responsible as well.”

In conversation, de Moraes often veers between jokes and brusque legal assertions. He grew up in São Paulo, in a middle-class family; his father was a businessman and his mother was a professor. As a young man, he attended law school at the University of São Paulo—a training ground for the Brazilian political class which, over the centuries, has educated a third of the country’s Presidents. De Moraes was ambitious, and he rose quickly. By his late twenties, he had become a prosecutor and written a best-selling book on constitutional law. In his thirties and forties, he held a series of government postings in São Paulo, as the city’s secretary of transportation and as the state’s secretary of justice and eventually its head of public security—essentially, the police commissioner. At the time, no one would have accused him of left-wing sympathies. He was a law-and-order advocate who professed zero tolerance for crime. “The most developed countries are those where people respect the law—where people know that if they break the law there will be consequences,” he told me. He commanded a vast force of more than a hundred thousand officers, and sometimes sent in uniformed men and armored vehicles to disperse protests.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Then as now, de Moraes tended to shrug off criticism. “To be honest, I’ve always been controversial,” he told me. Yet there are moments in his career that seem questionable even to his supporters. One was his leap to national politics. In 2016, President Dilma Rousseff, a protégée of Lula’s, was impeached by a group of right-wing legislators who included Bolsonaro. Vice-President Michel Temer took over, but his tenure was shadowed by a potential scandal: a blackmailer had hacked his wife’s phone and threatened to release compromising photographs of her. The story was made for the tabloids—Temer was seventy-five years old, and his wife, a former beauty queen, was thirty-two. When Temer explained his predicament, de Moraes quickly assembled a team of investigators to track down the blackmailer and arrest him. As if in gratitude, Temer named him Brazil’s minister of justice.

In office, de Moraes had a performative flair that did little to calm his detractors. Video from the time shows him striding through a field of illegal marijuana, slashing down the plants with a machete. “When I became minister of justice, the entire left called me a coup plotter,” he told me, with a shrug. “They hated me. Now the far right hates me.” A popular social-media meme plays on the change in his public image. It shows the footage of him hacking through the field of pot—but in reverse, so that his machete seems to make plants spring up from the ground.

De Moraes had been the justice minister for less than a year when a vacancy opened on the Supreme Court, and Temer made him a justice. The court has eleven members, each serving until the age of seventy-five, and they wield extraordinary power. “When it comes to the extent of authority of the Supreme Court, we have no clear limits,” Felipe Recondo, a Brazilian journalist who has written several books on the court, told me. “They argue everything of importance, from taxes to racial issues to abortion.” Unlike in the U.S., many consequential cases go directly to the court, without needing to pass through appeals. De Moraes expected to attract controversy again; perhaps he even welcomed it. But, he said, “neither my colleagues nor I could have predicted that Brazilian democracy would be at risk. It reached a level that was unimaginable.”

Before Bolsonaro entered the 2018 Presidential election, few political observers took him seriously. After retiring from the Army, having risen no higher than captain, he had spent decades in the legislature, where he was

distinguished mostly by his vitriol. He once described a female political opponent as too ugly to rape. Another time, he said that he would rather have a dead son than a gay one. Perhaps most alarming, he was openly nostalgic for the brutal military dictatorship that ruled Brazil from 1964 to 1985.

That regime began with a coup that ousted the left-wing President João Goulart. It was backed by the Lyndon Johnson Administration, during a grim era of U.S. support for Latin American dictatorships that purported to fight Communism. Brazil's was particularly zealous. In twenty-one years, tens of thousands of citizens were detained and tortured, more than two hundred were killed, and another two hundred or so were disappeared.

In March, a panel was convened at the University of São Paulo's law school to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of Brazil's restoration of democracy. (De Moraes teaches a weekly course at the school, which occupies a neoclassical edifice in the city's dilapidated downtown.) There were a half-dozen speakers, nearly all women, including a historian and two law professors. As an audience of about five hundred listened intently, they recalled their own youthful efforts to restore democracy and insisted on the importance of preserving it.

Cármén Lúcia Antunes Rocha, the country's only female Supreme Court justice, linked the fight against the regime with the current conflict over social media. "To be free is to be unshackled, to move beyond the conditions of oppression that marked our past," she said. "Instead of machines being subject to humans, humans are becoming subject to machines, and this brings new forms of tyranny. We are at risk of being chained by algorithms —by systems that know very well whom they serve."

The final speaker was Marcelo Rubens Paiva, a prominent writer whose father was among the regime's victims. In 1971, Rubens Paiva, a forty-one-year-old civil engineer and politician, was abducted from his home in Rio de Janeiro and tortured to death, leaving his family bereft. Marcelo, one of his five children, recounted the story in his memoir "I'm Still Here," which inspired this year's Academy Award winner for Best International Feature.

The men who abducted Paiva were indicted by federal prosecutors in 2014—but they have been protected by an amnesty law, passed as the regime was coming to an end, which has effectively kept the country from reckoning with the savagery of military rule. When Paiva spoke against the amnesty at the event, he received a standing ovation. “It’s the law that my mother fought for decades to overturn—not for revenge, but for justice,” he said. “And to this day we are still fighting for the truth.”

Part of what shocked people about Bolsonaro’s candidacy was that he didn’t just refuse to disavow the military regime; he called for it to return and finish remaking Brazilian society. “If a few innocent people die, that’s all right,” he said. The reverence for Paiva seemed to bother him particularly. When a statue was erected in Paiva’s memory, Bolsonaro spat on it—the kind of provocation that would eventually make him a star on social media.

Bolsonaro’s biggest advantage in the 2018 election, other than his gift for trolling, was that Lula was unable to run: he had been imprisoned on corruption charges, which were later reversed. Bolsonaro won by a wide margin, and took office promising to be a “defender of freedom.” Two of his sons also won seats in the legislature. But there were questions from the start about how online disinformation had skewed the results.

In the run-up to the election, the Brazilian internet was filled with an incredible volume of false and inflammatory claims. People passed around images purporting to show boxes of illicit ballots on a truck bed, or a left-wing politician posing with Fidel Castro. An analysis by Agência Lupa, a prominent Brazilian fact-checking organization, found that only four of the fifty most shared images were legitimate. Many of the most outrageous falsehoods were aimed at Bolsonaro’s opponent, Fernando Haddad. One meme showed a check for millions of dollars, ostensibly paid to Haddad by a criminal gang. Another, particularly widespread one claimed that he was distributing penis-shaped baby bottles in elementary schools, as part of a “gay kit.” A study published later found that almost eighty-four per cent of Bolsonaro voters believed it.

Those who called attention to disinformation became targets. Agência Lupa recorded as many as fifty-six thousand threats a month. Among the *bolsonaristas*’ greatest antagonists was Patrícia Campos Mello, a reporter at

Brazil's foremost newspaper, *Folha de São Paulo*. Campos Mello, now fifty-one years old, has spent decades covering major events in Brazil and around the world, including the wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria. When I got in touch to ask about her reporting on Bolsonaro, she responded from a frontline bivouac in eastern Ukraine.

During Bolsonaro's campaign, the Brazilian press began reporting on how a group of his close advisers, including his son Carlos, established what they called the "hate cabinet," which generated online propaganda and disseminated it through a network of supporters and bots. (Carlos and other associates have denied this.) Campos Mello broke a series of stories about businessmen who were financing a torrent of WhatsApp messages that denigrated Haddad. "They were hiring marketing agencies that offered assembly lines of disinformation," she told me. "They had dozens of people inside rooms, sending thousands of messages to databases of voters they bought on the gray market."

Campos Mello secured overwhelming evidence of how the firms operated, including photos, messages, and testimony from former employees. When the stories were published, she told me, "the Bolsonaro trolls went nuts." They spread claims that she had been fined by the Supreme Court for spreading false information, that the story had been paid for by Lula's party, and that she was a Communist. Strangers called her phone, shouting insults and warning that they would attack her. "Then they started sending messages threatening my son, who was six at the time," she recalled. "People yelled at me in the street, hacked my phone."

She cancelled public appearances, and the newspaper hired her a bodyguard. But she published more stories, showing how Bolsonaro's social-media operation had gained access to voter databases and hired foreign agencies to promote falsehoods online. Bolsonaro sued for defamation. The suit failed, but the campaign of intimidation only grew more intense.

In February, 2020, Campos Mello had just returned from covering Bolsonaro's visit with the Indian Prime Minister when the Brazilian legislature convened a hearing about disinformation in the electoral campaign. At the hearing, one of her sources testified—but with representation from a lawyer with ties to the far-right party of Bolsonaro's

Vice-President. To her astonishment, the source claimed that she had offered sex in exchange for information. His testimony also included pictures of the social-media operation, which inadvertently confirmed her reporting, but that fact was quickly overshadowed. Soon after the hearing, Bolsonaro's son Eduardo gave a speech from the floor of the legislature, accusing her of seducing sources to entrap his father.

"It was the end of the world," Campos Mello said. Bolsonaro supporters in the legislature and on the internet called her a whore. The worst invective was fuelled by an influencer named Allan dos Santos, she said: "He posted porn stuff about me, tagged me, and called on his supporters to make memes." Trolls created fake pornographic images of her, and some threatened rape. A few days after the hearing, Bolsonaro told a group of supporters that Campos Mello "wanted to get the scoop at any price." In Portuguese, the word for "scoop" also means "anus." After that, the memes and rape threats began referring to anal sex.

Finally, Campos Mello decided to sue Bolsonaro and a group of his supporters, including Eduardo and dos Santos. She also published recordings of the interviews with her source, to demonstrate that there was no sex involved. Meanwhile, Lula's Workers' Party filed a suit, based on her reporting, that argued that Bolsonaro's online manipulations disqualifed his candidacy. The case eventually landed before de Moraes and his fellow-justices, who ruled unanimously against overturning the election—though de Moraes warned that such tactics could be disqualifying in the future. "Justice is blind, but it is not foolish," he said.

Over time, Campos Mello was largely vindicated. WhatsApp acknowledged the irregular use of its platform during the election and promised to take legal action against the marketing agencies involved. New laws were passed to prohibit mass messaging on behalf of candidates. And all the men Campos Mello accused of slandering her were found guilty. "So far, Allan dos Santos lost the lawsuit, and owes me money, but he is currently hiding in the U.S.," she told me. "Eduardo Bolsonaro lost in several courts and is now appealing to the Supreme Court, saying that he has parliamentary immunity. But immunity to suggest that journalists are basically whores?"

The right to free speech is guaranteed by Brazilian law, but it is less absolute than in the United States. As de Moraes notes, the country's constitution, ratified in 1988 after a history of coups and the recent military dictatorship, was designed in part to "resist anti-democratic movements." Racist speech is forbidden. So are "crimes against the democratic rule of law" (such as spreading falsehoods about the electoral system) and "crimes against honor" (such as claiming that your opponents are raping children).

Among the messages spread by Bolsonaro's "hate cabinet" were insistent accusations that the Supreme Court was illegitimate. Before long, threats began circulating online about kidnapping or killing justices. Ordinarily, the prosecutor general's office would investigate such threats, but it apparently never did. So the Supreme Court, invoking a statute that empowered it to investigate any "violation of criminal law within the premises of the Court," opened its own inquiry—essentially becoming victim, prosecutor, and judge. De Moraes was put in charge of the effort. He was experienced in police work, and, unlike most of the other justices, he was adept at political maneuvering. As Recondo pointed out, he was also unusually tenacious. "If you give him a mission, he'll pursue it to the end," he said. "And, for him, this case was like blood in front of a shark."

Bolsonaro was already surrounded by scandal. His son Flávio had been found to be paying a salary to the wife and the mother of a fugitive policeman who was wanted for running a murder-for-hire operation. There were questions about the family's real-estate holdings, which included some fifty properties around Rio—purchased, implausibly, on Bolsonaro's government salary. De Moraes began to investigate, and, Recondo said, he never really stopped: "Bolsonaro kept committing crimes, and so Xandão kept leading new investigations."

During the *COVID-19* pandemic, Bolsonaro dismissed the danger, even as the country endured one of the highest death tolls in the world. When the health ministry stopped publishing daily statistics on the spread of the disease, de Moraes ordered it to begin releasing the data within forty-eight hours. Eventually, demonstrators began to gather outside the Supreme Court, angry about the investigations into Bolsonaro and about pandemic restrictions. Bolsonaro sometimes made appearances. On one occasion, he rode into the crowd on a horse, giving a jaunty thumbs-up; on another, he

buzzed overhead in a military helicopter, waving from the window. Protesters insisted that they were fighting for freedom, which frustrated de Moraes. “The far right has successfully manipulated these words to make people believe that they are the true defenders of democracy,” he told me. “It’s an impressive feat of brainwashing.”

At times, though, de Moraes’s investigations strained the limits of his authority. He blocked more than a hundred social-media accounts without providing explanations to the platform. After he banned X, he imposed a fine of almost nine thousand dollars a day on anyone who accessed the platform through a V.P.N.

You don't hear much  
about the 4<sup>th</sup> Little Pig —  
he lived in a house  
made of ASBESTOS



*Cartoon by Michael Maslin*

In one controversial case, eight businessmen were griping about the government in a WhatsApp group, and one of them wrote, “I prefer a coup to the return of the Workers’ Party.” De Moraes had their homes searched and their bank accounts frozen. (Two of the men are still under investigation, but the cases against the other six have been abandoned, for lack of evidence.) Rafael Mafei, a professor at the University of São Paulo’s law school, said that the decision was “on the razor’s edge of legality.” Yet the justices had reason for concern. One official told the *Times* that extremists had been found to be talking about assaulting justices, tracking their movements, and examining a floor plan of a judicial building.

The court that de Moraes had joined was not particularly liberal. The justices had resisted taking up the decriminalization of abortion, which is largely illegal in Brazil. They had ruled both for and against Lula in cases concerning corruption allegations and his eligibility for office. But during the Bolsonaro years the justices came together in support of de Moraes. “The court has always been like a weathervane—flexible, adaptable, basically a reflection of most of Brazilian society,” Recondo said. “The Supreme Court was eleven islands. Bolsonaro united them.”

In June, 2022, Brazil’s judiciary elected de Moraes to lead the Superior Electoral Court, which oversees the country’s general elections. At his inauguration—held in a formally decorated chamber, with several Presidential candidates present—he set out guidelines for the campaign. His speech contained an unmistakable warning for Bolsonaro. “Freedom of speech is not freedom to destroy democracy,” he said. “Freedom of speech is not freedom to spread hatred and prejudice. Freedom of speech does not allow the spreading of hate speech and ideas contrary to the constitutional order.” Bolsonaro, who had sat apart from the other candidates, frowned furiously. When de Moraes praised the integrity of the electoral system, he pointedly refused to applaud.

Bolsonaro’s efforts to discredit the election had already found allies abroad. His son Eduardo had travelled to the United States, where the businessman and Trump ally Mike Lindell helped him stage a presentation about electoral fraud in Brazil. Steve Bannon amplified the accusations. De Moraes told me that the right wing used similar tactics in both countries: “In the U.S., Trump accused mail-in voting of being fraudulent. In Brazil, Bolsonaro accused electronic voting machines of being fraudulent.” (De Moraes likes to joke that, if Brazilians voted by sending smoke signals, the right would claim that the Electoral Court was blowing the smoke off track.) “It’s not about the voting method,” he said. “It’s about declaring the system rigged, to justify seizing power to ‘fix democracy.’ ”

To an alarming extent, Bolsonaro’s campaign worked. Reports of disinformation on the internet increased more than sixteen thousand per cent from the previous election. Three-quarters of Bolsonaro supporters told pollsters that the results of the vote could not be trusted. De Moraes scrambled to respond. The Electoral Court expanded his authority to shut

down online attacks on the integrity of the election. He and his fellow-jurists issued dozens of decisions, restricting political propaganda, disqualifying candidates who misrepresented themselves, and deploying federal agents to insure safety on election day. When highway police stopped buses carrying voters from leftist strongholds to polling places, he ordered them to desist.

On election night, de Moraes went on television to announce that Lula had won. To demonstrate unity, he had assembled senior officials from around the country to stand with him. He told an elated crowd, “I hope from this election onward the attacks on the electoral system will finally stop—the delusional speeches, the fraudulent news.”

Yet many Brazilians remained anxious. In an interview with me at the time, Lula expressed concern that Bolsonaro’s efforts to retain the Presidency had powerful supporters. I had recently visited an Army garrison outside São Paulo where hundreds of loyalists, many of them wearing the yellow and green of the Brazilian flag, thronged the entrance, praying, banging drums, and demanding that the military intervene to keep Lula from office. Similar protests were taking place at garrisons across Brazil, and it seemed obvious that they had at least the passive acquiescence of the armed forces. “We need to find out who is financing them,” Lula told me, “because this is not spontaneous.”

Bolsonaro’s allies rejected warnings that the protests would turn violent. His son Flávio, borrowing a tactic from the right wing’s response to the January 6th attacks, told a Brazilian newspaper that in the U.S. “people followed the problems in the electoral system, were outraged, and did what they did. There was no command from President Trump, and there will be no command from President Bolsonaro.” But de Moraes knew that Bolsonaro was determined not to give up. “We suspected that something might happen during the inauguration—especially because, just a few days earlier, there had been a bomb attempt at the Brasília airport,” he told me. “And on December 12th, after the certification of the election results, rioters stormed the federal-police headquarters. So we were prepared to insure that nothing would happen on inauguration day.” After the ceremony passed without incident, the security forces felt that the threat was over, he said. “But a week later it happened—the January 8th attack.”

During the riots, vandals breached the Supreme Court building, broke open a cabinet containing de Moraes's robe, and carried the door into the crowd as a trophy. De Moraes seemed personally affronted. "These people are not civilized," he said in a speech later. "Just look what they did." He began issuing arrest warrants within hours of the attack; more than a thousand people were eventually detained. "The biggest risk was the possibility of a domino effect," he told me. "Would military police forces in other states—some of which supported Bolsonaro—also rise up? Would certain governors support the coup attempt?" He went on, "I had to act immediately, in the middle of the night." To neutralize officials whom he suspected of aiding the uprising, he suspended the governor of the Federal District and ordered the arrest of the district's secretary of security and the commander of its military police. (The case against the governor has been shelved; the two other men deny wrongdoing.) "This sent a clear message to the entire country," de Moraes said. "We will not tolerate chaos in Brazil."

Elon Musk, without apparent irony, has accused de Moraes of being an unelected autocrat. "How did Alexandre de Moraes become the dictator of Brazil?" he tweeted. "He has Lula on a leash." More thoughtful critics note that de Moraes leads far more inquiries than any other justice, and that many are kept sealed, making them difficult to assess. Certainly, some of the inquiries into Bolsonaro are for trivial offenses. One accused him of illegally pawning luxury watches given to him by Middle Eastern governments.

Recondo said that de Moraes had benefitted from Brazilians' affinity for tough guys: "We revere caudillos—strongmen who make decisions that go beyond the limits of the law." Yet he believed that de Moraes's campaign against disinformation was neither personal nor ideological. "Xandão really believes in the importance of the case, and moreover he is supported by his fellow-justices." The risk was in creating unaccountable authority. "I personally can't say whether it's a good thing that one man has so much power," he told me. "Because in the end we don't really know who de Moraes is and what he might do."

Some Brazilians argue that the concerns about social media should be addressed through legislation rather than litigation. "I do not believe this discussion should be taking place in the Supreme Court," the

congresswoman Tabata Amaral told me. “It should be taking place in Congress, where the public can discuss and debate the issues.”

Amaral, who is thirty-one, has been in the legislature for six years. After studying government and astrophysics at Harvard, she joined a center-left party and built a reputation as an advocate for public education. She achieved early prominence for a hearing in which she questioned Bolsonaro’s hapless education minister—a six-minute interrogation so embarrassing that he was fired soon afterward.

Together with another legislator, Amaral spent several years promoting legislation to hold social-media companies responsible for fake news and hate speech. But, each time they presented the bill, the tech platforms came after them, she told me. Spotify and Instagram spread critical messages, and YouTube displayed an “urgent alert,” warning content creators that the bill would harm them. Google took out full-page newspaper ads and put a link on its home page, just below the search bar, claiming that the legislation “could increase confusion about what is true or false in Brazil.” Eventually, the bill was pulled, and now Amaral and her allies were focussed on smaller initiatives. They had recently succeeded in restricting cellphones in schools, a modest step toward reducing social media’s power over children.

Part of the problem is that, in the Brazilian legislature, corruption and criminality are so endemic as to be inextricable from the job of governance. Amaral lamented that the failures of Congress had left the Supreme Court to intervene. “There is something fundamental about the democratic process,” she said. But she acknowledged that, without the court’s actions, Brazil’s democracy would be at much greater risk.

In some ways, Brazil has stronger legal guardrails than the United States. “If you are convicted of a criminal offense, you cannot run for political office,” Amaral said. “Trump would not have been reelected here.” But, even though Bolsonaro was forbidden to seek reelection, he could still do a lot of damage. He had already wrested a significant constituency from Brazil’s traditional conservatives. “Now you have to go to the extreme right if you want to be a *bolsonarista*,” she said. Amaral opposes expanding abortion rights, so the left doesn’t always see her as a natural ally, but her views on social media make her a target of the right. She has been called “Xandão

with a skirt,” and her opponent in the most recent election launched social-media attacks blaming Amaral for her own father’s suicide. “The reality is that, as with Trump, if Bolsonaro is against you, you’re fucked,” she said.

Amaral’s co-sponsor on the Fake News Law, as it became known, was Alessandro Vieira, a fifty-year-old former state police chief from the rural northeast. Vieira, elected as an anti-corruption crusader, had supported Bolsonaro in 2018. After witnessing his social-media abuses, though, he began working on the bill. In the 2022 election, he supported Lula.

Vieira told me that the goal of legislation should be to hold platforms accountable, not to penalize users. “There’s not a single comma in the text of the law criminalizing freedom of expression,” he said. But he’d found the bill impossible to pass. Brazil had devised a framework of internet law “in a more romantic era, when people still thought of the internet as a neutral, democratic space,” he said. “Now the vast majority of Congress is afraid of Big Tech’s retaliation. Imagine running for office with the algorithm working against you!” In his view, the court’s efforts to control social media were an uncomfortable necessity. “This ongoing inquiry is authoritarian, and authoritarian tools should always be fought,” he said. Yet, for now, “it’s the only possible solution.”

The issue was a global one, he added: “I think all countries will face it, and none of them are prepared—except maybe dictatorships like China or Russia, which have their own information ecosystems.” Democracies would be more vulnerable. Gesturing at his phone, he said, “The venom of communication from this little device makes part of the population applaud it and agree.”

After the January 8th attack on the Brazilian capital, Bolsonaro ridiculed the idea that the riots represented a coup attempt. The protesters, he said, were nothing more than “little old women with Brazilian flags and Bibles under their arms.” Later, investigators found that several of his close associates had documents outlining schemes to forcibly keep him in office.

I asked de Moraes how close democracy had come to falling in Brazil. “There was definitely a risk,” he replied. “And there still is.” He noted that military officers were involved, along with senior commanders of the

military police who guard the capital. All were now facing prosecution. “The strategy was to occupy government buildings—not necessarily to destroy them,” he said. “But you can’t control a mob. Their real goal was to enter the buildings, refuse to leave, and create a crisis so severe that the Army would be forced to intervene. Once the military arrived, they would request support for a coup. But the plan failed. Even though some military leaders supported the coup, the armed forces as an institution realized that no other power would side with them.”

When I asked de Moraes if he believed that Bolsonaro had masterminded the uprising, he dodged the question, saying that the investigation was in the hands of the federal police, which is independent from the Supreme Court. “Since I may have to rule on this case, I can’t comment,” he told me. Weeks later, the findings became public, in an eight-hundred-and-eighty-four-page report that cited Bolsonaro as a direct participant in a coup plot. The objective was not just to take over the government; there was also an operation, code-named Green and Yellow Dagger, to kill Lula and his running mate and to “neutralize” de Moraes. So far, five men, including police and military officers and a close Bolsonaro confidant, have been arrested. (They have all denied wrongdoing.)

The plotters coördinated through a Signal chat, called World Cup 2022, in which each identified himself as a national team: Austria, Germany, Ghana. They tracked de Moraes’s movements for weeks—during which, he told me, he attended a ceremony with Lula and travelled to São Paulo for a birthday lunch with his family. On December 15th, after he returned to Brasília, a group of heavily armed assailants surrounded his house, planning to kill or kidnap him, discard their phones, and escape. At the last minute, though, a message went out to the chat group, calling off the strike. (“Abort . . . Austria.”) De Moraes surmised that they had failed to secure support from the military; the day before, a proposal to annul the election and announce a state of siege had circulated among the leaders of the armed forces, but several had refused to sign on. De Moraes suggested that his life had been saved by connections in the armed forces, forged during his time as justice minister. “I joke with my security team that I couldn’t die,” he told me. “The hero of the movie has to continue.”

After Bolsonaro became a suspect in a coup plot, authorities seized his passport, to prevent him from leaving the country. But he and his allies hoped to get help from abroad. When Trump won reëlection, last November, Bolsonaro told the *Wall Street Journal*, “Trump is back, and it’s a sign we’ll be back, too.” Before Trump’s Inauguration, video circulated of Bolsonaro seeing off his wife at the airport and explaining morosely that she would attend in his place.

Trump has made few public statements about the situation in Brazil, but there are hints that he shares Bolsonaro’s frustrations with being censured for lying on social media. On January 20th, the White House released a statement complaining that the Biden Administration had “trampled free speech rights by censoring Americans’ speech on online platforms . . . under the guise of combatting ‘misinformation,’ ‘disinformation,’ and ‘malinformation.’ ”



“And have you considered empathizing with the stupid, sorry little son of a bitch?”  
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

On February 19th, Trump Media filed suit against de Moraes in the U.S., accusing him of censorship for ordering the social-media platform Rumble to remove the account of Allan dos Santos, the Bolsonaro supporter who helped lead the campaign against Campos Mello. (The Brazilian government has unsuccessfully sought to have dos Santos extradited from the U.S.) De Moraes described the lawsuit as “completely baseless,” adding, “Just as I

cannot, here in Brazil, issue a ruling that mandates something in the United States, no judge there can declare that my order in Brazil is invalid. But it's a political maneuver, which ended up getting press coverage."

Later that month, the Georgia congressman Rich McCormick released a statement that aligned Bolsonaro with Trump and Musk. "The indictment of former President Jair Bolsonaro is not about justice—it is about eliminating political competition through judicial lawfare, just as President Trump was targeted before making the greatest political comeback in history," he wrote. McCormick also argued that, by placing limits on Musk's business in Brazil, de Moraes was violating Americans' rights to free speech: "The United States cannot allow foreign judges to dictate what Americans can say, read, or publish." He called for Trump and Congress to take action, writing, "Moraes and his enablers must face real consequences, including Magnitsky sanctions, immediate visa bans, and economic penalties."

Other Republicans soon convened a hearing, in which the C.E.O. of Rumble and other speakers were invited to discuss a "crisis of democracy, freedom, and rule of law" in Brazil. Representative Chris Smith, of New Jersey, accused Lula and de Moraes of "the political abuse of legal procedures to persecute political opposition," adding, "Friends don't let friends commit human-rights abuses." During the testimony, Bolsonaro's son Eduardo led a rowdy contingent of Brazilian sympathizers in the audience.

Eduardo, who spent the night of Trump's election at Mar-a-Lago, cheering along with the crowd, has increasingly presented himself as an adjunct of the Administration. Last month, he announced that he would take a leave of absence from his congressional seat to move to the U.S., so that he can urge Trump to intervene on his father's behalf.

He already has an ally in Musk, who has stirred up the Brazilian right by claiming that it is suffering some of the most severe censorship in the world, at the hands of "an outright criminal of the worst kind." Last April, Jair Bolsonaro held a rally on the beach at Copacabana, where an enormous crowd gathered to applaud his calls for "free expression." Bolsonaro urged his supporters to give Musk a special ovation. "He's a man who's had the courage to show—already with some evidence, and more will surely come—where our democracy is heading and how much freedom we've lost," he

said. Later, when an X user asked archly why there had been no such rallies for de Moraes, Musk replied, “Because he is against the will of the people and, therefore, democracy.”

In the days after Wanderley blew himself up outside the Supreme Court, Lula began receiving foreign dignitaries at the G-20 summit, in Rio. At an event that week, the First Lady, Janja Lula da Silva, spoke about the imperative of fighting misinformation. When her speech was interrupted by the sound of a ship’s horn from a nearby harbor, she cracked, “I think it’s Elon Musk. I’m not afraid of you.” Then she added, in English, “Fuck you, Elon Musk.”

Janja’s comment caused a brief media sensation, and Musk responded, on X, “They will lose the next election.” But little else came of it, at least publicly. While Trump aimed threats and ultimatums at Mexico, Canada, and Panama, he was quiet about Brazil. In mid-March, the new Administration levied tariffs on steel, a major Brazilian export, but the announcement was made without commentary.

Still, when I saw Lula the morning after the tariffs took effect, he suggested that a showdown was coming. “There’s something in the air that worries me, which is the weakening of the democratic system,” he said. “In Europe, half of the twenty-seven countries already have right-wing authoritarian regimes. In Latin America, we see that anti-democratic, anti-institutional movements are also growing, and half of society is in favor of this.”

He suggested that the internet made it nearly impossible to govern. “I don’t think that in any country in the world we still have a sophisticated way to insure sovereignty,” he said. “The nation-state is very weakened, and it’s not just Brazil. It’s the U.S., China, everyone.” In a previous era, he said, “authoritarianism meant closing Congress, shutting down the judiciary, or putting troops in the streets. Now someone can speak to two hundred and thirteen million Brazilians without ever having been to Brazil.” When I mentioned that Musk’s Starlink satellite system was being used extensively by illegal gold miners who are devastating the Brazilian Amazon, Lula nodded grimly. “I visited the region and saw the predominance of Musk’s antennas,” he said. “We will not let someone who hates our administration, who hates democracy and our justice system, take control of the information

of a country and a region like the Amazon.” Slapping the table, he said, “No company, no matter how powerful it is, will put our democracy at risk.”

Lula said that Brazil was working with the U.N. Secretary-General to devise a proposal for an international treaty on regulating social media. Less promisingly, he said that Brazil would raise the issue at a summit this July for the *BRICS* nations, with representatives attending from China, India, South Africa, Russia, and Indonesia—countries that have largely addressed their problems with online discourse by criminalizing dissent.

In March, I met de Moraes again at his office. He seemed more relaxed than he had five months before. By then, the prosecutor general had charged Bolsonaro and thirty-three others with fomenting a coup. (Bolsonaro denies the charges, claiming political persecution.) “The responsibility of each person now has to be determined in court, because this is when they will present their defense,” de Moraes said. “But the entire narrative of political persecution, the claim of personal enmity, all of that has collapsed, because it wasn’t just the federal police that accused them—the prosecutor general himself decided to press charges.”

I asked whether there was a scenario in which Bolsonaro could regain power. “It’s possible that Bolsonaro will be acquitted in the criminal case, because the trial is only just beginning,” de Moraes said. “But he has two convictions from the Superior Electoral Court for ineligibility. So there’s no possibility of his return—because both cases have already been appealed and are now in the Supreme Court. Only the Supreme Court could reverse them, and I don’t see the slightest possibility of that happening.” De Moraes acknowledged that Bolsonaro’s wife or one of his sons could run for President, with his endorsement. But, he said, “none of them—whether his children or his wife—have the same relationships with the armed forces that he had.”

In the coming months, the court will issue a momentous ruling on internet regulation. Under current laws, digital platforms are liable for users’ content only if they have ignored a court order to remove it. The court now has to decide whether they can be held liable before such an order is issued—obliging internet companies to carry out exhaustive policing of their users.

De Moraes cast such regulations as a means of taking back control. Social media is “now the greatest power of all,” he said. “Not only does it influence people, but it generates the most advertising revenue in the world, giving it the financial strength to influence elections.” He compared tech corporations to the East India Company, the colonial-age trading firm that dominated many of the countries where it operated. “They want to create a new East India Company to control the world,” he said. “They don’t want to respect any country’s jurisdiction, because, in reality, they seek to be immune to nations.”

De Moraes’s most stringent actions have only inflamed Bolsonaro’s followers. In the streets, it has become common to hear complaints that free speech is dead and that the Supreme Court has dictatorial power. Oliver Stuenkel, a prominent political scientist in São Paulo, largely supports the court’s actions, but says that its assertiveness carries risks. “Brazil ended up being the poster child for how you protect democracy over the past few years,” he said. “The challenge is how to insure that the court goes back to normal, because I think it’s not healthy for any democracy to have the Supreme Court be a key political actor all the time.”

But de Moraes does not regard the crisis as over. “I believe President Trump’s recent actions will push governments to realize that if they don’t act now to control social media it will be too late,” he said. European leaders were already considering stricter rules. In August, French officials arrested the founder of Telegram, for allowing his platform to host criminal endeavors that ranged from drug trafficking to terrorism. (Telegram denies wrongdoing.) De Moraes noted that he had suspended Telegram three years ago, after it repeatedly flouted court orders. More recently, he suspended Rumble, for failing to maintain a legal representative in Brazil. “People are going to start saying I’m persecuting everyone now,” he joked. “At this rate, I’ll be accused of persecuting Trump, too.” He seemed unconcerned by the prospect of pressure from the U.S. “They can file lawsuits, they can have Trump speak,” he said. “If they send an aircraft carrier, then we’ll see. If the aircraft carrier doesn’t reach Lake Paranoá, it won’t influence the ruling here in Brazil.”

As we finished talking, de Moraes walked me out past a display of a few prized objects. They included a jersey from his beloved Corinthians soccer

team and two wooden effigies of Afro-Brazilian deities. He explained that they were Xangô and Exu—“law and order,” he said. Wait, I said. Isn’t Xangô a war god? De Moraes just smiled and ushered me through the door. ♦

By Jonathan Blitzer

By Andrew Marantz

By Dan Kaufman

By Julian Lucas

By Nathan Heller

By Charlie Tyson

By David D. Kirkpatrick

By Joshua Yaffa

By E. Tammy Kim

By Joshua Rothman

By Emily Witt

By Amanda Petrusich

# Takes

- Margaret Atwood on Mavis Gallant's "Orphans' Progress"

By [Margaret Atwood](#)

**New Takes on the classics. Throughout our centennial year, we're revisiting notable works from the archive. Sign up to receive them directly in your inbox.**

In 1965, when I was twenty-five and starting out as a writer, I was reading *The New Yorker*, as all of us young writers did. The magazine published short stories and I wrote them, though, at that time, not very many of them and not very well. In the April 3rd issue, I came across a story called “[Orphans’ Progress](#),” by Mavis Gallant, a writer I hadn’t heard of. Oddly, it was set in Canada; most of the stories in *The New Yorker* took place in the United States, and why not? It was an American publication.

In the story, two girls living with a dysfunctional mother in Montreal are taken away from her by well-meaning social workers. The mother is a mess —her husband is dead, she’s become an alcoholic, she’s been sleeping with a series of increasingly awful men, her shoddy abode is exceptionally dirty, her daughters are not bathed, they are not fed healthy food—but the girls love her and she loves them, in her own fashion. Filthy though it was, her home was their nest, and now they have been removed from it. They are sent off to a grandmother in Ontario who is the epitome of cold, self-righteous Protestant virtue. “Whether it is the right thing or the wrong thing as far as the children are concerned, it is the end of love,” the narrator says.

The grandmother’s maid becomes the children’s main informant, filling their ears with stories about how dirty and feckless their mother was, and how “Christian” it was of their straightlaced grandmother to rescue them. After the grandmother dies, the children are shuffled off to a francophone uncle’s home, where their cousins treat them cruelly and make fun of their accents, and then into a convent run by sadistic nuns, where they are not allowed to see their own bodies when taking a bath: the younger girl must wear a rubber apron, the older one a shift. They grow up and are separated. When the younger one passes her mother’s former home—which she has longed for, off and on, throughout her unloved childhood—she no longer recognizes it.

I was deeply impressed by this story: strong, clear-eyed, meticulously detailed, and ambiguous. Were the children better off for having been

“rescued”? What would their lives have been like if they’d stayed with their mother? No answers: the reader must decide.

Years later, I came to know Mavis through my partner, Graeme Gibson, who interviewed her for a Canadian Broadcasting Company literary show called “Anthology.” Whenever we were in Paris, where she lived then, we would see her. She preferred Graeme—with his military bearing and background, he must have reminded her of “the boys” she’d known as a wartime newspaper reporter in Montreal—but she came to tolerate me, once she realized I was not just an auxiliary fluff ball. She was a tough little nut, having had to make her own way from an early age: her personal story had parallels with “Orphans’ Progress.” She was packed off to a convent school when she was four—four!—her somewhat batty mother’s excuse being that the nuns had the best French accents. The reality was that Mavis’s mother didn’t have much time for her, being—like the grandmother in the story—not very maternal, though, in her case, this was attributable not to rigidity but to narcissism. Mavis’s father—whom Mavis loved but considered weak—had died early. Like the orphans, Mavis was bilingual, and had a ringside view of the differences and tensions between the anglophones and the francophones in Canada. In her stories, however, she gave no quarter to either: both can be mean, both can be what the Germans call *kinderfeindlich*—unfriendly to children.

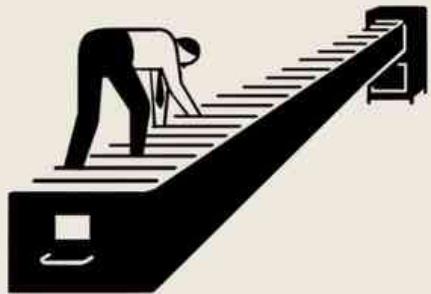
Despite her difficult childhood, Mavis persevered, through grit, bloody-mindedness, an absence of self-pity, and an ironic sense of humor. Lunch with her was always hilarious and often horrifying: the tales she told about her life exceeded in unlikely gruesomeness even her own fiction. She certainly had the “cold eye” that Yeats recommended for writers, and she saw through subterfuge, no matter who was trying it on.

During one of Graeme’s and my visits to Paris, the Canadian Embassy threw a dinner party for us. Mavis was there and took a dim view of the scanty amount of wine that was provided. When dessert arrived, one of the other guests—a Canadian—said, “This has got booze in it.”

“Well,” Mavis said, audibly enough for everyone nearby to hear. “I should certainly *hope* so.” ♦

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[Read the original story.](#)



### Orphans' Progress

The children did not know that they were living under what would later be called “unsheltered conditions.” They didn’t know that they were uneducated, and dirty, and in danger.

By Naomi Fry  
By Willing Davidson  
By Jennifer Wilson  
By Deborah Treisman  
By Alice Gregory  
By Graciela Mochkovsky  
By Adam Kirsch

## **Shouts & Murmurs**

- [Return of the Plastic Straw](#)

By [John Kenney](#).

It is “the Policy of the United States to end the use of paper straws.” . . . [Justice] Department components shall take appropriate action to identify and eliminate any portion of policy or guidance documents designed to disfavor plastic straws.

—*Memo from the Office of the Attorney General of the United States, March 11, 2025.*

It is the policy of the United States to end the use of Dijon mustard. Mustard is yellow and made in America and not in France. France is a stupid place. The Justice Department and components will identify and eliminate any mustard that isn’t yellow French’s Mustard, although henceforth the name “French’s” will be eliminated in favor of the word “Normal.” This policy enforces not only the use of yellow mustard but also the elimination of such condiments as chutney and piccalilli. The words “chutney” and “piccalilli” are, as of this writing, illegal in the United States, because no one knows what they are.

Want to know another new policy? Well, it is now the policy of the United States that a certain Yale University singing group will end the use of the name “Whiffenpoof.” The word “Whiffenpoof” will be stricken from use, and the Justice Department will determine a new name (possibilities include Men of Steel, Seal Team Twelve, or Erection Friends). The group will no longer sing songs about rainbows. They will sing about camping or deer hunting or dressing a deer and hanging a deer’s head on a wall in a private men’s club. Songs about rainbows are no longer consistent with the policy of the United States. You think we’re kidding? Go sing a song about a rainbow and find out.

Guess what else it is now the policy of the United States to ban? Anything Joseph Campbell says. Granted, he’s dead, but there are a lot of YouTube videos of him where he is saying things like “The dream is a private myth, and the myth is a public dream.” No one can say that or write that. That’s confusing and scary. What you can say is something to the effect of “Oh, I slept well, thank you, and I had a weird dream where I was fishing on a lake but I was only an inch tall and I was in my underpants.”

The Justice Department once saw a commercial for the Ginsu knife that began like this: “In Japan, the hand can be used like a knife.” It is now the policy of the United States to begin all television commercials with the sentence “In America, the hand can be used like a knife.” It does not matter what the product is. Just figure it out.

A clarification on the mustard thing: Several people have suggested that the Justice Department was insinuating that French mustard is “gay.” At no time did the Justice Department use that word, nor would we use that word. Not all French things are gay. And while we did change the name of French’s Mustard to Normal Mustard, the suggestion that “Normal” refers to heterosexual conduct vis-à-vis mustard is ungrounded and not legally provable. The Justice Department supports all people, including white heterosexual men in golf clothing.

Hi. It’s the Justice Department again. We literally just got back from a road trip to the National Air and Space Museum in Chantilly, Virginia, which is awesome, by the way. But that trip was ruined on the way back when we stopped at a roadside diner and spilled hot coffee on our pants and tried to clean it up, only to find that the diner used flimsy napkins made of recycled fibres. So. It is now the policy of the United States of America to end the use of flimsy napkins at, like, gas stations and coffee shops. The Justice Department will now demand that napkins be made of thick paper. Or, like, provide an entire fucking roll of Bounty, free to anyone, in the event of a spill. Use as many sheets as you want. We don’t care. But we swear to God, if you use that thin shit-bag paper we will fucking lose it. ♦

By Eddie Small  
By Claire Friedman  
By Anthony Lane  
By Amelia Tait  
By Barry Blitt  
By Laura Steinel  
By Mary Norris  
By Barry Blitt  
By Charlie Dektar  
By Lance Hansen  
By Guy Richards Smit  
By Karen Chee

# Fiction

- “From, To”

## Fiction

# From, To

By [David Bezmozgis](#)



*Illustration by Franco Zacha*

At ten o'clock on a Wednesday night, he gets a call from his aunt's number. It's late to get a call from his aunt, but his mother is often with his aunt, and it's not unusual for her to call at that hour. But it's his aunt on the line, her voice pained, then disintegrating.

And that's it; he feels a plummet and a deletion commensurate with the space his mother occupied in his life. Nothing will fill it. He knows this from his father's death. He'll go around with another amorphous blank, until he himself becomes one in the consciousnesses of his children.

There are immediate tangible demands that require a clarity of mind that eludes him. Normally, he prides himself on precisely this kind of ability. His work, in real-estate law, consists almost entirely of accurately doing things in the proper sequence. But at first he can't even make sense of what his aunt tells him. His mother has died but his aunt is not with her. His mother is on the roof of her condominium. She was playing Rummikub with other

Russian Jewish women. The paramedics came. He must go to his mother's condominium. He must call the funeral home.

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

It is his week with his younger daughter and she is asleep. Does he wake her? Does he call his ex-wife? Does he call the woman he is dating, who is at home with her own children? Does he call his older daughter at the encampment? He decides on his older daughter, because he will need to tell her anyway, and there is something in him that wants to speak with her, to, in a selfish and perverse way, use this death to evoke a connection.

He doesn't know the etiquette of calling his daughter at the encampment. She shares her tent with her girlfriend and he imagines that a phone call from him would be perceived as unwelcome or intrusive. But his daughter answers right away, and her voice is gentle and calm, as if there were nothing at odds between them. It's consistent with his sense of her, what he has always loved and admired, her innate inclination toward tolerance, compassion, and mercy. As if, despite her mounting disapprovals, she believes in his capacity to reform.

This is her first death. An irreducible part of her life is gone. If things were not so bizarrely strained between them, would it be any easier to find the words to initiate her into it?

“Mila, I need you to come home.”

“Why?”

“Babi died.”

There's a silence.

“Will you come?”

“O.K.”

“I'll wait for you.”

This is the conversation he has with his daughter, in her tent, on the grounds of her university campus, sectioned off by temporary fencing, festooned with posters and revolutionary slogans, ringed with Palestinian flags, under the skyline of an affluent North American city.

He orders her an Uber and taps in instructions for the driver, a young man with a Muslim name whose sympathies he infers. Even now, with his mother dead, there is space in his head for this thought. For some thoughts, rarely the best ones, there is infinite space.

### **Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to David Bezmozgis read "From, To."](#)

He sits at his dining-room table and watches the progress of the Uber on his phone. It is like a primitive video game from his youth. The little car approaches the university gates. It turns. It comes to a stop. It spins around and proceeds toward his apartment with his daughter inside.

All that passes for normal life strikes him as mockingly, even malevolently, strange.

As he waits, he calls the funeral home, the same one that ushered his father and his grandparents and almost every other Soviet Jew he's known out of this world. His father used to say leerily, "I don't want to go to that place." But he went. There is someone at the funeral home to answer the phone at any hour and the service is arranged for the next day.

The last time he saw his older daughter was two weeks ago, when his mother came to visit and wanted to see both girls. His daughters ate the food his mother brought and answered the same questions about school that she always posed. But because of what was in the news and what she heard from friends with grandchildren Mila's age, his mother also asked about the encampment and if Mila felt safe at her university. Mila assured her that she felt safe and that she had friends in the encampment, including Jews, who were just upset about what was happening in Gaza.

Afterward, with exceeding slowness, he walked his mother to her car. She tired easily. She expressed concern about whatever it was that was

influencing Mila's thinking. Implicit was the charge that his own laxness had enabled it. With each breath, a sound came from his mother's chest, as if something within were imperfectly sealed. Old age, she said.

This was how it was. They masked or hid from one another that which would cause distress. As a result, when the truth emerged, it was a shock. Or maybe not. Maybe everyone intimated everything.

Mila arrives, and he instructs her not to reveal anything to her sister should she wake. Before he leaves, they regard each other and then embrace. He has always been affectionate with his daughters, even as they grew older and there arrived the inevitable and intruding sense of physical distinction, but, when he and Mila hug, it feels as though they must thaw a frozen layer before they can exchange any warmth.

It is nearly midnight when he drives to his mother's condominium. There's very little traffic and he feels as if he were not so much driving as gliding through space and time. His route takes him past habitual totems of life as his parents' son: a large Russian grocery, the apartment building they inhabited when they first arrived, a house they bought, the park where they walked—a small node of the city once infused with a particular and intimate sensibility. This is when he weeps, driving unobserved in the dark, seized by orphanhood.

An ambulance is parked in the circular drive in front of his mother's building. The light is on in the cab and he sees two paramedics inside, as if preparing to leave.

There are a handful of people in front of the building, most of them elderly. The building's residents are primarily pensioners who have downsized from their houses, mostly Jews, including Russian Jews, but also Koreans and Persians. North of the city proper, the building is at the nexus of these three communities.

There is a murmuring as he approaches. One of the elderly men, whom he dimly recalls as a client of his, sombrely greets him, and, as he enters the building, he hears himself identified as "the son."

He has his own key, which he uses to enter the building. His own key and his name on the title for estate-planning reasons. There's a security guard at a station in the lobby, with a series of screens that offer diverse views of the building—the pool, the gym, the rear entrance, the parking garage, the roof. The guard, a young South Asian woman, new to the position, pays less attention to him than the people outside had.

He presses the button for the elevator and rides it in solitude, noting when he passes his mother's floor. He proceeds to the roof, where everyone is waiting for him.

To reach the roof, he pushes open a heavy iron door and then passes between a series of rectangular planters that some residents have claimed as their gardens. He knows which one is his mother's. She grows dill, green onions, cherry tomatoes, cucumbers. He has the declarative thought, *Someone will have to tend it.*

The area of the roof accessible to the residents is not very big—under a pergola there is a sturdy wooden table with seating for four. His aunt and uncle, three of his mother's friends, and a dark-suited representative from the funeral home are all by the table. None of them sit. His mother's body is on a gurney, zipped up in a black vinyl body bag. The ivory Rummikub tiles are still spread out on the table, along with the blue tile racks at each woman's position. His mother's place faces south, because she liked to look toward the lake and the city at sunset.

When his aunt sees him, she bursts into tears. She and his mother were fraternal twins who lived their whole lives together. Until they went to university, they shared a bed in a house that lacked indoor plumbing. In old age, they talked on the phone multiple times each day and accompanied each other to doctor's appointments and on routine errands. He'd sometimes wondered how one would cope when the other died.

His mother's friends also start to cry. Two of them he has known for decades, practically since they immigrated. The third woman, Tamara, is from the contingent of Soviet Jews who went to Israel first, before electing to migrate again. She was his mother's closest friend in the building. When

he spoke to his mother on the phone and she gave an account of her day, it often began, “I went for a stroll with Tamara.”

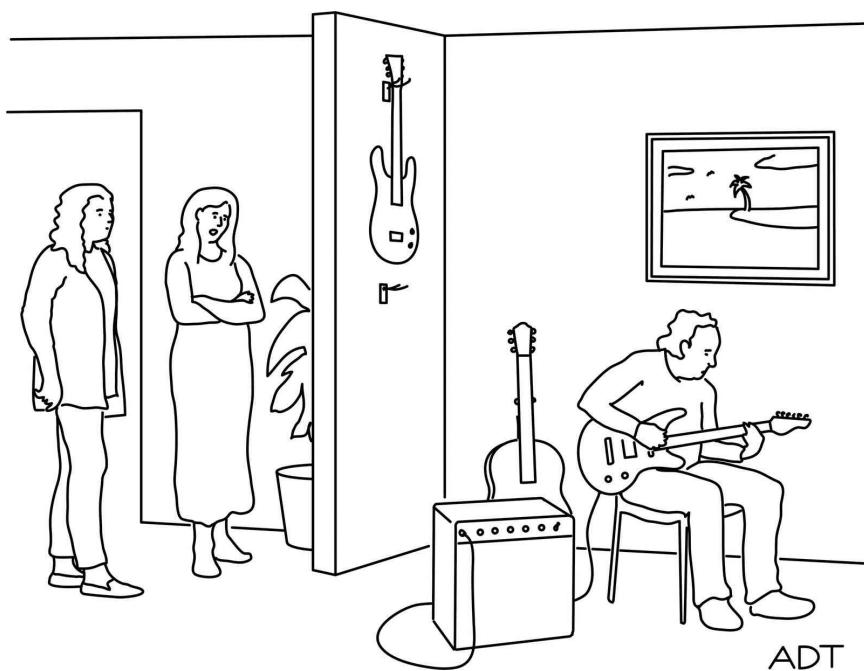
Tamara stands before him and wrings her hands.

“It happened in an instant. We were playing and then she went like this.”

She clutches at her chest to mime his mother’s actions, despite the superstition against depicting another’s infirmity on your own body. How many times had his mother admonished him? “*Ne pokazyvay na sebe.*” Don’t show on yourself.

“She could hardly speak. But she said your name. ‘Vadik.’ It was always ‘My Vadik.’ ”

All of this is communicated in Russian, with the man from the funeral home looking on.



They have been waiting on the roof out of deference. The man from the funeral home asks him if he would like to look at his mother before she is taken away, but he declines. When his father was dying, from a more

agonizing and protracted illness, he'd resolved to be there for everything, to see everything. He'd learned that lesson and doesn't need to learn it again.

With nothing left to do, the man from the funeral home begins wheeling the gurney away, and everyone follows, as if in a procession or a trance. Then they all silently wait for the elevator. Once it arrives, there is a moment of uncertainty about who should go in with his mother's body. He steps inside with his uncle and aunt, and his aunt insists that his mother's friends join; there is enough room for all of them. There is something about this gaggling that feels piercingly emblematic of his life with his family, with this community, the eschewing of proprieties, the clumping together.

On his mother's floor, the doors open and he is struck by the horror of finality. He must get out of the elevator and be apart from her forever. Goodbye, Mama. He places a hand at the base of the body bag to feel some part of her for the last time.

He walks along the corridor with his uncle and aunt and unlocks his mother's apartment. Inside, it is tidy, everything in its place. Framed photos on the wall, mostly of his daughters at different ages. He goes into the kitchen and sees a Pyrex casserole dish, a cup, a plate, and a fork, washed and rinsed beside the sink; a bowl of green grapes, the globes of fruit detached from the stems the way she preferred; a free Russian-language newspaper open on the table. What else? A calendar of Jewish holidays and a tin can with a slot—a *pushka*, the quaint Yiddish word for it comes into his head, the charitable container, into which his mother intermittently dropped coins for the Jewish Russian Community Center. Every mundane thing is precious and searing. He loved his mother, but she loved him more. Is that just the way of things? The child grows apart, separates, contrasts. He would die for his daughters without hesitation. God forgive him, he can't say the same thing about his mother. Maybe that is the line between childhood and adulthood, when you begin to hesitate to die for your parents.

There's nothing that needs to be done at his mother's apartment. He comes out of the kitchen to find his aunt sitting at the dining-room table, shaking her head as if to deny something, and his uncle standing beside her, looking tired and bereft. He is a short, stocky, glowering person, trained to design truck engines, who has known his sister-in-law for more than fifty years, and

must also be mourning her and feeling sympathy for his wife and for his nephew. There's so much to weep about; it is endless.

They take the elevator down together. They part and get into their cars. Before he drives, he calls some old friends who can be relied upon to tell others. He's received the same calls from them in grim and sacred reciprocity.

The lights are on in the apartment when he returns. Both girls are on the couch. The younger one glares at him. She is ten. She still wears pajamas with pictures of unicorns.

"Why are you up?" he asks, though it's obvious why.

"I didn't wake her," Mila says.

He believes her. Awake or asleep, Lily knows if Mila is there. It's like a sixth sense, reverence.

"*You should have woken me,*" Lily says, tears burgeoning, straining surface tension, then falling.

"It makes no difference. I would have told you in the morning."

"It makes a big difference."

"I didn't tell her," Mila says. "She started guessing and guessed."

*What a stupid argument*, he thinks. Like most arguments.

He goes to Lily and takes her up in his arms because she is still small enough and young enough to be taken up. They sit on the couch, the three of them, Lily in his lap, Mila resting against him, all of them sobbing. He thinks, if his mother could see them, how sorry and heartbroken she would be. This was because of her and she couldn't comfort them.

None of them sleep much. Mila goes to her room. Lily climbs into his bed, as she sometimes does for a treat, but this is not that. If he sleeps, it's so fleeting as to leave no trace. And yet come dawn he scarcely recalls what

occupied his mind all night—erratic thoughts, fixations, orchestrated disputes. Also the eulogy. If he'd been scrupulous, he'd have got up and written something down. Instead, he lay beside Lily. And then it was the light of morning for the condemned and nothing would revoke time or alter the terms of the day.

His task is to get up, so he gets up. It is a school day for Lily, so he calls the automated system and selects the appropriate number for “family matter” and then another for “full day” to report her absence. He brews coffee. He knocks on Mila’s door as he used to when, only a year ago, he would wake her for high school. He sits on the bed beside Lily and nudges her shoulder. She opens her eyes and he can see that there is an instant when she still inhabits the former reality before she is besieged by the current one.

“Pick out your clothes,” he says.

“What do I wear?”

“A dress, if you like. But nothing too bright.”

“O.K.,” she says and sits up.

She rises, goes to her room.

Telling her to pick clothes reminds him that he must do the same. He is a man, a lawyer, he has suits—even though he mostly works from home and rarely has occasion to wear them. But he must also choose a shirt, one that can be sacrificed. Should it matter which one? It’s for his mother’s funeral. Sacrifice the whole closet. But he deliberates because he knows she would consider it wasteful to ruin a good shirt.

In the kitchen, he turns on the radio, as is his habit. It is the top of the hour—the international-news brief, led since October with reporting from Gaza. The reporting is unrelentingly bleak. There is little to squabble about in terms of the bleakness. But little still isn’t nothing. What is quantitatively small can be qualitatively large. In his mind he inquires of the reporter, of the national newscaster, both of whom are supported substantially by taxpayer dollars, “Why do you never mention . . . ?,” or “Why, only at the

very end, do you mention . . . ?” These questions can be spoken aloud only in front of certain types of people. Broadly speaking, Jews. Also conservatives. Conservatives, because, at the moment, this position falls within the scope of their ideology. Jews, because human beings are and always will be clannish. Not all Jews, of course.

As a reminder, the national news has an item about the university encampments and the petitions made to the courts in different jurisdictions to have them removed. A student activist is interviewed, a young woman with a Celtic last name, and Mila drifts to the kitchen counter to listen. The student employs the standard terms. She sounds more educated than smart. What does he expect? She is a representative. She is representing.

“Do you know her?” he asks.

“Yeah,” Mila says. “I know her.”

The dress Lily chooses is black, long-sleeved, accented at the cuffs and the hem with black lace.

“Is it O.K.?”

“Yes.”

“It’s the one I wore to your party.”

“Right.”

He’d thrown a party for himself when he turned fifty. He was born at the end of September, 1973, a week before the start of the Yom Kippur War. For the party, he invited family and friends to a Russian restaurant not far from where his mother lived. A big spread. A dance floor. Layers of kitsch. He reasoned that in another decade he wouldn’t be able to throw such a party. His mother, his aunt, his uncle might be gone or in no condition to attend. He assumed that he and his friends would still be around, but this was not necessarily true. And his daughters would be grown.

But it didn’t require a decade. It hadn’t been a year, and his mother was dead. And one week after his party homicidal maniacs had started a war that,

among a great many other shocking and despicable things, had alienated his daughter from him and from her family and people.

There isn't much time before they have to go to the funeral home. He sits down in his office to compose the eulogy. What does he want to say about his mother that is not a platitude? She let him make his mistakes without letting him forget that she considered them mistakes. But when she was proved right, which was not every time, she was there to help him: "We will get through this together." They were fundamentally different people who disagreed about many things—politics, danger, child rearing—but he prized her resolve, her levelheadedness. His entire life, mostly in secret, he'd sought her approval. He should have told her. Now he would. What was a eulogy if not a last chance to declare thoughts and feelings that have been withheld?

The service is at noon. They need to arrive earlier. When they do, his aunt and uncle, a cousin, and her son are already in the chamber reserved for the family. The room is just off the main chapel. Through the door, it is possible to see the coffin on its bier, flanked on one side by the national flag, on the other by the Israeli one. For his mother, he has selected a raw-pine box, its only adornment a pine Star of David on the lid. It was the same for his father and for his grandparents. As it was written, to bury promptly with minimal interference so the body could return to where it came from.

In time, attendees begin to fill the chapel. Those who are family or very close friends come into the room to offer their condolences. His ex-wife is among them. She knew his mother for two decades and was beloved until the divorce. Daniela Levin, born in Johannesburg, descendant of Lithuanian Jews. They met in law school. He was attracted by the exoticism of her accent and her sharp mind. She was a champion debater, a standout in moot court—a talent that lent itself less well to connubial life, but nevertheless. She embraces him, the girls, his aunt, his cousin. Her parents, Norman and Eleanor, are with her. "Eleanorman," Daniela calls them. Kind people. "We can't believe it," they say with their lilt.

As the start of the service nears, the rabbi arrives. A formidable person, he has shepherded this community of Soviet Jews since the beginning, going on fifty years. With a razor blade the rabbi makes a tear in his aunt's blouse and

in the shirt that he wears under his suit. According to tradition, there are no other direct mourners—husband, parents have all passed—but Mila asks the rabbi to cut her blouse, too. The rabbi hands her the blade. The law does not command it, but neither does it proscribe it. Mila cuts her blouse and makes a tiny nick in the lace of Lily’s dress—and with the rend grief spills out.

The chapel is full. As they take their places in the front, he sees childhood friends, the woman he’s dating, his legal assistant, some of his clients, real-estate agents with whom he does business, and faces from his parents’ generation, the geriatric remnant. The rabbi intones psalms and speaks about his mother, offering recollections of her and the principal details of her life: birth in the embers of the Shoah, Yiddishkeit, Soviet existence, antisemitism, immigration, courage, struggle, family, community, legacy. His aunt, folded over herself, waves off the invitation to speak and then it is him, “the son,” and what he has prepared. He has spoken at his grandparents’ funerals, at his father’s, and now this. Each time, there are fewer people present who were part of the story. As he speaks now, he feels that there is nobody left who can chart the vital coördinates of his life. He is disappearing, becoming diffuse.

When he concludes, Mila rises, Lily with her. She reads from her phone about her admiration for her Babi, a person who went through so much, who possessed clear and unwavering principles and a tremendous capacity for love. Her grandmother was her exemplar. Mila delivers her remarks without faltering, more composed than he was. After her, Lily recites all the things his mother had promised to teach her: to speak Russian, to make dumplings, to grow vegetables. Who will do it now? Nobody will do it as well as her.

That is all for the ceremony. The rabbi chants the prayer for the dead; six pallbearers lift the coffin and take it out to the waiting hearse. Then it is the limousine to the cemetery—his aunt and uncle, him and the girls. A procession of cars follows. They drive north, past new housing developments, to the large Jewish cemetery where his father is buried. His parents bought a double plot, installed a double headstone; one half is still smooth and blank, awaiting inscription.

He stands with an arm around each daughter while the assembled mourners bury his mother. The concussive sound of the first shovelful of dirt on the

pine coffin, like the rending of the garment, shockingly tactile. The day is warm, sunny, quite beautiful. Around the edges of the cemetery are stands of mature trees—willows, maples. The gravestones have no uniform size, color, or style. There are thousands of them, names carved in English, Hebrew, Russian. Near his parents' plot is the grave of a Holocaust survivor, the names of his murdered family etched onto the back of the stone.

Once it is all done, he and his daughters pass between the ranks of those who remain, some of whom have enough Jewish education to recite the ancient benediction: "May the Almighty comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem." He wonders what Mila makes of it, the many liturgical allusions to Israel and the Children of Israel. Does she number herself among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem?

The shiva is to be at his mother's apartment. He goes there with his daughters to begin the mourning ritual. The mirrors have been covered, the cushions removed from a section of the couch in the living room so that he and his aunt can sit low. In the early afternoon, there are few visitors. Only Tamara and the other women from the roof. Lily disappears into his mother's room, her closet, her jewelry box. Mila goes through albums to select a photograph to submit to the *Exodus*, the weekly community newspaper whose back pages are reserved for obituaries. It is the primary function of the paper. Whatever else is printed—articles about religion, Israel, humor pieces—is subordinate to the obituaries. Frequently, his mother would call to tell him whose photo she had seen *v Eksoduse*, in the *Exodus*—a habituated use of an English word in place of its Russian equivalent, both broad mistranslations of the original Hebrew, *Shemot*, names. (These persecuted Children of Israel, some still with Jewish names, liberated from Soviet bondage for North American redemption.)

They decide on a photograph from a session from Mila's bat mitzvah, taken five years earlier, his mother with her hair done, wearing her best jewelry, in a dress she'd bought for the occasion. It had been a proud and happy day for her, a validation of sacrifice and resolve, a datum of continuity, fulfillment of a pact with her parents and generations of cherished pleading phantom hearts.

The obituary will appear in the next issue of the paper, and he imagines the phone calls it will elicit: *Do you know who I saw in the Exodus? Basia Katz.* He also thinks, *Only two more such obituaries to go*—one for his uncle and one for his aunt. By the time he and his cousin die, the *Exodus* itself will probably no longer exist.

In the lull, he goes to his mother's bedroom and uses her computer to log on to Facebook—object of ridicule for his daughters, preserve of the tedious old. He hardly uses it, even less since October 7th, as nearly everything he saw posted elicited despair and cast people in the worst possible light—jingoists, cynics, bigots, fools. People he hardly knew, for whom he could barely kindle a feeling, became thoroughly odious. The shrieking about Zionists, the melding of swastikas with Stars of David, Hitler with Netanyahu. The strings of partisan flags, emblems, and emojis. Injunctions and pledges. Hate and rationalization of all the provenances of brutality. He excised swaths of people from his life: from undergrad, when he'd majored in English and considered becoming a professor; a smaller number from law school; still fewer actual lawyers, brokers, and Realtors—an inverted pyramid toward a vertex of practicality. The only ones that pained him, that felt like a genuine loss, were a few members of a Facebook group with whom, since the end of the pandemic, he had played soccer twice a week on the grounds of a downtown high school. Most of the players were half his age, came from somewhere else—Europe, Africa, South America, the Middle East—and were native to the game, its flow decanted into them. He offered a passable approximation, like a clever pet. From childhood, the game had been a bond with his father, who had been a very good player, good enough to spend his year in the Red Army mostly on the soccer team. Myron Katz. Jew; athlete. *Yevrei; sportsmèn.* The entirety of a Soviet joke that also described the first half of his father's life.

The soccer Facebook group was ostensibly created to register who could or could not play on any given evening, but it became a place where members teased and cheered one another and posted soccer videos, quotes, and memes. It recalled the early days of the internet, fora for niche enthusiasts, now with incalculably more material—clips of Lilliputians from the early twentieth century, footage from practically every Olympics and World Cup, as well as the most parochial ephemera. He had devoted days just to the Hungarian national team of the nineteen-fifties, the Mighty Magyars, the

Golden Team, his father's heroes, led by the great and unpronounceable Ferenc Puskás and Nándor Hidegkuti. Here were more of life's disappointments: his father had not lived to see his grandchildren, and he had never got to see his father transported back to the worshipful time of his youth by YouTube.

On the soccer Facebook group's page, he'd once surrendered to a base urge and checked the personal accounts of some of the members whose origins suggested a certain bent. He found what he'd dreaded from Padraig and Aziz —the gruesome videos of weeping fathers, covered in the dust of an air strike, cradling the broken bodies of their children. He was a father. Some of the soccer-group members were fathers, or aspired to be someday. To put himself in the place of the Gazan fathers for even a few seconds was unbearable. The sensation in his heart and his mind breached the bounds of his body and swamped the potential of life. He could almost understand how, from the outside, for another, the totality of a response would be outrage. Except that reality was riddled with almosts.

Sitting at his mother's computer, a portrait of himself as an untrammelled thirteen-year-old deity hanging above him, he types into the Facebook chat that he will miss that week's game and, after a tug of reticence, provides the reason. Almost immediately, the little avatars pop up, followed by the reactions—the teardrop emojis and the misspelled and mispunctuated condolences.

He returns to the living room to find his aunt on his mother's cordless phone and Mila out on the balcony off the sunroom talking to someone on her cell. He hears his aunt pronounce in her heavily accented English the words she will say many times during the week of mourning, the declarations of disbelief, the sense of an eerie somnambulance, and the paltry consolation of existence.

She sees him, beckons him over, and gives him the phone. On the line is Shulamit, his mother's cousin in Ashkelon. He has met her twice in his life. Once in Israel, when he and Daniela were on their honeymoon. The other time was when he was a teen-ager, and she and her brother and her father had come to visit. At the time, his mother's father, Zev Melman, was still living, and it was a reunion between two brothers who hadn't seen each

other since before the war, when Aron, the oldest, had left what was then independent Latvia for what was then British Mandatory Palestine. Afterward, history had interfered and the family had met its allotted fates. His grandfather had expediently sided with the Soviets and retreated with them as the Nazis advanced. His youngest brother, Mordke, had remained behind and was taken by the Nazis and their Latvian accomplices to a nearby wood, where he was shot, along with his parents and every other Jew in town. When his grandfather, a wounded and decorated Red Army veteran, returned home after the war, there was literally nobody left—not family, not friends, not rivals. What had been had ceased to be, mathematically. The lesson drawn and instilled by his family was that the Gentile zeal for Jewish death is implacable and that only Jewish strength in a Jewish land can oppose it. That only Jews themselves could provide a plausible answer to the Jewish Question. In his youth, he had tried to refute this, unconvincingly for his family and, ultimately, for himself.

On the phone now, Shulamit delivers her words of condolence and then asks if she can pass the phone to her brother Mordke—named for his murdered uncle—since he is very affected by the death of his cousin and anxious to express what is on his heart.

“Here, Mordke, talk to Vadik,” he hears her say.

With Shulamit, he speaks in English. With her brother, he speaks in the Hebrew he acquired and mostly retained from eight years of Hebrew school, an education that he and Daniela elected not to extend to their girls. That decision now, given prevailing conditions, seems, to him, like a mistake.

There is a fumbling on the line as the phone is handed over to Mordke, who, before he forms words, hums and mewls in a low tone. Now sedulously described as “neurodivergent” or “on the spectrum,” he would formerly have just been called “simple,” a term that more closely approaches the tenderness and heartache he inspires.

“Vadik,” he says.

“Hello, Mordke.”

“Are you sad?”

“Yes, I’m sad.”

“Are you angry with God?”

“Not about this, Mordke.”

“You shouldn’t be angry with God,” Mordke says. “He is in the garden.”

“Yes?”

“Yes, He is in the garden. And your mother is in the garden.”

“That’s good,” he says. “She loved gardens.”

“So don’t be angry or sad.”

“All right. Thank you, Mordke, I won’t be,” he says.

There is a pause. Mordke emits his otherworldly sounds and doesn’t say anything more.

When Shulamit returns, he asks her how she is keeping.

“What can I tell you, Vadik? *Bardak*.” A word identical in Russian and Hebrew. A mess. A disaster. “The rockets come. The alarm sounds. We hide in the safe room. *Bardak*. Of course, it isn’t always so easy with Mordke, but then I think of all the old women who are hiding alone and I thank God.”

He ends his call and looks out to Mila, who, noticing him, ends hers and comes inside. He wants to ask whom she was talking to. He imagines it was Farah, her girlfriend, whom he met once at the encampment. He’d been allowed through the security checkpoint to attend a session given by a professor at the university, a Tunisian dissident and political exile, a specialist in the liberation movements of the Global South. Solemnly and reverently, Farah had delivered the introduction. Throughout the talk, a fun-house-mirror version of his own understanding of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, he had felt both Mila’s and Farah’s eyes on him, but he could not

make himself nod his head or moan in assent and he knew he was failing their test, doing a poor job of disguising his true feelings, exposing himself as an impostor and interloper.

And now he must be doing it again, because Mila asks if something is wrong.



"Do you ever worry that A.I. will steal our jobs?"  
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

"You have a weird look on your face."

"I do?"

"I would say go look in a mirror, but."

Then she asks whom he was talking to and he taps a genealogy that means almost nothing to her. He could be speaking about characters from the Bible: Aaron. Shulamit. Zebulun. Mordecai. Remote beyond conception. He's not sure he's ever mentioned them to her. And now it feels impossible to speak about them without it being construed as part of a polemical narrative. He cannot say, especially now, with his mother gone, and the others of her generation waning, that it pains him that the painful past of their family doesn't pain her. That he does not believe he can evoke in her any of the sorrow he feels for the antecedent Mordke, her age when he was shot in the

proverbial wood, the younger brother his grandfather mourned to the end of his days. Is it fair of him to expect it of her? He feels pain because it was transmitted to him through the immanence of his grandfather, a person he knew and loved. But what he feels doesn't possess sufficient charge to be transmitted further.

“I wanted to ask,” Mila says.

“Yeah?”

“What do I tell people if they want to come?”

He makes room for the full connotation of “people.”

“People are welcome.”

“O.K. And is there anything they should know?”

“Sometimes people bring food. Round food. Bagels. Cookies. But they don’t have to. There will be plenty of food.”

“Why round?”

“I don’t know. The circle of life.”

“Anything else?”

“Give them the code to buzz up. There will be a sign downstairs with the apartment number.”

“That’s it?”

“I think so. Though maybe mention to the people not to wear kaffiyehs.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“I don’t know, is it?”

“Thanks very much for the information.”

“You’re very welcome.”

As the day wears on, the apartment fills up. Daniela comes from work and sits with Lily. There is a chill between her and Mila, a clash of personalities that predates the encampment, so they steer clear of each other. It has been five years since the divorce. But the clashes between Mila and Daniela would have happened, he believes, with or without the divorce. They are akin to the clashes he had with Daniela—in which one person regards conflict as inevitable and cathartic and the other does not. In this way, Mila takes after him, restrained, deliberate, contemplative, but also clinically resolute. Life lesson: opposites might attract, but they do not endure. Because he and Mila are similar, they have been able to maintain a semblance of harmony.

It is always busiest on the first evening. The first and the second. After that, there is a merciful reprieve. When his father died, almost twenty years before, family friends from the earliest days of the immigration came to sit with his mother. To them, even now, he remains effectively a boy. A boy with a profession. A boy who furnished the grandchildren. Correspondingly, they persist for him as they appear in his mother’s plastic photo albums, in the first blush of their capitalism, posing beside enormous American cars. Now they dodder in, *az och un vey*—in the badge of his mother’s Yiddish. Well, not all of them dodder. There is one who has become an avid cyclist, another who has pledged himself to pickleball. They are eager to expound on these things, which introduces some variety into the conversations. Their children are his age and are spoken of proudly. Some of those children have moved away and attained success in certain medical fields. Others have not moved away and attained success in certain medical fields. They have married well, raised children who are a credit to the nation. They sound boring and fortunate. What does he feel? Bored and envious? The envy is fleeting, futile. And, besides, there’s more to them than that. There’s more to everyone. But who has the time to delve? He wishes them well. He wishes them all well, in these precedented times.

Some of his friends come. A number of them have coördinated catering for the week. Platters arrive from a Jewish deli, drawn from the bereavement menu. There is a reversion to gender norms, and the women take charge of

the food in the kitchen. Daniela and Eleanor. His cousin. Mila with them, as if in the fold, which almost brings him to tears.

Because it is summer, a week after the solstice, the sun doesn't set until past nine. By eight, when the rabbi arrives to lead the prayers, the living room and kitchen are crammed with people. The food has been put out because it is past dinnertime for everyone. Stray disposable plates and cups dot the apartment. His cousin makes the rounds with a black garbage bag. A knot of the older people forms around the rabbi and they engage in a disquisition in Russian. What is it about? He knows. The subject uppermost on everyone's mind, for which they are seeking a Hasidic imprimatur. Not his mother's death but Israel, Gaza, Hamas, Hezbollah, the Palestinians, the Arabs, the Muslims, the hypocritical leftists. All the proliferating enemies of Israel and the Jews. He is grateful that they are conducting this conversation in Russian, because Mila will not understand. He understands and remembers how it was when his father died, at the time of the Second Lebanon War. His uncle called him over to hear the rabbi's prescription for the Arabs in Lebanon and wherever else they threatened Israel: "Make them disappear." How? With what magic trick? He was disgusted then and remains disgusted, in line with his role in the family, leftist idiot and naïve fool. His family escaped a totalitarian regime that persecuted them and now complain about opportunistic and culturally incompatible immigrants who seek to transform their adoptive country into a version of their regressive, Jew-hating, theocratic homelands. In short, his family are essentially fascists, comfortable with totalitarianism if it suits them. Not just his family. He is convinced that this is true of most people. Democracy is a discipline, like diet and exercise, strenuous and irksome. Sooner take a pill or eat cake.

When Farah calls up, it is still the doldrum period before prayers start. He and the girls have been in the apartment for more than seven hours. Lily sits on a chair at the edge of the room, oblivious of everyone, singing to herself. He looks around the apartment and sees Mila in the kitchen listening politely to Tamara. He gestures with the portable phone to get her attention.

"Your friend is here," he says.

"Oh."

“Not here here. She’s coming up. You might want to meet her at the door.”

“O.K.,” she says and excuses herself from Tamara.

He watches Mila cross the room, open the front door, and let it close pneumatically behind her. He imagines her waiting in the hallway or by the elevator bank. He keeps his attention on the front door, anticipating. But, when it opens, it isn’t Mila or Farah who enters but Claudia, the woman he is dating. She holds the door for Mila and Farah. Claudia, born and educated in Romania, with an Eastern European’s disdain for the left, her own family’s acrid history from the war—a grandfather silent about his time in Odesa, relatives who pointed their guns in the wrong direction at Stalingrad, a great-uncle who once made a strange remark about Paul Celan—and no compunctions about who is at fault in Gaza or anywhere else. She, unlike Daniela, is consummately laconic, by circumstance or upbringing, and can devastate with a gesture, a shift, a shrug. How someone like her stayed in a bad marriage for more than a decade confounds him, but maybe that is a labyrinth for everyone.

Farah comes toward him and extends a white poster-board box sealed with a gold sticker with the name of a bakery. He doesn’t recognize the name.

“I hope this is O.K.,” she says.

“I’m sure it is.”

“I’m very sorry for your loss,” she says.

“Thank you,” he says, though the tradition mitigates against mourners thanking visitors.

“Here,” Claudia says and takes the pastry box from him. On her shoulder are the straps of a canvas tote filled with groceries, greens on top.

He notices the room contort as if from a change in the magnetic field. His aunt looks directly at Farah, making no effort to be discreet. He’s certain Farah is aware of it. Mila is aware of it. Farah hasn’t worn a kaffiyeh, but she has two small round buttons pinned to the left side of her T-shirt. One is the Palestinian flag; the other is the rainbow. He wonders what possessed her

to wear them: provocativeness, obliviousness, or the snug tenet of living her truth. It is something that she and Mila can do with little consequence in this apartment, in this city, this country, also in Israel, and nowhere else in the Middle East, including Gaza and all of the Muslim world. Putatively irrelevant.

Even without the buttons, Farah would attract attention. She is an Arab in a roomful of Jews. Not just Jews but Zionists, with the claws and fangs. If there is a hostility toward her, there is also a fear. Fear of this slight, young woman who has elected to come in a show of sympathy and respect. She should be the one to feel intimidated, and probably does. How little it takes for people to feel “unsafe”—that glib euphemistic construction. The opposite of safe is not unsafe, as the opposite of love is not unlove. What capacity is there for variation or dissent? It’s just a choice. Everything is a choice while you live. The only immutable thing is death. They are now under the shadow of its wings. It will last for only a brief time. Can they make anything good of it?

He has a feeling of admiration for Farah, who has evidently been brought up right. There is nothing inviting about the way his aunt looks at her, but Farah approaches, bends low, and offers her condolences. He can’t quite hear from where he’s standing, but he assumes they are the same words she spoke to him, “I am very sorry for your loss.” Uncharacteristically for the times, a sincere and simple sentence in the active voice. His aunt behaves cordially, though later she will complain to him, “Mila absolutely had to bring this friend? She looked at us like we were animals in a zoo. You know that Mila being a lesbian caused your mother a lot of pain. She hoped she would outgrow it.”

When it is finally time for prayers, Mila and Farah are across the room with Lily, who has played hostess and brought Farah refreshments. The rabbi checks his smartwatch and announces that they will now begin. Men who haven’t covered their heads are given yarmulkes from the stash his mother kept at the house for holidays. Prayer books, some with English transliterations, some with Russian, are distributed to those who want them. There is only a small number of people in the room who know anything about Hebrew prayer. A few of his friends with some parochial schooling. Daniela and her parents, who, because of the peculiarities of the South

African apartheid system, all received traditional Jewish educations. And Mila, who learned to sound out Hebrew words for her bat mitzvah. The others, the Soviet Jews who have lived for decades in a land of religious liberty, know to stand more or less obediently, sometimes turning a page.

The rabbi faces east, toward Jerusalem, and begins. The first few words are intelligible before they dissolve into sonorous murmuring.

He meets Mila's eyes and motions her over. She comes, leaving Lily tracing with her finger a tattoo on Farah's arm. From a distance—vines, tributaries, flowers?

"You don't have to stay for this part," he says.

"Do you want us to leave?" she asks.

"That's not what I mean."

"Where would we even go?"

"You could take Lily out."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. Down by the fitness center and pool. Or out back by the tennis courts. Just let her run around."

"All right."

"The prayers will be done in about an hour."

"O.K."

They leave, the age difference between them suddenly compressed. The older girls still need to apply fashions and postures in order not to be mistaken for children. To be regarded seriously, even as they retain a footbridge to childhood. He treasures this about his daughters, how effortlessly they reinhabit the lyrics of pop songs, a nonsense dialect from the internet, synchronized clapping games: happy llama, sad

llama / mentally disturbed llama / super llama, drama llama / big fat mama llama.

The rabbi leads the group through the first portion of prayers. “Leads” is the right word. Maybe because he’s been thinking about children, this is what he imagines: the rabbi walks ahead; they shuffle behind. If he stops, they stand dazed, then disperse. The purpose of the prayers is for him and his aunt to recite the Kaddish, to sanctify God’s name in their time of grief. They are supposed to do this three times a day for the duration of the week, in the morning, the afternoon, and the evening. Practical Talmudists parsed the law and amalgamated the afternoon and the evening. Between the afternoon and evening prayers, there is a short and symbolic break. The rabbi fills it with scriptural exegesis in a mixture of Russian, Hebrew, and English. *The Creator of the Universe. The Holy One Blessed Be He.*

He wanders to the kitchen to get himself some water. There is a glass door that leads to another small balcony. It faces the rear of the building. Through the glass, he sees Lily running and cartwheeling on the lawn by the tennis courts. She turns back toward Mila and Farah, who walk casually behind. Claudia comes to check on him and tracks his gaze.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” he replies, but thinks, as he increasingly does, *How did this happen? How did we get from there to here? From the drowsy meagre shtetl. To the great Soviet fraud. To the gratification-industrial complex. You were supposed to build a structure—a family, a country—that could withstand destruction. How is that working out? Self-assess.*

He returns and the rabbi commences the evening prayers. Who is left? His cousin and her teen-age son. His uncle. His aunt. Daniela and her parents. Tamara. Claudia. Two elderly Russian Jews from the building. An elderly Jew, not Russian, who is the treasurer of the condominium board. Two of his childhood friends. And, with him, they have exactly the requisite ten Jewish men to conduct the service. As they conclude with the Kaddish, dusk cedes to night and the sky outside goes dark. It is late, nearing ten. People say their goodbyes, the men promising to return for morning prayers at seven. His aunt is exhausted, unsteady on her feet, her eyes red. His uncle offers her his

arm, though he is also spent. His cousin insists on driving them home in her car. The rabbi says he will come in the morning with two grandsons to insure that they have enough people.

Mila, Farah, and Lily have yet to return. Daniela is supposed to take Lily home with her so that Lily can attend school the next day, the last day before the summer break. He used to have the ability to see Mila's location on his phone, but she disabled it not long after she started at the university. Allowing him to see her location had been a condition of his paying her cellphone bill, but even after she disabled it he kept paying. This was a distillation of his parenting. More permissive than punitive. He couldn't be another way. When he tried, it was unconvincing. His daughters saw it as a pretense and laughed.

"Call her," Daniela says, although she has a phone.

He calls and Mila picks up. He has her on speaker.

"Sorry, we are literally one minute away," she says. In the background, Lily clamors for the phone.

"Did you think they kidnapped me?" she asks.

"No," he says.

"They said you probably thought they kidnapped me."

"No. But it's dark, and it's late, and everyone is leaving."

"Sorry," Mila says. "We'll be right there."

They wait in a fractious mood.

"What kind of joke is that?" Daniela says.

Claudia announces that she will go. When she opens the door, Lily is at the threshold with an oversized cup, her lips tinted blue.

"I really am sorry," Mila says. "Lily wanted a slushy from the gas station."

“You didn’t think to call?” Daniela asks.

“You were in prayers.”



*“On your mark, get set, go find an employee to open the case for you!”*  
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

“Text,” Daniela says.

“Leave her be, Daniela,” Eleanor says.

“Fine,” Daniela says. “Lily, do you have everything?”

“Yeah,” Lily says.

“All right. Say goodbye to everyone. You’ll see them after school tomorrow.”

“Not Mila and Farah.”

“Mila, you’re not coming back tomorrow?” he asks.

“No.”

“Why?”

“I have to be at the encampment.”

She says this with the tentativeness, abandon, and conviction of drawing a line that should not be crossed. He feels that if she crosses it, if he allows her to cross it, something irreparable will happen. He has always been inclined to identify as a child and not as a parent. He has borne the lessons of being his parents’ child and tried to apply them to his children. He has resisted doing the thing his mother never resisted doing—asking his child to do something for his sake, against her will.

“Mila,” he says. “I don’t want you to go.”

“The judge ruled that the encampment has to be taken down tomorrow,” she says.

“Farah can pack up your tent.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Farah,” he says, “what would you do if your grandmother died and your father asked you to stay with him instead of going with people who despised everything she stood for?”

“What people are you talking about?” Mila says.

“I went to the encampment. I attended the lecture. I read the signs. I know what people I’m talking about.”

“You were there for two hours and you talked to nobody.”

“I guess it depends,” Farah says.

“On what?”

“On if my family was supporting a genocide.”

“You’re Palestinian?”

“Palestinian Egyptian.”

“O.K. If I were Palestinian Egyptian, maybe I would feel the same as you. Although there are exceptions who also criticize Hamas and spare a thought for the hostages. But it’s my daughter who should know better. She exists only because her great-grandfather put his family on the last train into Russia before the Germans arrived. My father, Mila’s grandfather, after whom she is named, was five years old at the time. Do you know what the survival rate was for five-year-old Jewish boys in Latvia?”

“No,” Farah says. “I imagine it was low.”

“It was basically zero. So here is the truth: the Jews of Europe would have traded places with the Palestinians of Gaza in a heartbeat and called it salvation.”

“Wow,” Mila exclaims. “That’s fucking gross.”

“Is it? What part?”

“The part where you’re O.K. with the killing, you’re just upset with the terminology.”

“There’s a lot of killing in the world.”

“This is being done by us.”

“Who is us? Are you part of us?”

“If that’s how you define us, then, no, I’m not.”

“Well, they’ll kill you anyway,” he says.

When he is left alone, he goes around the apartment turning off the lights. Often the first light switch he tries is wrong. He’s never stayed at his mother’s apartment by himself. Sleeping in her bed is out of the question. In the guest bedroom is the single bed made of sturdy blond wood which his parents bought for him when he was a child and which his mother has kept all these years. When he started having sexual desire, he used to grind into the mattress. “What have you been watching on TV?” his mother asked when she surprised him one time. Now he is sleeping on it, a grown man, his

parents gone, fearing that his daughter is lost to him for good. He regrets his outburst, not because what he said was technically wrong but because he gained so little from saying it. Did he think it would sway his daughter? There's a reason that he has tried not to act like his parents. That approach only ever drove him away. Though he always came back. He clings to this even as the gulf between him and his daughter feels so much wider than anything between him and his parents.

What does it mean to Mila? *From the river to the sea, Palestine will be free. There is only one solution, intifada, revolution. We don't want two states, we want all of '48.*

He thinks about Shulamit and Mordke. He thinks about the Shulamits and Mordkes of Gaza. An old woman and an old man, innocent as lambs, clambering over rubble with their piteous backpacks and bundles. What will happen to them from the river to the sea in the intifada revolution? What will happen that has not already happened?

He is angry and confused. He wants his daughter back. He wants normal life back. He is a real-estate lawyer. Isn't it a dispute over land? Send in the real-estate lawyers! Titles, liens, deeds, encroachments, easements—they can settle it!

No justice, no peace? False. Peace *is* justice. Peace is the crown of the law. Why is the word nowhere to be found at the encampments and the rallies or in the news reports and the op-eds and the open letters? Without it, they are all doomed.

He Who makes peace in His heights  
May He make peace  
Upon us and upon all Israel  
And now say: Amen. ♦

By Deborah Treisman  
By Joyce Carol Oates  
By Bryan Washington  
By Yiyun Li  
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# The Critics

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- [James C. Scott and the Art of Resistance](#)
- [Briefly Noted](#)
- [It's a Typical Small-Town Novel. Except for the Nazis](#)
- [The Evolution of a Folk-Punk Hero](#)
- [The Frick Returns, Richer Than Ever](#)
- [Retro Masculinity in “Glengarry Glen Ross” and “Good Night, and Good Luck”](#)
- [“Warfare” Offers a Hyperrealist Rebuke of the American War Movie](#)

## Books

# Environmentalists Are Rethinking Nuclear. Should They?

Fourteen years after the Fukushima disaster, nuclear power is being rebranded as a climate savior, and fission is in fashion.

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)



*High-profile disasters shook our faith in atomic power. But many climate activists now believe that we're afraid of the wrong things.* Photograph by Mitch Epstein

The disaster at the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant began on the afternoon of March 11, 2011, when the Tōhoku earthquake, also known as the Great East Japan Earthquake and the Great Sendai Earthquake, struck the island of Honshu. The shock, which registered 9.1 on the Richter scale, was so powerful that it knocked the island eight feet closer to Hawaii and generated a tsunami that sloshed all the way to Antarctica.

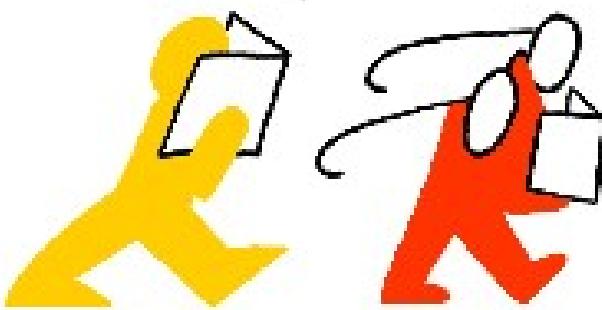
That afternoon, three of Fukushima's six reactors were up and running; the other three were down for maintenance. The quake tripped the plant's emergency-response system, and control rods were automatically inserted into the fuel assemblies in the units numbered one, two, and three. Even so, the reactors continued to give off heat. When the tsunami hit, about forty-five minutes later, it flooded the plant's backup generators, along with the

batteries that were supposed to back up the backups. As a result, Fukushima's cooling pumps failed. Within hours, the temperature inside Unit 1 rose to five thousand degrees, and the fuel assembly started to melt down. Everyone living within a mile and a half of the plant was ordered to evacuate.

Setback followed setback, in what one report would refer to as a "[chain reaction](#)" of crises. On March 12th, exploding hydrogen destroyed much of Unit 1 and exposed the pool that housed spent fuel rods to the air. The evacuation zone was extended to six miles, then, later that day, to twelve miles. Workers at the plant tried frantically to contain the damage, by, for example, spraying seawater from fire hoses and rigging up car batteries to supply power. On March 13th, the fuel assembly in Unit 3 melted. On March 14th, that unit suffered an explosion. On March 15th, there was another explosion, this time in Unit 4, where highly radioactive waste was being stored. (The reactors' containment domes remained intact.)

## What We're Reading

*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*



As radiation-dose rates soared, Fukushima's owner, the Tokyo Electric Power Company, considered pulling its workers from the plant. The Prime

Minister, Naoto Kan, met with aides to assess the consequences of such a move. They concluded that without workers the situation would spin further out of control and that eventually all of Tokyo, which is a hundred and fifty miles south of Fukushima, might have to be emptied. Kan grew so alarmed that, reportedly, he stormed into *TEPCO*'s offices to demand that the workers stay at their posts. "What the hell is going on?" he asked, according to press accounts.

In the immediate aftermath, the lesson of Fukushima seemed clear. On March 15th, Germany's Chancellor, [Angela Merkel](#), announced a shutdown of the seven oldest of the country's seventeen working reactors.

"The absolutely improbable became reality," Merkel, who had previously been staunchly pro-nuclear, said. "That changes the situation." A few weeks later, her government decided to decommission all of Germany's nuclear facilities. In short order, Switzerland, Belgium, and Japan announced phaseout plans. In earthquake-prone Italy, which had already shuttered its reactors, voters overwhelmingly rejected a government proposal to allow new ones to be constructed. "I am really happy," one Roman voter told Reuters. "We do not want nuclear plants."

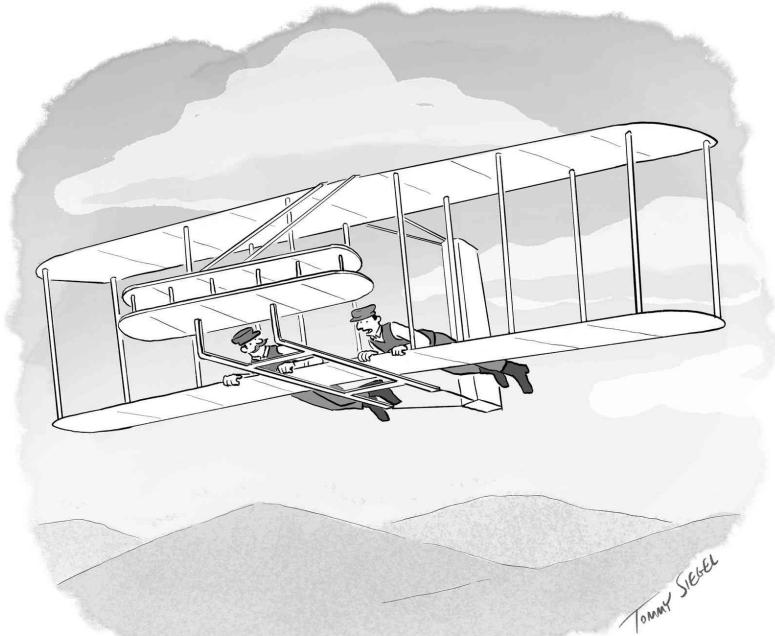
But, with time, the accident's significance has faded. When, in 2023, Germany fulfilled Merkel's promise and shut the last of its reactors, her successor as head of the Christian Democratic Union, Friedrich Merz, mourned the event, calling it a "black day."

"It raises the question of who here is driving in the wrong direction," Merz said. By now, Switzerland, Belgium, and Japan have all backed away from their phaseout goals. Many countries, including Canada, France, and the United States, have signed on to a pledge to triple global nuclear capacity by 2050. Google has teamed up with a nuclear startup called Kairos Power. Amazon is investing in another nuclear startup, X-energy. Microsoft wants to reopen a shuttered reactor at [Three Mile Island](#), in central Pennsylvania. Fourteen years after Fukushima, fission, for better or worse, is back in fashion.

Rebecca Tuhus-Dubrow, a freelance journalist, was brought up in the nineteen-nineties on whole-wheat sandwiches packed in reused paper bags.

Her environmentalist parents opposed nuclear power and might well have marched at anti-nuclear protests had the U.S. not mostly given up building reactors by then. Influenced by what she calls “years of indoctrination,” she became worried about environmental problems, particularly [climate change](#). As an adult in Southern California, she helped organize her neighbors to install solar panels. She still viewed nuclear skeptically—until she learned that some prominent climate scientists were calling it the world’s best hope for limiting warming.

“Could it really be true that something that had once threatened to doom us was now needed to save us?” she wondered. She set out to learn more, and chronicles her journey of discovery in “[Atomic Dreams: The New Nuclear Evangelists and the Fight for the Future of Energy](#)” (Algonquin).



*“For reasons I don’t understand, I could absolutely annihilate a tomato juice right now.”*  
Cartoon by Tommy Siegel

Prominent among the book’s “evangelists” are Heather Hoff and Kristin Zaitz, who founded a group called Mothers for Nuclear. (The organization’s logo shows a mother cradling a baby, encircled by rings of electrons.) Hoff and Zaitz both work at the Diablo Canyon nuclear plant, in central California. They are athletic and adventurous, and Tuhus-Dubrow clearly admires them.

“The two women seemed like more outdoorsy and capable versions of me, the kind of person I sort of wished I were,” she writes. But, recognizing that they are being paid by the nuclear industry, she also tries to maintain her reportorial distance: “I knew to be cautious about accepting their claims at face value.”

As it happens, Hoff was in the control room at Diablo Canyon the day of the Great East Japan Earthquake. According to Tuhus-Dubrow, Hoff’s initial reaction to the meltdowns was much like everyone else’s: “her confidence in nuclear power was shaken.” Gradually, though, Hoff recovered her faith. Yes, every nuclear operator’s nightmare had come true at Fukushima. But what had been the actual consequences? No one living close to the plant, or anyone working inside it, had died from acute radiation syndrome. As the years passed, there was no discernible rise in cancer deaths in the area around Fukushima. Meanwhile, a great many people—it’s been estimated at more than two thousand—had died prematurely as result of the disruptions caused by the evacuations. (Most of these victims were sick or elderly or both.) On the Mothers for Nuclear website, Hoff eventually summarized her view as follows: “Our fears were largely misdirected.”

In her travels with nuclear evangelists, Tuhus-Dubrow hears versions of this argument over and over. The problem is not that nuclear plants are prone to catastrophic meltdowns; it’s that people are prone to catastrophic thinking. “You see time and time again that fear of radiation, fear of nuclear, has been more dangerous than nuclear itself,” Eric Meyer, a former opera singer who heads a group called Generation Atomic, tells her.

Much of “Atomic Dreams” is devoted to the plant that employs Hoff and Zaitz. This is partly a function of Diablo Canyon’s location—it’s the only working nuclear station in Tuhus-Dubrow’s home state—and partly a function of its history. No nuclear facility in the U.S., and perhaps none in the world, has been the subject of more wrangling.

The fight began all the way back in 1961, when Pacific Gas & Electric proposed siting a nuclear reactor in Bodega Bay, a fishing village north of San Francisco which [Alfred Hitchcock](#) once described as “picturesque.” (He shot “The Birds” there.) At that point, the Sierra Club had yet to take a position on nuclear power, but it opposed P.G. & E.’s plan out of concerns

that cooling towers would mar the scenery. P.G. & E. then proposed moving the plant three hundred miles south, to the Nipomo Dunes. This was where Cecil B. DeMille had filmed “The Ten Commandments,” and the Sierra Club objected again, for similar reasons. The Diablo Canyon site—a bluff on the Pacific roughly halfway between San Francisco and L.A.—was also spectacular. This time around, the Sierra Club was willing to compromise. In 1966, its executive board declared the bluff a “satisfactory alternative.” Ground was broken on Unit 1 two years later.

In 1969, geologists discovered the Hosgri Fault just offshore from Diablo Canyon. Mothers for Peace, a San Luis Obispo group originally formed to protest the Vietnam War, swivelled to take on P.G. & E. (“Mothers for Peace are fighting another war” is how the local newspaper put it. ) The organization filed motion after motion aimed at halting construction. This slowed but did not stop the work. Then, in 1979, Three Mile Island’s Unit 2 suffered a partial meltdown. The ranks of Diablo Canyon’s opponents swelled. In 1981, protesters blocked the only paved access road to the plant. Within two weeks, more than nineteen hundred people were arrested.

Diablo Canyon Unit 1 finally went online in May, 1985. Unit 2 followed in March, 1986. A month later, the No. 4 reactor at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, in northern Ukraine, melted down and caught fire. (The accident, which resulted in more than a hundred cases of acute radiation syndrome and several thousand cases of thyroid cancer, is still considered the world’s worst nuclear disaster.) Mothers for Peace members took to wearing badges that said “Remember Chernobyl: It can happen here.”

For the next couple of decades, the mothers kept fighting and Diablo Canyon kept operating, more or less uneventfully. This was the case even though several additional earthquake faults were discovered nearby. All the while, though, the glow was coming off the atom. Nuclear power had been promoted as affordable—according to one famous prediction, it would be “too cheap to meter”—but was instead proving too expensive to sustain. By contrast, other forms of energy, such as solar and wind, were falling steeply in price. In 2016, P.G. & E. announced that it would close Diablo Canyon when the reactors’ operating licenses expired, in 2025. The utility promised to replace the power with other forms of carbon-free energy. [Gavin](#)

[Newsom](#), then the state's lieutenant governor, called the arrangement one "we can all be proud of."

It was around the time of this announcement that Hoff and Zaitz founded Mothers for Nuclear. The duo thought shutting the plant was a terrible idea, and not just, they insisted, because it would cost them their jobs. ("The only way we can have a utopia is if we do nuclear!" Hoff tells Tuhus-Dubrow.) Conceived as a foil to Mothers for Peace, Mothers for Nuclear adopted many of the older group's tactics: protesting, testifying at hearings, offering up catchy slogans—in this case, ones like "Split, Don't Emit." And, as with Mothers for Peace, they were—initially, at least—frustrated.

But then came yet another turn of the turbine. In the summer of 2020, California experienced a brutal heat wave. The demand for air-conditioning strained the state's power grid, and the grid's operator, which goes by the acronym *CAISO*, instituted rolling blackouts. (The situation, Tuhus-Dubrow observes, "highlighted how energy use and climate change feed on each other in a vicious cycle.") Diablo Canyon was then providing almost ten per cent of the state's electricity, and, despite the terms P.G. & E. had agreed to, it seemed likely that, if the plant shut down, at least some of the power it generated would be replaced by burning fossil fuels. In February, 2022, more than seventy-five energy and climate experts sent a letter to Newsom, who by then had become the governor, urging him to "delay the closure of the plant." (In the letter, the group called comparisons between Diablo Canyon and Fukushima "alarmist.") A few months later, Newsom, in effect, ripped up the deal to decommission the plant.

"Some would say it's the righteous and right climate decision," he told the *Los Angeles Times*. What struck Tuhus-Dubrow most about the reaction to the Governor's reversal was that there wasn't much of one. Mothers for Peace, which was still actively opposing Diablo Canyon, was "furious, of course," she reports. But "the general public sentiment seemed to be a shrug." Late last year, after "Atomic Dreams" went to press, California's public-utilities board approved a rate hike that is expected to increase the total price of electricity in the state by more than seven hundred million dollars. The hike was explicitly designed to cover the cost of Diablo Canyon's continuing operation.

Marco Visscher is a Dutch journalist whose backstory resembles Tuhus-Dubrow's. For much of his life, he regarded nuclear power with hostility. Writing in a monthly magazine called *Ode*, he once declared that the technology had “nothing good to bring to people or nature” and that “now is the time to bring the nuclear industry down.” But he kept hearing about environmentalists and climate scientists who were staunchly pro-nuclear. He decided to look into the matter and, in the process, experienced a full-blown conversion. In “[The Power of Nuclear](#)” (Bloomsbury Sigma), he declares, “Just about everything we think we know about nuclear power turns out to be wrong.”

Our first and most important mistake, according to Visscher, is thinking that nuclear power represents a special threat. Every form of energy production poses risks. Coal-fired power plants belch out pollutants that cause, among many other health problems, lung disease, heart disease, and cancer. A study published in *The Lancet* estimated that coal, on a per-kilowatt basis, was nearly five hundred times deadlier than nuclear. Though gas-fired plants burn cleaner, they, too, emit dangerous particulates. Renewables, meanwhile, pose hazards of their own. Hydroelectric dams collapse; small planes fly into wind turbines. “Nuclear power is the safest of all energy sources,” Visscher asserts.

So how did it get such a bad rep? In Visscher’s telling, the problem, paradoxically, stems from the industry’s tireless pursuit of safety. In the U.S., reactors operate under the requirement that radiation doses, for workers and the public, be kept “as low as is reasonably achievable”—for short, *ALARA*. The nuclear industry accepted this requirement in the nineteen-seventies “in an attempt to reassure the public,” Visscher writes. “But it didn’t work.” *ALARA* reinforced the idea that any exposure was too much: “If the industry itself treated very low doses of radiation with the utmost care, it must be very dangerous, right?”

Another big mistake is the fear of nuclear waste. When spent fuel rods are first removed from a reactor, they are extremely hot, in terms of both temperature and radioactivity. Although in the first sense they will cool down in a matter of years, in the second they will remain hazardous for centuries. In the U.S., the Department of Energy has been trying for nearly five decades to draft a plan for the long-term storage of nuclear waste, but

has yet to come up with one that can win congressional approval. As a result, a hundred thousand tons' worth of spent fuel has piled up at reactors around the country. Two thousand additional tons are added each year. Disposal has been called the nuclear industry's Achilles' heel.

Here, again, Visscher waves away concerns. Solutions exist, he says—they just have to be implemented. Finland is currently building a “deep geological repository” for its waste; the repository, on the country’s southwestern coast, will eventually consist of thirty miles of tunnels bored into the granite bedrock. Spent fuel can also be recycled or, to use the term of art, reprocessed. This is done in, among other countries, France. Finally, in what are known as fast reactors, waste can be converted into fuel. “The highly radioactive waste from nuclear plants is special, indeed, but in a good way,” Visscher writes.

Among climate scientists, the most outspoken proponent of nuclear power is probably James Hansen, a former director of *NASA*’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies, who is sometimes called the father of global warming. Hansen recently co-wrote an op-ed in the Albany *Times Union* that praised New York’s governor, Kathy Hochul, for embracing “advanced nuclear” as a way to cut the state’s greenhouse-gas emissions. (“Advanced nuclear” is a catchall term that’s used for a variety of proposed plants, none of which have yet received operating licenses from the Nuclear Regulatory Commission.) “If the state hopes to achieve its climate goals, it will need more nuclear power,” the article concluded.

Visscher presents climate change as the ultimate pro-nuclear argument. Industrialized economies need reliable electricity, and the sun and the wind provide power only intermittently. Those who disagree with him are, he suggests, either hypocrites or dupes. This group includes the Swedish climate activist [Greta Thunberg](#), who says that nuclear plants take too long to build, and the former European commissioner for climate action Frans Timmermans, who says that they’re too expensive. Delays and cost overruns aren’t reasons to oppose nuclear power, Visscher counters; they are *products* of the opposition to nuclear power, which can add years and billions of dollars to construction. Nuclear foes “have turned out to be the useful idiots” of the fossil-fuel industry, he writes.

Work on the Shoreham nuclear power plant, on the North Shore of Long Island, began in early 1973. The plant was intended to help meet the area's surging electricity demand, but, from early on, it was plagued by problems. To start with, Shoreham's owner, the Long Island Lighting Company, made the containment dome too small. A New York State official who visited the site during construction compared the equipment-stuffed dome to a shoebox crammed with junk. Another said that entering it was like walking into "the middle of a bowl of spaghetti."

*LILCO* had originally projected that Shoreham would take five years to build and cost five hundred million dollars. The plant was nowhere near finished when, in 1979, the Three Mile Island accident took place, and opposition exploded. On June 3, 1979, an estimated fifteen thousand people gathered on a Long Island beach to protest. Some friends and I were among them.

We were in high school then and lived across the Long Island Sound, in Westchester County. I can't remember if it was already raining when we set out, in a borrowed station wagon, but by the time we got near Shoreham it was pouring. After an hour or so of shivering in the wet, I suggested that we had registered our opinions and should head home. My friends, I recall with some bitterness, disagreed.

Three Mile Island was the kind of accident that the nuclear industry had insisted couldn't happen. When it did happen, it changed the way plants were regulated. Operators now had to develop evacuation plans in concert with local officials. Those who tried—in good faith or not—to come up with such a plan for Shoreham had to contend with Long Island's awkward geography. In the event of an accident, the only practical way to get away from the plant would be to drive west, toward New York City. (The other, impractical option would be to take a boat across Long Island Sound.) People living east of the reactor would thus have to head into danger in order to escape it. In 1983, the Suffolk County Legislature declared there was no evacuation plan that would "protect the health, welfare, and safety" of the public.



"I guess we were so distracted by the whole cookie thing we forgot he was a monster."  
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Years of wrangling ensued. In 1985, a hurricane knocked out power for many *LILCO* customers; the company struggled to get the lights back on, raising fresh questions about its competence. In 1988, *LILCO* was convicted of misleading state regulators to win rate increases. It nearly went bankrupt. Finally, in 1989, it announced that it would abandon Shoreham. In return, the state agreed to allow the company to recoup from ratepayers the cost of the plant, which had ballooned to almost six billion dollars (roughly fifteen billion dollars in today's money). The reactor was shut down before it could deliver a single kilowatt-hour of electricity. Shoreham has been called "every utility's nightmare," a monument to human folly, and "a world-class fiasco."

The abandonment of the reactor made Long Island that much more reliant on coal and natural gas. It's been estimated that Shoreham's closure resulted in the emission of an additional three million tons of CO<sub>2</sub> a year, or more than a hundred million tons over the past three and a half decades.

Were those who opposed the plant wrong to do so? As Marco Visscher points out, all forms of energy production entail risk. And, as James Hansen points out, the risk—or, really, the certainty—of continuing to burn fossil

fuels is global catastrophe: major cities under water, grain belts too hot to produce grain, forests in flames, entire ecosystems unravelling.

Clearly, the new nuclear evangelists have a point. Just as clearly, they're also missing something. Say what you will, Fukushima was a world-class disaster. Hundreds of tons of highly radioactive fuel are still sitting at the bottom of Units 1, 2, and 3 because no one knows what to do with them, or even how to get at them. Cleaning up the site could take a century, if it happens at all. And the really chilling part is that a much bigger accident was averted only by accident.

Because Unit 4 was undergoing maintenance when the tsunami hit, workers had filled its reactor well with water. Owing to a leak that shouldn't have existed, some of this water seeped into the unit's spent-fuel pool. It's likely that without this leak the hot fuel rods in the pool would have caught fire. In that case, radionuclides would have been spewed over a wide area, possibly including Tokyo. A high-ranking Japanese official called this possibility the "Devil's scenario."

Nuclear power—and this includes burying or reprocessing the resulting waste—has always been safe on paper. The trouble is that we don't live on paper. We live in a world where earthquake faults are belatedly discovered, contractors cut corners, utilities mislead regulators, and people panic—a world, in short, of errors, terrors, and corruption. As the world warms, global instability will only increase. In this sense, climate change represents a pretty good argument *against* going nuclear.

In the end, the most convincing case for learning to love fission may be the grimmest—not so much green as dark green. Few nuclearists embrace it, but it did have one influential advocate: James Lovelock, the British scientist best known for developing the Gaia hypothesis. Lovelock, writing in 2001, observed that the bubonic plague presented a great threat to medieval Europeans but was "of no consequence for the Earth itself." Much the same could be said of nuclear accidents: they are traumatic for the human beings involved but have little appreciable effect on the biosphere.

"The land around the failed Chernobyl power station was evacuated because its high radiation intensity made it unsafe for people," Lovelock, who died in

2022, on his hundred-and-third birthday, wrote. “But this radioactive land is now rich in wildlife, much more so than neighboring populated areas. We call the ash from nuclear power nuclear waste and worry about its safe disposal. I wonder if instead we should use it as an incorruptible guardian of the beautiful places of the Earth. Who would dare cut down a forest in which was the storage place of nuclear ash?” ♦

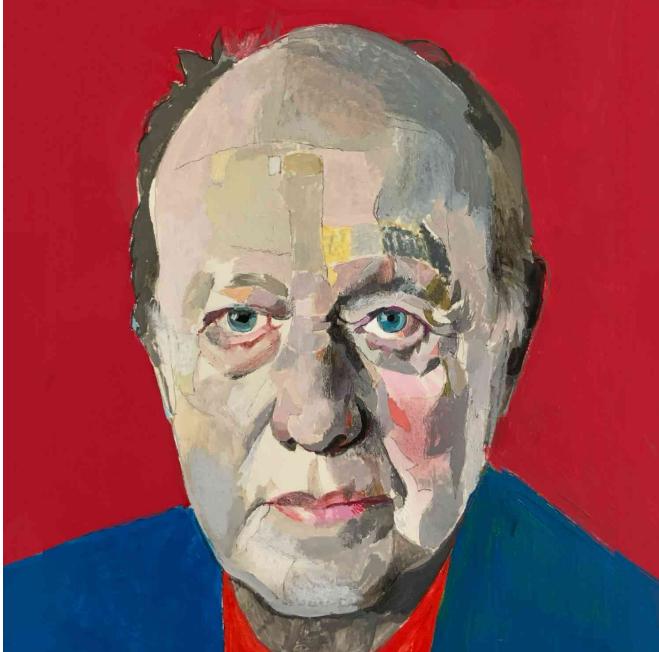
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## Books

# James C. Scott and the Art of Resistance

The late political scientist enjoined readers to look for opposition to authoritarian states not in revolutionary vanguards but in acts of quiet disobedience.

By [Nikil Saval](#)



Though Scott came from the political left, his most famous book, "Seeing Like a State," a vigorous critique of large-scale government projects, was warmly received by the libertarian right. Illustration by Andrea Ventura; Source photograph by Michael Marsland / Yale University

“In Praise of Floods” (Yale), a study of rivers by the late political scientist James C. Scott, arrives after a year of catastrophic floods. Last spring, heavy rainfall lifted parts of the San Jacinto and Trinity Rivers, in East Texas, at least a dozen feet above the flood stage, forcing thousands to evacuate their homes. In September, during [Hurricane Helene](#), the French Broad River surged into commercial corridors in Asheville, North Carolina, wiping out restaurants, breweries, stores, and dwellings. In October, in Spain, the Magro, Júcar, and Turia Rivers overflowed their banks in the region around the city of Valencia, leading to the deaths of two hundred and thirty-two people.

Scott wants us to look past disasters such as these. Focussing on the human costs of flooding, he argues, is too anthropocentric. A flood may be, “for humans,” the “most damaging of ‘natural’ disasters worldwide,” but, from “a long-run hydrological perspective, it is just the river breathing deeply, as it must.” A seasonal inundation, known as a “flood pulse,” delivers crucial nutrients to organisms that depend on rivers. “Without the annual occupation of the floodplain, the channel—that line on the map—is comparatively dead biotically,” he argues. Or, as he puts it more succinctly elsewhere in the book, “No flood, no river.”

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It is as difficult to imagine a flood survivor reading these sentences without objection as it would be to picture a displaced resident of Pacific Palisades reading a book called “In Praise of Fires.” But Scott doesn’t ignore how damaging a river’s overflowing can be to those living along its banks. In celebrating periodic flooding, he is also warning about the costs of human intervention. Dams and levees lead to less frequent flooding, but erosion and deforestation mean more catastrophic floods when these barriers are breached. The more civilized you are, the less resilient you are.

[\*\*In Praise of Floods\*\*](#)” offers a posthumous conclusion to a scholarly career of upending conventional wisdom. Scott spent forty-five years in the political-science department at Yale, where he taught until a few years before his death, last July, at eighty-seven. But his interests were broader than those of most political scientists. He started out as a specialist in contemporary Southeast Asia; just as he was beginning to gain recognition for his work, he risked his career to move to Malaysia and embark upon an ethnography of village life. He founded the agrarian-studies program at Yale, researching and teaching about rural communities from around the world. By the end of his career, he had left detailed field work behind and was writing sweeping treatments of the distant past, which nonetheless managed to broach some of the most vexing political questions of our time.

Though Scott came from the political left, his most famous book, [\*\*“Seeing Like a State,”\*\*](#) a vigorous critique of big government projects intended to improve human welfare, was warmly received by the libertarian right. When asked to define himself, he hedged and qualified: he sometimes called himself “a crude Marxist, with the emphasis on ‘crude.’ ” He was an anthropologist “by courtesy,” in acknowledgment of the fact that he had no formal training in the discipline. Late in life, he drifted toward anarchism, but even this belief system exerted a tenuous hold, and he could offer only “two cheers” for it. He strove to cultivate a similar openness in his students. For several years at Yale, he led what he called an “incubator” workshop, in which he encouraged graduate students to bring in half-formulated ideas as a way to develop risk-taking instincts. Another risk he encouraged was student organizing: he was a strong and consistent supporter of the decades-long project to form a graduate-student union at Yale. In his private life, he tried his hand at farming (his biography on the political-science department’s website listed him as “a mediocre farmer”), and he brought eggs to his classes.

The lives of people working in agriculture were at the center of Scott’s work. Small farmers and peasants the world over endured dramatic transformations in the twentieth century and were subject to grand and ill-begotten experiments by capitalist and communist states alike. In colonial and post-colonial regimes, they were forced to plant cash crops and were heavily taxed. Under Stalin and Mao, experiments in collective farming led to

famine. Scott wanted to study how rural populations responded to these upheavals.

Peasants have often been seen as docile and passive. Scott thought otherwise. He looked out for tacit “local knowledge” that states ignored in their giant programs of social remodelling, and discerned in small acts of disobedience a pattern of resistance that sometimes erupted into full-scale revolt. In his later work, he cheerfully depicted the “barbarians” who hovered on the edges of states, eluding conscripted labor and leading daring raids on grain hoards. Scott himself was a bit like one of these barbarians, constantly attacking and unsettling a seemingly stable consensus on the value of state power, and of civilization itself.

Scott first visited Southeast Asia in his early twenties. Born in southern New Jersey, in 1936, he attended a Quaker school before going to Williams College. At Williams, a professor encouraged him to study Burma, now Myanmar. After graduating, Scott went there on a Rotary Fellowship, in 1959. Riding a 1940 Triumph motorcycle, he travelled throughout the country, ending up at Mandalay University, where he studied Burmese for five months. The sojourn launched his interest in Southeast Asia, the peasantry, and the formation of states.

While overseas, Scott wrote reports on Burmese student politics for the C.I.A., and was involved in the U.S. [National Student Association](#), then a hotbed of global student activism. As detailed by the political scientist Karen Paget, Scott’s involvement with the C.I.A. was brief, but his time with the U.S.N.S.A. seems to have whetted his interest in radical politics. This was the era of Third Worldism, when countries that had ejected colonial powers began to band together, many of them under the banner of non-aligned socialism. With the U.S.N.S.A., Scott travelled to Singapore, where he met representatives of the Socialist student union, and to Indonesia, where he was introduced to the heads of the Communist student union, many of whose members were later killed in the country’s anti-Communist purges of 1965.

In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, the Vietnam War was a matter of urgent concern in politics and scholarship alike. The leading role played in the war by the Vietnamese rural poor prompted Scott to wonder what

motivated peasants to revolt. This question led to his first major book, “[The Moral Economy of the Peasant](#),” from 1976, which borrowed the idea of a “moral economy” from the left-wing British historian E. P. Thompson. Scott described a universe of mutual assistance that peasants—his subject was Southeast Asia, but his conclusions were general—created for themselves to insure that they didn’t go hungry. The peasantry relied on what Scott called a “subsistence ethic,” a safety-first principle that dictated that access to food and other means of sustaining life took precedence over maximizing profit. If this fragile web of economic relationships was disturbed, it could lead to starvation and a breakdown of social trust.

Just such a breakdown had occurred in Vietnam and Burma in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when colonial authorities began to intrude into peasant life, privatizing village lands, forests, and fisheries and introducing a multitude of punishing taxes. These moves disrupted the tenuous balance that had allowed peasants to survive. When the Great Depression reached these countries, in 1930, putting further strain on the livelihoods of small farmers, they erupted in resistance. Crowds, sometimes swelling to the thousands, began an assault on the colonial state. In a series of rebellious actions in central Vietnam, Scott writes, “administrative offices and their tax rolls were destroyed, post offices and railroad stations and schools were burned, alcohol warehouses plundered, collaborating officials assassinated, forest guard posts destroyed, rice stores seized, and at least one salt convoy attacked.”

“The Moral Economy of the Peasant” came out as political events were laying waste to the hopes that many had placed in Third World revolution. Post-colonial and socialist states founded in opposition to colonial oppression exhibited their own brutality and oppressiveness. One country after another employed fantastic schemes to improve general welfare, such as Mao’s Great Leap Forward and Julius Nyerere’s Ujamaa campaign to resettle rural populations in Tanzania in planned villages. These efforts often required coerced labor and diminished democratic participation, and sometimes led to famine. When peasant rebellions appeared, they were crushed even in superficially democratic countries such as India, whose government violently suppressed the Naxalite uprisings in West Bengal. Later in life, Scott would confess to having become “disillusioned by the

way in which revolutions produced a stronger state that was more oppressive than the one it replaced.”

Scott’s fourth book, the extraordinary “[Weapons of the Weak](#),” from 1985, registers a growing disenchantment with revolutionary politics. In 1978, hoping to observe peasant struggle up close, he had moved with his wife, Louise, and their three children from Connecticut to a remote village in the state of Kedah, the rice bowl of Malaysia. In that country, as elsewhere in Southeast Asia, revolutionary idealism was giving way to forms of state power that were sometimes as intrusive as the colonial regimes they had replaced. As part of the so-called Green Revolution, the Malaysian government had introduced new machinery and cash crops intended to boost agricultural productivity, restructuring the farming economy in ways that were greatly resented by the rural poor.

Scott went to Malaysia looking for rebellion. But, instead of open defiance, he found a series of half measures—“foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage.” Outward conformity and deference on the part of the poor masked quiet subterfuge: villagers were squatting on land that belonged to others, stealing food and money, refusing to work or working more slowly than usual, and secretly damaging farm machines. A man in Kedah told Scott that he knew exactly how to put barbed wire and nails into an auger to jam a combine harvester. He recounted watching as other villagers surrounded a harvester belonging to a Chinese syndicate, poured kerosene over the engine and the cab, and set it on fire. Scott defined these actions as “everyday resistance,” and argued that this was the most common form assumed by the fight against an oppressive society. Organized revolt was rare. But public servility masking private resentment was everywhere.

There is a certain doomed quality to the activity Scott describes in “*Weapons of the Weak*.” The peasants in Kedah knew that they had no way to win their campaign against the state; they hoped only to minimize or delay the threat to their livelihoods. Scott came to think, however, that such muted protests were in fact more common and more important than any other kind, and that these actions had the potential to bring down governments. In a later work, he named this sort of rebellion “infrapolitics”—politics outside the visible range. Throughout world history, he argued, people fought the encroachment

of state power not by public protest—which under an authoritarian regime often meant death—but through a series of clandestine activities that amounted to protest nonetheless. In “[Domination and the Arts of Resistance](#),” from 1990, he told the story of how, as eighteenth-century European states began taking control of forests previously held in common, the peasantry in England and France continued to forage in them, and gather firewood and pasture animals, even after these activities had been outlawed. They considered it an injustice that their customary privileges had been abrogated by fiat, and they would fight, if quietly and subversively, rather than cede what they understood to be their rights.

Scott’s injunction to look for resistance where it does not immediately appear turns the familiar hierarchy of the visible and the invisible on its head. Don’t look only at the operations of power, at the crushing machinery of the state, at the apparent acquiescence of people to being ruled, he seems to say. Look, instead, at things that don’t seem worthy of comment at all. That is where the vast majority of resistance takes place. Look at rumors, gossip, metaphors, euphemisms, folktales—all the means by which subordinate groups disguise their opposition. This isn’t just another way of submitting to power; this is a way of maintaining safety, of living to fight another day. And, Scott believed, slipping from the worlds of his peasant subjects to something more universal, it is all around.

Scott’s sympathy for resistance to the state and his congenital skepticism of any project coming from on high constitute a political orientation that he eventually began to call anarchism. Unlike the late anthropologist David Graeber, one of the [founding organizers](#) of Occupy Wall Street, Scott wasn’t an anarchist activist: he had long ceased to be involved with social movements, and he offered no strategic considerations. But he shared with Graeber a theoretical viewpoint that didn’t take for granted that “civilization” was a natural good. Much of human history occurred outside the context of states, and a good deal of it, if you abstracted the objects of your gaze through what Scott called an “anarchist squint,” took place in direct opposition to states. This meant that, when you looked at how states worked, even when they were trying to improve human welfare, you often found that they ignored the very things that people did on their own, without the help of government, to maintain their existence, or to live free of coercion.

The subject of how government worked or failed to work was the focus of “Seeing Like a State,” a series of case studies of high-modernist social-engineering projects undertaken mostly in the course of the twentieth century. Perhaps the book’s most familiar example, for Americans, is that of the large-scale city planning to which the urbanist and writer Jane Jacobs objected. But Scott also looked at German scientific forestry; collective farming in the Soviet Union and Tanzania; utopian city planning in Chandigarh, India, and in Brasília; and Vladimir Lenin’s theories about the formation of revolutionary parties.

Despite ideological differences, many twentieth-century intellectuals, politicians, and planners were united in their belief that the state had a special capacity to make vast improvements in human lives through wide-reaching social transformations. To accomplish such improvements, modern states had to reorder society in a way that was legible to them by bringing their subjects under centralized administrative control. How can the government collect taxes, for instance, or conscript soldiers or enforce the law, if people do not have last names? Better assign some. In a footnote drawn from a historical document, Scott unearths the example of a sixteenth-century Welshman who was chastised by an English judge for giving his name, “in the Welsh fashion,” as “Thomas Ap”—son of—“William, Ap Thomas, Ap Richard, Ap Hoel, Ap Evan Vaughan.” Afterward, the man “called himself Moston, according to the name of his principal house, and left that name to his posteritie.”

“Seeing Like a State” radiates with Scott’s fondness for reversing hierarchies of knowledge. He insists that high-modernist projects of social reform, however sophisticated their proponents, were less complex, not more, than the local societies and forms of knowledge they attempted to reorder. (How much more detailed knowledge is concentrated in “Thomas Ap William, Ap Thomas, Ap Richard, Ap Hoel, Ap Evan Vaughan” than in “Thomas Moston.”) The vision that a planner and his state bureaucracy projected onto an agricultural area or a neighborhood was far more rigid and simplified than what already existed. Scott called the practical knowledge accumulated by locals “*metis*,” after the ancient Greek word for “skill” or “wisdom”—distinct from “*gnosis*,” the word related to our “knowledge” and “insight.” *Metis* was “common sense, experience, a knack” or “savoir faire.” It was the way, for example, that certain Indigenous Americans taught Colonial settlers

to plant corn “when the oak leaves were the size of a squirrel’s ear,” a folkloric aphorism that contained within it years of observation of the sequence of seasonal change. But metis was also the informal system of “eyes on the street” that [Jane Jacobs](#) observed as having developed over the years in dense urban neighborhoods, and which no project planned from on high could replicate. Metis was also the warren of narrow city streets, perhaps built over old cow paths, that both represented and generated a thick network of intimate and practical neighborly relationships. High modernism, on the other hand, was the grid—easier to survey, tax, and police.

“Seeing Like a State” was published in 1998, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the decline of socialism, and after the United States had lost its taste for New Deal-style economic planning. Perhaps as a result, the book appeared more conservative than Scott meant it to be. The political scientist Francis Fukuyama gave it an approving notice in *Foreign Affairs*, and, a year after it was published, the head of the libertarian Cato Institute invited Scott to address its annual convention, much to his dismay. Many on the left concurred with their libertarian colleagues that Scott had made, however inadvertently, a pro-market case against state power. In a review, the liberal economist Brad DeLong noted the striking similarities in argument between Scott’s brief against planning and the libertarian Austrian economist Friedrich Hayek’s praise of the “spontaneous order” of market economies. Scott, unlike Hayek, was an avowed skeptic of free markets; in “Seeing Like a State,” he had argued, albeit briefly, that “market-driven standardization” was susceptible to many of the flaws of modern social engineering. But his critics on the left weren’t wrong to compare his arguments to Hayek’s: so intently and thoroughly did Scott make his case against the modern state that, once you’ve read “Seeing Like a State,” it’s difficult to imagine the virtue of any state action, even of the incremental and meliorist variety. After such knowledge, what forgiveness?

Years later, it’s possible to look at Scott’s book less as an isolated broadside against the state and more as a way of seeing, through extreme examples, the extent to which planning ignores local knowledge at its peril. Still, even in those instances, Scott offers equivocal lessons. When it comes to contemporary debates on how best to solve our nationwide housing crisis, for instance, he can be read as an ally to movements attempting to protect neighborhoods against large-scale development. He asks planners to “prefer

wherever possible to take a small step, stand back, observe, and then plan the next small move.” He makes special pleas for “context and particularity.” At the same time, he asks to make room for “human inventiveness” and “surprises,” which might suggest removing constraints to development—for example, restrictive zoning—that stifle initiative and drive. If you need room to build, better for the state to get out of the way. Both stances are conceivable within the capacious framework of the book, and that is perhaps why radicals and conservatives alike have found support for their arguments in its pages.

“Seeing Like a State” offers an even more complex (or blurry) lens through which to view the climate crisis. Scott’s study of how states reordered the natural world to generate maximum revenue may help to explain our own landscapes of fracking pads and pipelines. But it’s difficult to extract from the book a coherent strategy to fight climate change. To avoid the worst of the devastation from rising global temperatures will undoubtedly require not just state action but multistate coöperation on an unprecedented scale. Governments may need to override city and country alike to produce solar arrays and wind farms, shut down coal- and gas-fired power plants, unearth minerals for large-scale battery storage, and retrofit millions of houses, offices, and schools with electric cooling and heating systems. With Scott in mind, it’s possible to hope that states engaged in this collective project will overcome the blindness of the past. Still, if they—and we—are to succeed, Scott’s advice that planners pause before making their “next small move” will likely be discarded.

It’s an irony of Scott’s career that, though he pleaded for respecting local knowledge, his own writing began to take on imperial proportions in the later decades of his life. The last major works that he published before his death, “[The Art of Not Being Governed](#)” and “[Against the Grain](#),” both cover centuries of history, confidently summing up many shelves’ worth of research and surveying wide tracts of geography. Scott examines how ancient states formed around sedentary agricultural practices—growing rice in medieval Southeast Asia, and wheat in ancient Mesopotamia—not because such farming had any intrinsic or inevitable value but because it was an important step in creating a “legible” and “manageable” state. Outside the rice “padi-state” and “grain states,” in Scott’s view, intrepid rebels engaged

in more mobile, nomadic forms of agriculture, trying to escape taxation and forced labor.

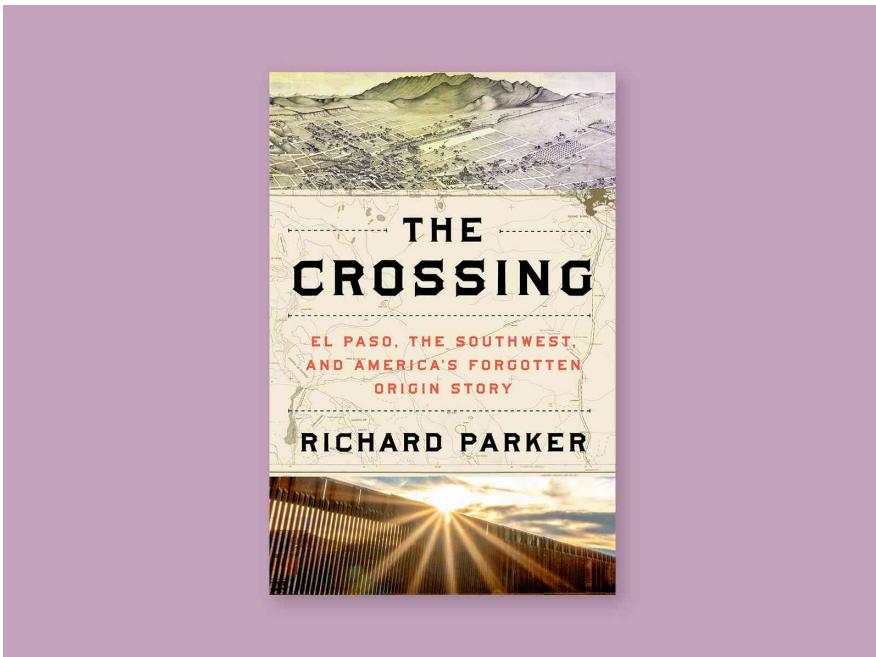
Scott saw each step in the civilizing process, from farming cereals to working on an assembly line, as a loss of complexity, a diminishing of the “great diversity of natural rhythms” to which our ancestors were attuned. “It is no exaggeration to say,” he writes, before arguably risking just such an exaggeration, “that hunting and foraging are, in terms of complexity, as different from cereal-grain farming as cereal-grain farming is, in turn, removed from repetitive work on a modern assembly line. Each step represents a substantial narrowing of focus and a simplification of tasks.” From this perspective, a civilization’s collapse, rather than something to be lamented, might be experienced, at least by those at the edge of a state, as “an emancipation.” Scott acknowledged that so-called dark ages offer “fewer important digs for archaeologists, fewer records and texts for historians, and fewer trinkets—large and small—to fill museum exhibits.” But he argued that “such ‘vacant’ periods represented a bolt for freedom by many state subjects and an improvement in human welfare.” Anarchic social orders erect no monuments, and leave no ruins to be bleached over the centuries in the desert sand. Instead they offer alternative visions of how society might have developed had states not formed, concentrating manpower and crops, homogenizing landscapes, and taming rivers.

Some critics have called Scott a romantic, in part for seeming to indulge the lawlessness of non-state peoples. In “Against the Grain” and “The Art of Not Being Governed,” there is an ineluctable charisma to the frontier nomads, with their state-repelling egalitarianism and their sense of freedom. “In Praise of Floods” extends the forms of resistance Scott celebrates to nonhuman subjects. Laboring to evoke the sheer variety of what gets lost when rivers are subjugated by humans, he devotes a questionable chapter to ventriloquizing the voices of riverine animals—mollusks, river dolphins, snow carp, Asian hairy-nosed otters—speaking out against human intervention. But his work, even at its most tendentious, speaks uncannily to our current political mood of gnawing anxiety, fleeting optimism, and partial resignation over the future of the human project. To read Scott is to feel the fatalistic sense that civilization may have been botched from the beginning. But it is also to be hopeful—that what seems to be a runaway ecological

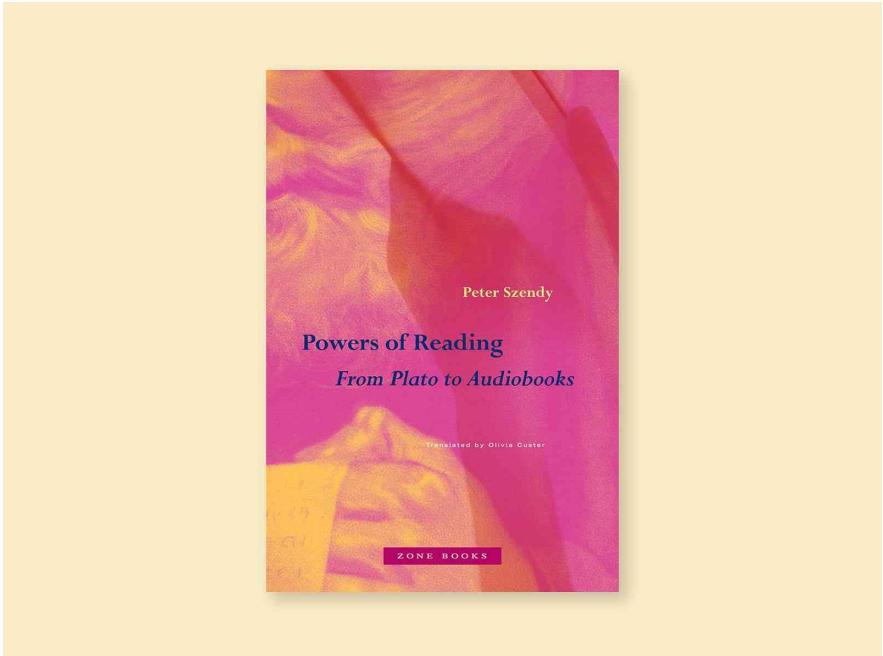
crisis and a global drift toward authoritarianism contains within it the potential for political transformation, if you look closely enough.

At Scott's memorial service, last October, organizers handed out tote bags with the slogan "Become Ungovernable." Disobedience was, in certain respects, the watchword of all his work. In "[Two Cheers for Anarchism](#)," a short book published in 2012, he testifies, like a latter-day [Henry David Thoreau](#), to insubordination as an animating principle of all social change. He describes the desertion of Confederate soldiers during the Civil War as potentially a key factor in the overthrow of slavery, and even lauds the Vietnam War-era practice of "fragging," in which infantrymen supposedly used live grenades to eliminate their commanding officers. Authoritarianism, in Scott's view, dies this way: not through "revolutionary vanguards or rioting mobs" but through "the silent, dogged resistance, withdrawal, and truculence of millions of ordinary people." Just as "millions of anthozoan polyps create, willy-nilly, a coral reef," he writes, "so do thousands upon thousands of acts of insubordination and evasion create an economic or political barrier reef of their own." ♦

By Elif Batuman  
By Elizabeth Kolbert  
By Alexandra Schwartz  
By Adam Kirsch  
By Adam Gopnik  
By Alice Gregory  
By Louis Menand  
By Graciela Mochkovsky  
By James Wood  
By Moira Donegan  
By Molly Fischer  
By Jill Lepore



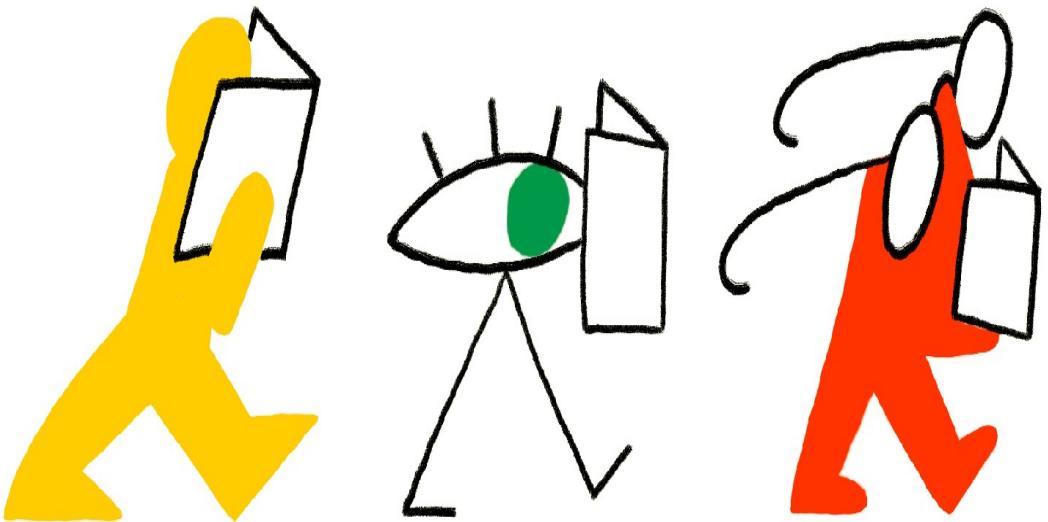
[\*\*The Crossing\*\*](#), by *Richard Parker* (*Mariner*). “American history did not begin in the Northeast. It began in the Southwest,” Parker asserts, in this sweeping history of El Paso, his home town. The account, which starts in the sixteenth century, is one of both endless conflict and cross-cultural accommodation. “El Paso is where Native, Spanish, European, African, Jewish, and Arab cultures fought, bled, died,” he writes, but it’s also where they forged a “vibrantly diverse” society that became a model for the country. Although Parker was moved to write the book after a white nationalist murdered twenty-three people at an El Paso Walmart, in 2019, he strikes a hopeful note: “This isn’t just where America began. If we’re lucky, it can show America how to begin again.”



[\*\*Powers of Reading\*\*](#), by Peter Szendy, translated from the French by Olivia Custer (Zone). In this elliptical meditation on the nature of reading, Szendy draws a connection between Phaedrus reading aloud to Socrates, the reading regime of Hobbes's "Leviathan," and audiobooks. He argues that the solitary, silent type of reading that has become the norm is "an interiorization of the reading aloud that prevailed" for centuries. "When I read silently," he writes, "*I listen to myself reading.*" Much here is theoretical, but Szendy's ultimate purpose is to point toward a new "politics of reading," one that will empower the "readee," or "the one for whom one reads," amid the proliferation of digital devices and techniques that are "shaking up our experience as readers."

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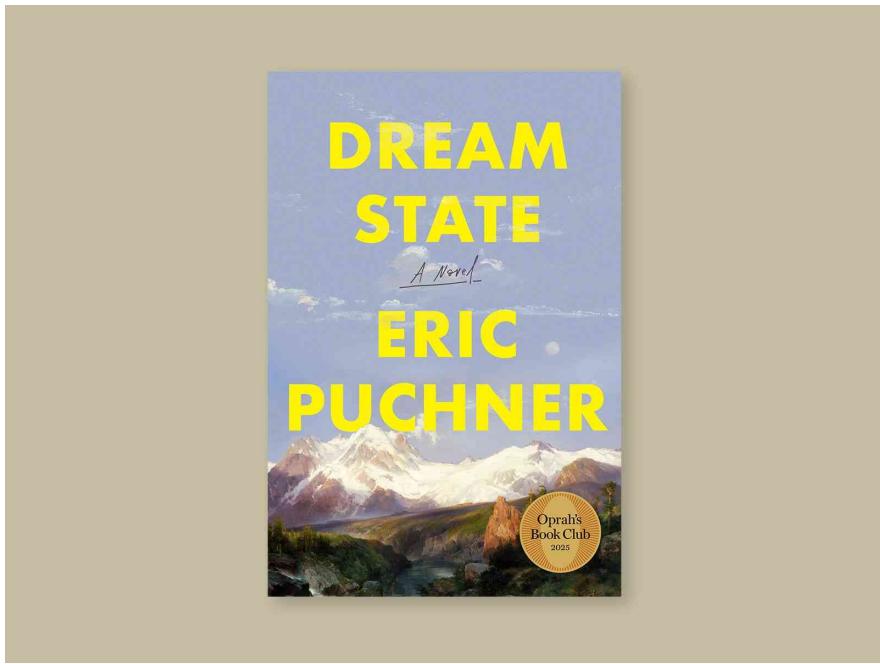
## [\*\*What We're Reading\*\*](#)



*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

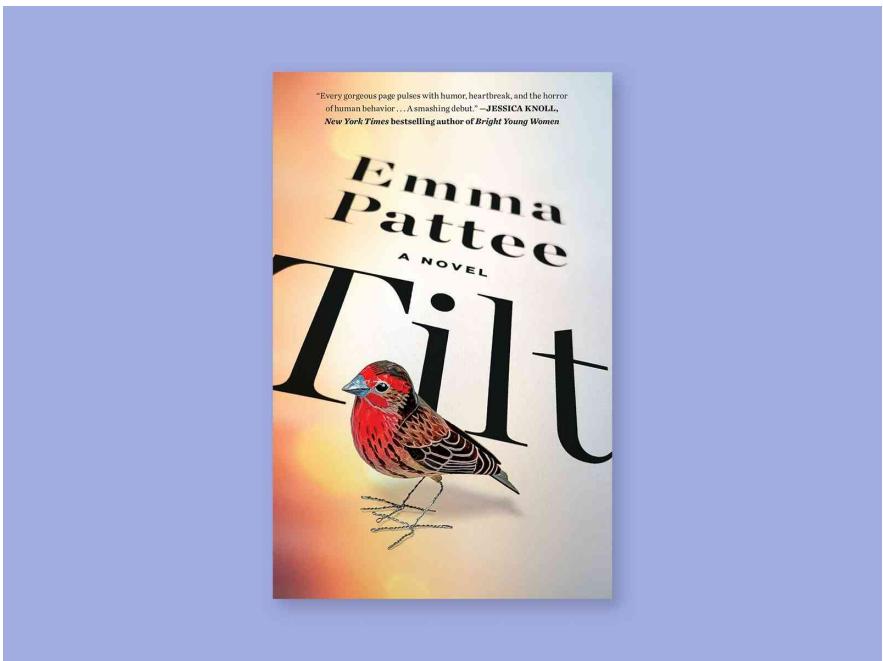
*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*

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**Dream State**, by Eric Puchner (Doubleday). This expansive novel delineates the multigenerational fallout from a young bride's impulsive decision to leave her new husband for his best friend. Cece spurns life with a Los Angeles anesthesiologist named Charlie and throws her lot in with

Garrett, a depressive baggage handler who lives in Salish, Montana, where Charlie's parents own a vacation home. The story is no fairy tale; it's one of "guilt and second-guessing and trapdoor ambivalence opening to regret." The action, which begins in 2004 and unfolds over the next several decades, is set against the backdrop of an increasingly inhospitable world—glaciers are disappearing, fires are raging, the air is unbreathable—and explores how we might make meaning of our existence in the face of escalating loss.



**Tilt**, by Emma Pattee (S&S/Marysue Rucci Books). Annie, the narrator of this propulsive novel, which takes place in a single day, is nine months pregnant and in a Portland IKEA when the “Really Big One” hits the Pacific Northwest. After the quaking subsides, Annie—left with no phone, money, or car—begins walking across what remains of the city. While traversing blazing hot asphalt and mounds of rubble, her mind flits back and forth between her present circumstance and her not so distant past: getting engaged, taking birthing classes, and fighting with her husband, whom she can't reach. “This is not an *Indiana Jones* movie where everybody will end up alive,” she says to her unborn baby. “Your father is lost to us now . . . and if I don’t get home, you will be lost to me, too.”

By Adam Kirsch  
By James Wood  
By Alice Gregory  
By Graciela Mochkovsky  
By Daniel Mendelsohn  
By Leslie Camhi  
By Adam Gopnik

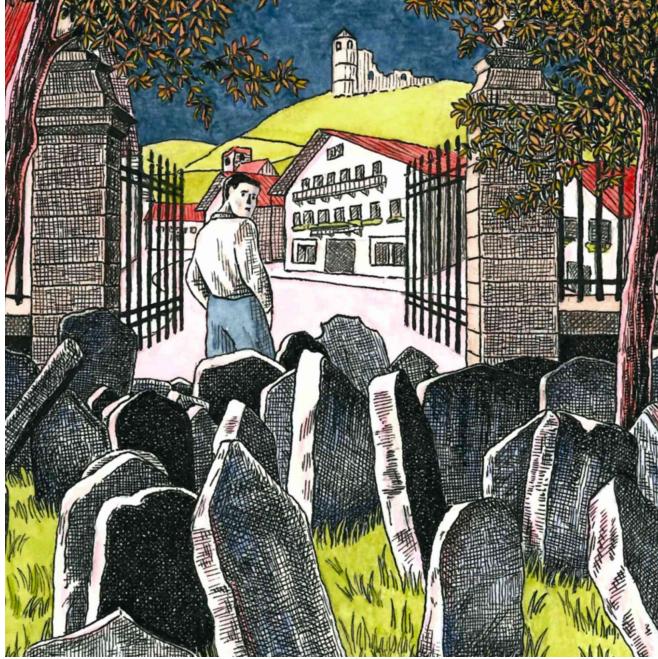
**By Moira Donegan**

## Books

# It's a Typical Small-Town Novel. Except for the Nazis

In “Darkenbloom,” by the Austrian novelist Eva Menasse, the citizens of a European border town have secrets they’d prefer to forget.

By [James Wood](#)



*The narrator's searching, playful, scathing voice renders a deep and original reimagining of history's evils. Illustration by Naï Zakharia*

We know this kind of novel. Reliable as the seasons, its opening pages disclose a familiar reality. A hovering, Godlike narrator looks down upon a European border town and begins to describe it. Since the novel is long—more than four hundred and fifty pages—and its title is also the town’s name, we anticipate a small world that will prove intricately large and tangled. The prose must first uncover the immovable furniture, then introduce the immovable inhabitants. This ancient place, doldrummed in an eastern corner of Austria, has a mostly ruined castle, a central hotel (the Tüffer), a couple of supermarkets, and a train station that, three times in the past century, has been demolished and rebuilt—each time worse. Like many European towns, it has a mazy old quarter, with cobbled alleys and crowded streets, beside an uglier new section. The inhabitants include a grocer, a

travel agent, a general practitioner, a mayor. Then, in August, 1989, two mysterious men arrive. The clock of plot begins to tick.

But “[Darkenbloom](#)” (Scribe), a new novel by the Austrian writer Eva Menasse—her second, after “Vienna,” published two decades ago—is stranger than this suggests. The strangeness begins with that Godlike narrator, who flicks a diabolical tail. This narrator has attitude. She tells us, for instance, that the castle (or most of it: only a tower remains) was pulled down after the Second World War and that “someone must have profited back then, because someone always does.” The old part of Darkenbloom has winding streets and whitewashed houses; the newer half is “hideously functional, all steel and silicone, practical, easily wiped clean, just as people would have liked to be themselves, back then, in the period of reconstruction.” About this war: afterward, Darkenbloom’s inhabitants “just carried on, as everyone did—the majority, anyway. As everyone did who wasn’t excluded from carrying on; because they were dead, for example.” And these dead: like many Central European towns, Darkenbloom has a Jewish cemetery, neglected and overgrown. Why go there? You wouldn’t wander that cemetery without a grave to visit, and for a stroll “the Catholic and Evangelical ones were nice enough.”

## **What We’re Reading**

*Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.*



So the novel's faux-innocent narrator is also a knowing satirist, who sounds at times as if she still lives in Darkenbloom, and at other times as if she got out as fast as she could. Such existential doubleness is a basic definition of irony, which wears one meaning as its official uniform while hiding underneath it a meaning that might be its rebellious opposite. The Portuguese novelist [José Saramago](#) is a master of such ironies, in which a narrator's bland clichés and platitudes hang in the air, neither quite owned nor quite disavowed, waiting to be ironized by the action of the novel. Nearer to Menasse's home, the German novelist [Walter Kempowski](#) has used a wry, interrogative, omniscient voice to examine postwar German history, a point of view simultaneously close and distant, possessive and judgmental. (Menasse's sure-footed translator, Charlotte Collins, has also translated Kempowski.) We might call this an epic voice, well suited for claustrophobic communities and long historical perspectives—the effort of proximity, the fatigue of distance.

What might a typical, sunstruck August midday feel like in Darkenbloom? Not a soul on the streets—everyone at work or at lunch, “eating dumplings and brains with eggs and thinking, as they chewed, of nothing at all.” One of the two arriving strangers, a man named Lowetz, who grew up here, has a name for this average, brain-eating yet brainless citizen: *Homo robustus*. (He longs for the appearance of a more valiant resident, who might deserve the

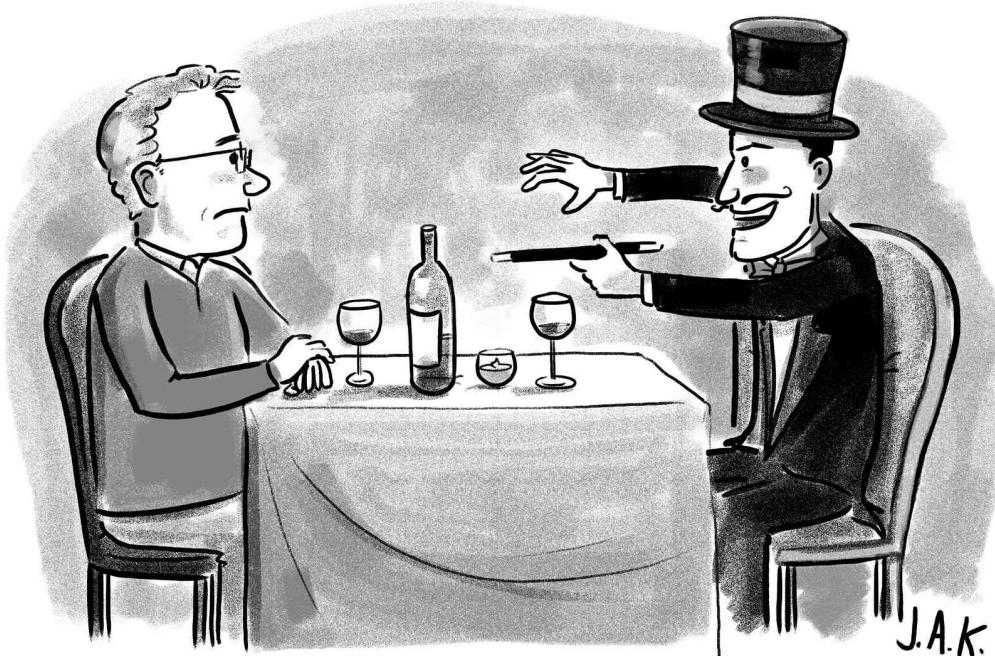
name *Homo darkenbloomiensis*.) Lowetz is returning after the death of his mother, who left a family house and belongings to sift through. Lowetz set off when young, settled in Vienna, and dreads coming back. This provincial place always stokes his anger.

The second stranger, another returnee, is more obscure. He takes a room at the Hotel Tüffer and ambles about, playing the part of an elderly, genial tourist. No one catches his name. Almost two hundred pages go by before his past emerges. He's Sascha Goldman, son of a local schoolmaster, raised here until he was eighteen, when a notice appeared at the town hall, accompanied by a list of names: "By order of the Gestapo you are hereby informed that you must leave the municipality of Darkenbloom by 30 May 1938 at the latest. Sign below to confirm that you have noted these instructions." Sascha and his father were on the list. Sascha, who now goes by a different name and lives in Boston, may have returned to search for his father's remains; he is also searching for evidence of a mass grave.

Scores of European towns bear broken postwar histories, and in 1989 that past was still felt as a palpable sediment. From time to time, fields and forests had yielded up unexploded ordnance, even the nameless dead. Against this shadowed backdrop, certain dubious citizens preferred to ghost their own histories. But how do you live in a town steeped in near-universal amnesia, where nearly everyone chews dumplings and brains, quite deliberately thinking of "nothing at all"? Menasse's novel has, as one of its epigraphs, a line from Robert Musil: "Historical is that which one would not do oneself." The whole book might unfold under that motto. By this measure, Darkenbloom teems with willfully unhistorical souls who, when pressed to recall their war years, manage to have been elsewhere: history was what someone else was doing.

*Homo robustus* is outwardly placid but nervously awaits the moment when history might demand its due—as it does now and then, especially in novels like this one. Patiently, sardonically, Menasse shifts between present and past, teasing out the long, obscured threads of her characters' lives from her vast tapestry. Take Zierbusch, a local architect and a former Hitler Youth member, who abetted a mass execution in the forest as the war closed, yet escaped charges. "Even now," we're told, "if the doorbell rang late at night

or early in the morning, he was afraid that, all these years later, they had come to get him.”



*“Now you see me, now I think we should see other people.”*  
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Or take Resi Reschen, apprenticed at fourteen to the Hotel Tüffer, where she caught the owners’ attention and thrived as an employee. Then the war hit, and “soon the Tüffers were gone, young and old, with their clothes and hats and coats and boots,” never to return. (The Tüffers were a Jewish family.) Resi falls in with the right crowd, marries an antisemite, and eventually takes over running the hotel herself, never letting on “how much she feared the Tüffers’ return.”

In the summer of 1989, the town is in an uproar—the two returnees are poking around, but the real trouble is that a group of long-haired students has arrived from Vienna, authorized to restore the Jewish cemetery. Graves will be righted, brambles cleared. The old gates stand open, letting townsfolk drift in. All this excavation unnerves the locals. The mayor is powerless—the order’s from above, the money from elsewhere. So it’s free, at least: “No, it’s not costing us anything. Yes, of course, it’s true that the fiftieth anniversary year is finally over. But our chancellor also said that we shouldn’t remember Austria’s annexation only on the memorial day itself; that remembrance should be something that endures. The cardinal said so, too. Or was it even the president?” Menasse lets these words stand without

comment; readers will note for themselves how talk of Jewish remembrance glides into Austrian remembrance—and self-pity. Elsewhere in the novel she mentions that Austria’s President in 1989 was Kurt Waldheim, the slippery ex-Nazi whose wartime role in Yugoslav and Greek atrocities had surfaced four years earlier.

Darkenbloom has its own Waldheim problem. At the war’s end, “wagonloads of half-starved, ragged creatures” rolled in from Budapest to build the South-East Wall, meant to be the last great defense against a righteously vengeful, breathingly close Red Army. (Two of these workers were Sascha and his father.) In fact, Soviet tanks soon crushed the wall, and townspeople pilfered the workers’ scant rations. One night as the war guttered out, while a wild party was held at the Darkenbloom castle, the starving workers were taken into the woods and shot by S.S. soldiers. Local Hitler Youth teens drove them to the site and dug the graves. (Zierbusch was among them.) The students’ work in the Jewish cemetery risks rousing this grim past, and most Darkenbloom residents want no part of such investigations. They’d rather think of nothing.

Menasse’s fictional Darkenbloom is based on Rechnitz, a real village in southeastern Austria near the Hungarian border. In March, 1945, as the war staggered to a close, some two hundred Hungarian Jewish forced laborers were executed near Rechnitz. Like the novel’s victims, they’d toiled on the South-East Wall. In 2007, the British journalist David Litchfield wrote in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* that guests at a ball at Schloss Rechnitz were invited to shoot Jews for sport—a claim disputed by historians, who do not dispute that the massacre took place. With the Red Army closing in, such gatherings, expressions of a desperate gaiety, a *fin d’une époque* efflorescence, weren’t rare. Nor were executions of prisoners and forced laborers, marched to a state of collapse. These killings doubled as cover for war crimes and a brutal shrug: what else to do with those cast as human refuse? The Austrian Nobel laureate Elfriede Jelinek wrote a play in 2008 about the event, “Rechnitz: The Exterminating Angel.” In her acknowledgments, Menasse informs us that she borrowed sentences from Martin Pollack’s “Kontaminierte Landschaften” (“Tainted Landscapes”), a book partly about the Rechnitz horror.

Menasse hews to the broad historical frame, but her novel justifies itself, as novels must, by doing what only fiction can. One could argue that “Darkenbloom” is too prosecutorial, and that none of Menasse’s characters especially surprise the reader. Greed, avarice, racism, and plain human weakness crop up right where you’d expect, in predictable doses. It’s no shock that provincial Austrians of 1989—Kurt Waldheim’s subjects, so to speak—would strategize in every possible way to bury the shameful past or, failing that, dilute personal guilt in collective moral haggling.

But it is Menasse’s style—which is to say, the way she uses her narrator—that makes the case for her deep and original reimagining of history. This teasing, searching, playful, scathing voice, half inside the community and half outside it, sometimes as bland as soup and other times as sharp as death, recounts history as no responsible historian could. The novel’s scornful power is bound up with the way it enacts and embodies its curious push-pull of identification and recoil, affiliation and disgust. Yet this doesn’t quite capture the book’s elusive tone, since the narrator’s identification with Darkenbloom is so highly ironized, while her recoil from Darkenbloom is at the same time so knowing, almost world-weary. Her novel may be set in 1989, but it’s very much a text of the twenty-first century, a document of cynical hindsight. This cynicism, though bleakly unsparing, saves the work from sentimentality or the unearned melodrama of inherited Holocaust legend. Instead, one has the sense of a kind of irritated prosaicism on behalf of the author, as if Menasse, in a distinguished Austrian tradition, were angrily quarrelling with her own countryfolk. As a result, despite its heavy history, “Darkenbloom” doesn’t read like some overdetermined historical “Nazi novel”; it reads like a satirical, intemperate, gossipy small-town novel, into which Nazi history just happens to have dropped.

If I were to select one of Menasse’s many threads as an example, it might be the tale—told in a brief, perfect chapter—of how the town’s prewar physician, Dr. Bernstein, was edged out of Darkenbloom. In 1938, two antisemitic thugs showed up at Bernstein’s home with the predictable ultimatum: time to go. These “two crooks” had been Bernstein’s patients since they were kids. With no Gentile doctor yet in place, Bernstein packs his bags and instruments and takes Room 22 at the Hotel Tüffer. For ten weeks, he continues to work—peering down throats, tapping knees, dosing digitalis for creaky hearts. Meanwhile, Darkenbloom, in a hasty and

mistaken boast, hoists white flags to advertise that it is Jew-free—"beating its rival, the more bourgeois Kirschenstein, by a few hours," our sly narrator remarks. Yet the townsfolk rather like seeing their old doc in his new digs: "As far as many Darkenbloomers were concerned, it could all just have stayed that way; they were used to and trusted him, and it even felt rather elegant, going to visit the doctor at the hotel." ♦

By Adam Kirsch  
By Alice Gregory  
By Adam Gopnik  
By Moira Donegan  
By Nikil Saval  
By Elif Batuman  
By Graciela Mochkovsky  
By Alexandra Schwartz  
By Leslie Camhi  
By Anna Wiener

[Pop Music](#)

# The Evolution of a Folk-Punk Hero

Nine years after retiring his alter ego, Pat the Bunny, Patrick Schneeweis is ready to sing again.

By [Kelefa Sanneh](#)



*"I admit it—I'm a musician,"* Schneeweis said, chuckling. *"Earlier, I would have tried to downplay that."* Illustration by Brian Rea

Patrick Schneeweis was never the voice of a generation, but perhaps he was the voice of a tendency. To a small but fervent and far-flung community of listeners, he was known as Pat the Bunny, an anarchist punk troubadour from Vermont whose desperate—and sometimes bleakly funny—folk songs were about young people who wanted to smash the system, although they often settled for getting smashed themselves. In one of them, “Fuck Cops,” he yawped about how everything was going to hell:

When I dream of the future, I see an arm full of holes  
Empty pockets, and a bleeding nose  
Hacking up a lung filled with blood and tar  
On a sidewalk next to my spangeing jar

Starting in the early two-thousands, Schneeweis began to build an audience. His songs circulated on burned CDs and through primitive file-sharing sites;

he played gigs at house shows and in parks, where dozens or even hundreds of fans would show up to sing along. Most of those fans surely knew, some from firsthand experience, that “spange” is a portmanteau of “spare” and “change,” and that “spangeing” is a way to survive without doing something as indefensible as getting a job. Schneeweis sang to and for the kind of young people you might see sitting in a park or on a sidewalk, with face [tattoos](#) and skinny dogs and bulging backpacks. This version of “punk” identity, like many others, combined idealism and cynicism, and Schneeweis knew how paradoxical the combination could be. “I’m not a nihilist / I just can’t pledge allegiance to shit,” he once sang.

In his lyrics, Schneeweis called for revolutionary change, but his musical output reflected a program of incremental reform. Many early songs, including “Fuck Cops,” were credited to Johnny Hobo and the Freight Trains, with Pat the Bunny listed as lead singer. When he decided to make music that was a bit less fatalistic, he became the leader of a band called Wingnut Dishwashers Union, and stopped singing the old songs, although his fans never stopped listening to them. By the end of the two-thousands, he was more popular than ever, but his life revolved around his debilitating addiction to alcohol and heroin. He found his way to Arizona, where he began to get sober; he retired Wingnut Dishwashers Union and, in 2011, started a clamorous band called Ramshackle Glory, which chronicled his struggle to get clean in exuberant and often excruciating detail. He released quieter “solo” songs, too, credited simply to Pat the Bunny, a nickname he’d had since high school. And then, in 2016, Schneeweis retired. “I am not really an anarchist or a punk anymore,” he wrote, on [Facebook](#), explaining that his life and his perspective had shifted. He said that his music would remain freely available online, and added that he didn’t want fans to “feel tricked” when they learned that he no longer felt like the revolutionary he had once claimed to be. The statement was signed “Pat (no bunny, at last).” Not long before, he had sung, “Don’t you dare give up on us, or anarchy, before / You can name one government not rotten to its core.” Now *he* was giving up, or at least retreating into silence.

That silence ended this past January, when a new band called Friends in Real Life released a song called “Buckeye.” It was tuneful and upbeat, with Schneeweis’s characteristically reedy voice delivering lyrics that were uncharacteristically optimistic: “We’re all gonna die, I’ve known it since I

was a kid / The thing I had to learn is: before that, we're gonna live.” In the comment section on YouTube, people expressed shock and joy at this unexpected comeback. Some said they were crying; others told stories of their own experiences with drug addiction. One listener simply wrote, “*I CANT BELIEVE FOLK PUNK JESUS CAME BACK.*” Reactions like this help explain why Schneeweis retreated from public life in the first place: it made him uneasy to be treated as a hero, or a guru. For similar reasons, he never sought out media opportunities, although this reticence has only heightened his fans’ curiosity. (If you search online for interviews with him, what you will mainly find are interviews with other people *about* him.)

But, on a recent morning in Tucson, Schneeweis seemed less like a cult hero in hiding and more like a cheerful and unusually perceptive narrator of his journey through the netherworld. He met me in a parking lot downtown, next to the small room that serves as the Friends in Real Life headquarters. In February, he released a short but memorable new album, credited to Friends in Real Life, full of songs about surviving punk, and the people who don’t; since then, he has been fulfilling orders for T-shirts, CDs, records, and cassettes. Schneeweis is thirty-seven now, and he has been pleasantly surprised to discover that fans seem to support his ongoing evolution, perhaps because a number of them have evolved in similar ways. “Almost everyone I was getting drunk and getting high with, every day, is either dead or sober at this point,” he told me.

We had walked over to a loft that serves as the office of a radical community group; all around us were boxes full of tourniquets, ready to be assembled and shipped out to aid workers in [Gaza](#). “I’m not, like, hostile to anarchism,” Schneeweis said. He is close with many activists in Tucson, and he still considers himself part of the struggle for freedom and justice. But he no longer feels like a revolutionary, and he no longer thinks of his songs as calls to action, if he ever did. In his newest incarnation, he is just a singer and songwriter, rather than a ringleader. “I admit it—I’m a musician,” he told me, chuckling. “Earlier, I would have tried to downplay that.”

Many young people discover radical politics through radical music, but for Schneeweis it was the other way around. He was outraged by stories of injustice and loved the idea of left-wing protest, but it wasn’t until he happened upon a local punk show, around the time he was in seventh grade,

that he encountered a group of people who seemed determined to live outside the system. By high school, he was spending more and more time with a crew of local punks and freaks in Brattleboro, where he played in a few bands before discovering that he didn't really need anything but an acoustic guitar. Back then, Schneeweis had no particular interest in folk music, and no taste for it—to him, Woody Guthrie was just some dead guy whose songs he had to sing at school. But he wanted people to be able to hear his lyrics, and he wanted to be able to tour light and play anywhere: squats, parks, parking lots. And so he wound up making a kind of punkish folk music—not realizing, he says, that punks around the country were doing something similar. In the early two-thousands, the term “folk-punk” was applied to a range of bands, including Defiance, Ohio, from Columbus; Mischief Brew, from Philadelphia; and Against Me!, from Gainesville, which soon left the folk-punk underground behind, earning mainstream acclaim and signing to a subsidiary of Warner Music. Schneeweis's renown was more circumscribed, but plenty intense. His younger brother Michael is a fellow-musician who plays and sings on the *Friends in Real Life* album; they toured together in the old days. “At some point, he became, like, a rock star in that world,” Michael told me. After shows, there would be a long line of fans who wanted to meet Schneeweis, and often they shared stories as harrowing as the ones they heard in his lyrics. A few years after Schneeweis retired, Michael emerged to assure anxious fans that his big brother was doing well.

Schneeweis told me that he spent those quiet years focussed on sobriety, and on helping other people stay sober; he learned to meditate, and for a time did some computer programming. He knows he is hardly the first person to age out of the punk life style. “I think that the value of punk is that it's so uncompromising,” he said. “But it's always going to be predominantly for young people, if it retains that quality, because it's very hard to be uncompromising forever.” In fact, it's hard to be uncompromising at all, especially if you're a working musician. Different iterations of punk are different attempts to solve this unsolvable puzzle, as successive generations find ways to reject the compromises of the ones that came before. (As a boy, Schneeweis didn't think [Green Day](#) had anything to do with the punk scene he was part of.) The sound of *Friends in Real Life* is more “folk” than “punk,” with some electronic accents that reflect Schneeweis's current affection for pop music and dance parties. Still, the album reflects his

lifelong determination to sing only what he absolutely believes. This resolution can lead to awkward or ungainly lines, but it's also what makes his best songs so affecting. "Down to the River" is an elegy that's strikingly gentle, especially when compared with the reckless energy of his older songs: "Do you wanna go swimming? Do you wanna just cry? / I say it'll be O.K., but that's just two chords and a lie."

As a boy in Vermont, Schneeweis was contemptuous of the wealthy ex-hippies who shopped at the local food co-op, a onetime grassroots enterprise that had evolved, since the seventies, into something that resembled a fancy supermarket, fully integrated into the local economy. The punks in Schneeweis's scene sometimes framed their antisocial or self-destructive behavior as a way to resist the process of integration, to insist that their movement would never become respectable. But some of them probably discovered—as Schneeweis did, in the depths of his addiction—that there are worse things than respectability. "Unless you actually succeed in overturning the existing order, it's going to ingest you, one way or the other," he told me. He is thinking of returning to the stage later this year, playing for whoever is still interested in the troubadour formerly known as Pat the Bunny. And he says he will always relate to the wandering bands of tattooed punks who sometimes ask him for spare change, even though he knows that they might not relate to *him*. He says, "If I see some real fuckin' street punks, somewhere in my mind it's, like, Oh, man. They would think I suck." ♦

By Anna Wiener  
By Rachel Syme  
By Amanda Petrusich  
By Nick Paumgarten  
By Naomi Fry  
By Emma Allen  
By Sheldon Pearce  
By Michael Schulman  
By Michael Schulman  
By Joshua Yaffa  
By Charles Bethea  
By Nick Paumgarten

# The Frick Returns, Richer Than Ever

After a few years away, the Frick Collection reopens with a renovated grandeur that marries Old Master power portraits to a domestic intimacy.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)



In Paolo Veronese's "Choice Between Virtue and Vice," Hercules seems, like most of us, to be struggling manfully toward Virtue, though Vice clearly has him in her grip. Art work by Paolo Veronese / Courtesy the Frick Collection; Photograph by Michael Bodycomb

The Frick Collection, on East Seventieth Street, is, by so many miles, the finest small city museum—less self-consciously eccentric than London’s Sir John Soane museum, broader in scope and more distinguished than Paris’s Jacquemart-André—that its return after a few years away for renovation is a rare blessing in a time short on them. The collection never had any set program, beyond housing Old Master pictures bought by the industrialist Henry Clay Frick with the nudging of the era’s shrewdest tag team: the art historian Bernard Berenson and the dealer Joseph Duveen. But, walking through the place ahead of its official opening, on April 17th, one is reminded—both by one’s eyes and by the new director, Axel Rüger—that the collection does bend toward a point. With scarcely any nudes or still-lifes, it turns on businessmen, bureaucrats, and bishops: rich men dressed for work.



*The renovated mansion reminds us that it was originally built to house a family as well as a collection. Photograph by Nicholas Venezia / Courtesy the Frick Collection*

Holbein's [Thomas Cromwell](#) looks like a fastidiously evil Cabinet minister who would never accidentally add a journalist to his text chain; his Sir Thomas More looks like Laurence Olivier made up to play Sir Thomas More. Even St. Francis, caught in ecstasy by Bellini, has his comfortable office-hermitage behind him, as though he has stepped away from his desk just long enough to receive the stigmata. Frick's people are people like Frick: men of power and influence. Hercules, the ultimate man of power, is, if anything, overdressed in Veronese's "Choice Between Virtue and Vice"—a callow youth, with an uncanny resemblance to Aaron Paul in "Breaking Bad," in a tailored silk suit. (He seems, like most of us, to be struggling manfully toward Virtue, though Vice clearly has him in her grip.)

The essentials of the Frick's renovation involve the big things dear to institutions and their architects: a near-doubling of space, an expansive shop, and a Danny Meyer café. Key to all this is a remarkably unostentatious new addition by Annabelle Selldorf, in collaboration with the firm Beyer Blinder Belle. Its architectural showpiece is a grand, hyper-marbled, slightly anachronistic Deco-style staircase. (A new auditorium replaces the cozy but acoustically flawed chamber garden.)

For the picture-seeking visitor, however, the most affecting changes are quieter. The skylights in the great West Gallery—the one with [Rembrandt](#)'s

“The Polish Rider” and his self-portrait, not to mention the two Turners of two harbors—have been refurbished and cleaned, and though the effect is subtle, it’s real: the light is both brighter and more diffuse, ideal for seeing pictures. More significant still is the way the new design makes the Frick look like a home again. When the Gilded Age architect Thomas Hastings put up the mansion, in 1914, it was conceived as a residence for the family as well as for the collection. (Frick had an equally grand mansion in Pittsburgh, where he had made his fortune in steel.) Then, just five years later, Frick died, followed by his wife, Adelaide, a dozen years after that, and the architect John Russell Pope oversaw the conversion of the structure into a museum and library. In this design, which opened in 1935, the grand rooms downstairs were what mattered. Now, for the first time, the second floor, where the Frick family actually lived, is open to the public, redesigned to reflect the domestic atmosphere and display some of the original hangings once in place there.

For instance, François Boucher’s eighteenth-century paintings of toddlers engaged in the work of scientists, artists, and philosophers previously formed an odd parenthetical downstairs. Now they are back where they began, as boudoir paintings (perhaps originally intended for Madame de Pompadour’s circle), reinstalled in Adelaide Frick’s sitting room. Art cycles in and out of fashion, and nothing could have been less suited to twentieth-century taste than Boucher’s chocolate-box cherubs. Yet they feel oddly attuned to our own moment, resonating with the work of [Jeff Koons](#), [Takashi Murakami](#), and [John Currin](#), with their own peculiar blend of the saccharine and the satirical. Boucher’s *enfants* practice the arts and sciences both as a jest—a *child of five can do this*—and as an Enlightenment homage to the unclouded natural mind. Nowhere is the dream of pastoral harmony regained through scientific knowledge more beautifully realized than in Boucher’s nocturne of a cherub, telescope in hand, contemplating the moon.

No less striking is the revelation that the Italian Quattrocento paintings, long an energizing presence in the downstairs galleries, were largely the acquisitions of Frick’s daughter Helen, the future doyenne of the adjoining Frick Art Research Library, where this writer was once woefully employed. These paintings, with their bold color and crisp columnar forms, previously served as a sorbet course amid the Baroque chiaroscuro. Now relocated to a small gallery of their own in Helen’s upstairs bedroom, they may be missed

below, but their new arrangement clarifies the broader evolution of taste. By the nineteen-twenties, with Frick already gone, the Quattrocento had been fully embraced by Fifth Avenue connoisseurs as equal to what followed.

For the first time, the lighting is strong enough and the space intimate enough that one can appreciate the matchless delicacy and wistful grace of Filippo Lippi’s “Annunciation”—Lippi being the most Pre-Raphaelite in feeling of all painters who actually preceded Raphael—alongside Piero della Francesca’s bright-red “Saint John the Evangelist,” a fireman for the faith. The strong, clear, almost naïve Quattrocento manner—with its astonishing pace of invention, its decade-by-decade advances in perspective, atmosphere, and optical finesse—once played off the polished mastery of van Dyck and Holbein. That contrast is gone, but the gathering together of these works offers its own kind of education.



Rembrandt's 1658 self-portrait was painted not long after he declared bankruptcy, having lived beyond his means in ways that painters of the Dutch Republic were not expected to—owning a grand house, and amassing an Old Master collection that would have rivalled the paintings now surrounding his portrait in the West Gallery. Art work by Rembrandt Harmenszoon Van Rijn / Courtesy the Frick Collection; Photograph by Michael Bodycomb

The temporary relocation of the Frick during the past few years to the brutalist building on Madison Avenue that formerly housed the Whitney offered certain severe pleasures and austere revelations: St. Francis, placed next to the architect Marcel Breuer’s arrow-shaped, hyper-modernist trapezoidal window, seemed at home, and to be drawing cleansing energy from the forms of modern minimalism. Still, the overwhelming emotion on

visiting the original location is gratitude for the familiar pictures in their familiar spaces. You come back downstairs at the new Frick, as at the old, to one perfect room and two perfect paintings. The perfect room is that oval gallery where four Whistlers once hung and now hang again, including the matchless portrait of Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac—the original Baron de Charlus in Proust—bearing the Whistlerian title “Arrangement in Black and Gold.” [Richard Avedon](#) used to say that everything he knew about fashion, about the beautiful surfaces of society, could be found in this painting, along with its feminine counterpart: the narrow portrait of the gossamer-clad Mrs. Frances Leyland (“Symphony in Flesh Colour and Pink”). Whistler elongates the fashionable figures into letter openers, and life into a series of dinner invitations to be sliced open. Avedon, having first glimpsed the portraits at the age of twelve, returned to them regularly until his death, at eighty-one. They remain: four wraiths of fashion, studies in the chic of attenuation, so flat that one feels they could be rolled up, like Peter Pan’s shadow, each night when the museum closes.

The other singular painting, of course, is Rembrandt’s self-portrait of 1658. When I was starting out, a notably unskilled employee at the Frick, I would sneak downstairs to look at it. When you’re young, it seems a study in dignity sought and achieved, a portrait of a man imbued with enviable, tragic self-knowledge, like [Hamlet](#) or Richard II in the last act. When you’re older, the elements of dress-up and sheer exhaustion—you look at, rather than in, those eyes—become more apparent. The circles and shadows of the subject’s aging are sharper even than the authority of his gaze. And yet the painting’s marriage of majesty and melancholy remains undiminished. The work is all the more moving in light of Rembrandt’s circumstances at the time. Not long before, he had declared bankruptcy, having lived beyond his means in ways that painters of the Dutch Republic were not expected to—owning a grand house, amassing an Old Master collection that, ironically, would have rivalled the paintings now surrounding his portrait in the West Gallery. He had lost them all. Sadness permeates the picture, but so does defiance.

At the Frick, thoughts inevitably circle back to the vexed questions of wealth and commerce, and their role in making, collecting, and commodifying art. Frick was the embodiment of much that was wrong with the plutocrats of his time, being an exploiter of immigrant labor, a union-crusher—a man Emma

Goldman sent her lover to try to assassinate. But the Rembrandt offers a compensatory and critical view. Coming of age in a Holland that was one of the first truly modern commercial societies—where feudal overlordship had vanished more completely than it had anywhere else in Europe—he reminds us that an artist can carve out a life of pleasure and defiance in a culture that might otherwise obliterate him. Living beyond one's means is, in its way, the artist's majestic revenge against the rich. The essential contract of commercial cultures, then as now, is that in exchange for tolerating wealth's inequalities and its ostentations—the embarrassment of riches, in every sense—we are granted a landscape of shared splendor and a reservoir of growth and energy, however turbulent its course. Rembrandt was a casualty of the same commercial culture that produced the gallery in which his image hangs today, and his self-portrait conveys the richest and most ambivalent emotions that the collection contains.

Oh, and the Frick family's bowling alley in the basement—where, after a long day of gazing at Piero and Velázquez, the Fricks would retreat to throw a few strikes and spares—is intact and splendid once again. A marvel of frictionless wood and steampunk ingenuity, it features a ball return once operated by a dignified footman, whose job was to sit at the end of the lane, catch the flying pins, and reset them. Though it's not open to the public, the staff, we're assured, can use it still. ♦

By David S. Wallace  
By Françoise Mouly  
By Namwali Serpell  
By Rebecca Mead  
By Anna Russell  
By Alex Scordelis  
By Elif Batuman  
By Kyle Chayka  
By Emma Allen  
By Alice Gregory  
By Anthony Lane  
By Anna Wiener

[The Theatre](#)

# Retro Masculinity in “Glengarry Glen Ross” and “Good Night, and Good Luck”

Kieran Culkin and Bob Odenkirk try to close the deal in David Mamet’s classic, and George Clooney stars in a timely portrait of media courage.

By [Helen Shaw](#)



*Kieran Culkin plays the top dog in a real-estate office full of shady salesmen. Illustration by Chuan Ming Ong*

At the climax of David Mamet’s masterpiece “Glengarry Glen Ross”—now at the Palace, in its fourth Broadway production since 1984—a motormouthed salesman in a shady real-estate office in Chicago lambastes his office manager for fouling a deal. As a gullible buyer starts to get nervous, the manager accidentally reveals that the salesman has been lying, torpedoing thousands of dollars in commission. “You stupid fucking *cunt*,” the salesman snarls at him. “Whoever told you you could work with *men*? ”

A man’s work—in the swift, grim, aurally intoxicating “Glengarry”—is never done. First, there’s the machine-gun patter required to sell even an acre of what we gather is utterly worthless land. Then, there’s the fact that

every slimeball in the office fancies himself a tiger, and any conversation can become a tar pit. The top operator, Ricky Roma (played here by Kieran Culkin), remains friends with his fading mentor, Shelley Levene (Bob Odenkirk), though he's always looking for a way to siphon business away from the older man. And a simple chat at a Chinese restaurant, like the one between the dyspeptic Dave Moss (Bill Burr) and the weary George Aaronow (Michael McKean), might turn out to have been criminal entrapment. The minute you listen, you're sunk. "We're just *talking*," Moss says, the play's code for "You're cooked."

Life operates like the leaderboard in the office sales competition—everyone can always see who's ahead. Of course, that Darwinian kill-or-be-killed ethic works for "Glengarry" revivals, too, especially when they're held up against the movie, which was released in 1992: if you play Roma, you're going mano a mano with Al Pacino at his reptilian peak; if you're Levene, you're battling memories of Jack Lemmon and Pacino, who played Levene on Broadway in 2012. I don't personally think that theatre should be a competition, but these are the rules of the Mametian game. The "Glengarry" script is as dynamically notated as a musical score, and it offers little room for interpretation; an actor has to drill deep to make an impression.

In this handsome production—directed by Patrick Marber as an entertaining showcase rather than as a backhanded tragedy—McKean manages to sidle up to the part of Aaronow, infusing him with a lovely, understated air of collapse. The erstwhile standup comedian Burr, as Moss, takes a thrillingly berserk approach to Mamet's syncopated cadences; his high, angry voice carries amazing momentum, and it hits like a glass in a bar fight. But the dynamic between the rising Ricky and the falling Shelley sits at the heart of the drama, and although Culkin and Odenkirk are strong, they're never astonishing. Odenkirk's portrait of failure is sad but not, as it needs to be, pathetic, and Culkin's shifty insouciance couldn't trick a baby out of a lollipop, let alone sell his character's grandiloquent flights of quasi philosophy.

Why so many revivals of "Glengarry"? The answer usually seems obvious: it offers male stars wonderful parts full of stunning, serrated language. But I couldn't help noticing, in the thickening air of 2025, that it's the only piece on Broadway by an explicitly pro-MAGA playwright. As this "Glengarry"

was heading into previews, Mamet, in an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, wrote that Donald Trump is “returning the American government to decency, the rule of law and common sense.” I don’t get the feeling that the producers would like us to think about their writer’s politics too much, and it may be a mug’s game to draw a direct line from his imaginative work of forty years ago to his beliefs today. But, while watching the show, I did wonder what the young men sitting around me were absorbing from the play’s non-stop verbal aggression, which I’ve always believed was a razor-edged critique of blustery American masculinity. Could all this jocular, misogynistic vulgarity *influence* anybody? Surely not. All these guys onstage—they’re just talking.

Meanwhile, up at the Winter Garden, George Clooney is actually hoping that a male role model can make a lasting impression on his public. The Broadway adaptation of his superb 2005 film, “Good Night, and Good Luck,” stakes the superstar’s reputation on his ability to transfer his silver-screen magnetism to live theatre, and from there, I think, to real-world efficacy. “Good Night,” adapted by Clooney and Grant Heslov from their own screenplay and directed for the stage by David Cromer, takes place back when men were men, cigarette smoke made ’em all squint like cowboys, and the little ladies (mostly) didn’t come to the office. More important, it takes place in and around 1954, when Edward R. Murrow (Clooney), on his CBS news program, “See It Now,” took a stand against Senator Joe McCarthy, the Red Scare demagogue who used accusations of Communist subversion as a bullwhip against his enemies.

In the movie, which Clooney directed, the actor played the “See It Now” co-creator Fred Friendly, and David Strathairn gave an extraordinary (and Oscar-nominated) performance as Murrow. As Friendly, Clooney was charmingly diffident, throwing his lines away; as a director, he combined beautifully composed black-and-white glamour with an insistently voyeuristic camera, which peered through windows to discover characters in unguarded moments. Archival footage of the real McCarthy—sweaty and shouting on a subcommittee dais, say—gave the whole thing the feel of a documentary, as if it were an artifact from Hollywood’s golden age.

Stepping into Murrow’s shoes on Broadway, Clooney is certainly graceful. He looks just right in the elegant swing of nineteen-fifties trousers—Brenda

Abbandandolo designed the costumes—and he excels, as he has for more than thirty years, at communicating a winning kind of weary resolve. But theatrical acoustics can be unforgiving, especially with an actor who tends to swallow his lines, however slyly. Accordingly, to capture Clooney's charisma, the production relies on closeups, shot live onstage by a bulky CBS camera and projected onto a large screen near the audience. It's a strategy with diminishing returns, though it does allow us to see the strain in Clooney's eyes when Murrow feels the pressure.

Clooney and Heslov, movie creatures in their bones, are too accustomed to telling half their story through visuals, and some scenes needed more of an overhaul for such a different dramatic form. One entire story line, a secret marriage between two CBS employees, played by Ilana Glazer and Carter Hudson, comes off as downright foolish when we see the couple awkwardly snuggled up against the proscenium, and, despite many cross-stage entrances, Cromer fails to bring the film's sense of bustling movement to the stage.

And so a finely made blade has become a blunter object. But we are in a time when a hammer may be more useful than a knife. Clooney and Heslov have chosen to change very little of their twenty-year-old script, which sounds as though it's a deliberate allegory for everything that is happening now. When Murrow inveighs against convictions using sealed evidence, we think of immigrants being deported to El Salvador without due process. When employees consider signing a "loyalty oath," we think of the government's current screening of federal workers.

It's been a season when the relative inaccessibility of tickets has been very much on my mind. The cost of a pair to "Good Night, and Good Luck" most likely means that the majority of folks watching it are executives, media types, or well-heeled business owners, some of whom might be thinking about if and when courage will be required. These, probably, are the very folks Clooney is trying to reach.

Near the end of the play, we see the famous footage of the lawyer Joseph Welch asking McCarthy, in 1954, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?"—the inflection point for a country growing tired of McCarthy's rough disregard for the Constitution. (I'm sure it's a coincidence that Welch

worked at Hale & Dorr, a firm now known as WilmerHale. Last month, WilmerHale sued the Trump Administration for its “plainly unlawful attack on the bedrock principles of our nation’s legal system.”) *Look*, Clooney seems to be saying. We did this before. We can do it again. ♦

By Anthony Lane  
By Helen Shaw  
By Helen Shaw  
By Helen Shaw  
By Anna Russell  
By Justin Chang  
By Michael Schulman  
By Justin Chang  
By Doreen St. Félix  
By Katy Waldman  
By Sheldon Pearce  
By Justin Chang

By [Justin Chang](#)

“Warfare” ends the way a lot of movies based on true events do: with a series of side-by-side photographs. Here are the characters you’ve just seen, and here are the actual people upon whom they’re based. This is standard bio-pic operating procedure, and it often smacks of mimicry porn, a chance to marvel anew at the actors’ skill, at the achieved resemblance between performer and subject. But “Warfare” isn’t a bio-pic—it is, you’ll be startled to hear, a war movie—and it cares not a whit for impersonation. Many of the real-life subjects, nearly all of them U.S. Navy *SEALS*, have had their faces blurred out in these photos, presumably for security and/or privacy reasons. The choice is in keeping with the movie’s method. It’s invested in process rather than personalities, and the performances aren’t just scaled down; they’ve been practically strip-mined of individuality. A closing dedication, “For Elliott,” is as jarring as it is touching. To single anyone out is almost an affront to the film’s spirit.

It begins not with a battalion of troops but, instead, with a shapely squad of female pelvises, gyrating and thrusting in an aerobics studio. The sultry 2004 music video for Eric Prydz’s “Call on Me” is playing on a screen before an appreciative audience of young male [troops](#). War films are loaded with whooping eruptions of pent-up sexual energy; think of “Full Metal Jacket” (1987), in which a platoon’s encounter with a Vietnamese sex worker triggers a comedy of lusty one-upmanship, or “Jarhead” (2005), in which a sex-tape viewing party backfires, humiliatingly, on a lone marine. But in “Warfare” even the collective horniness feels mass-choreographed. The men sway together, indistinguishably, like a mosh pit of blue balls. You will recognize some of their faces; the best-known actors include Will Poulter, Noah Centineo, and Charles Melton, though only one of them, Poulter, has a significant role. But, after the film concludes, what you remember are the coördinated movements and gestures: how nimbly the men assemble into a formation, and how quietly they advance on a pitch-black night.

It’s November, 2006, in Ramadi, the capital of [Iraq](#)’s Anbar Province and a hotbed of [Al Qaeda](#) insurgency. Under cover of darkness, a squad of *SEALS* enters a two-story apartment building, slips upstairs, and sledgehammers its way through a wall, awakening a family on the other side. Are the *Seals*

targeting a member of the family? They are not. (A local translator tells the terrified civilians that they will not be harmed.) The uncertainty fuels the suspense, as does the sinuous elegance of the camerawork, by the cinematographer David J. Thompson. Even after daylight arrives, the tension doesn't dissipate, although now, at least, we can better make out faces and figures, and we eventually grasp that the men are conducting surveillance. The aforementioned Elliott (Cosmo Jarvis) aims his rifle scope through a hole in the wall, monitoring activity in the surrounding neighborhood. His comrades—they include Sam (Joseph Quinn), Ray (D'Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai), and Tommy (Kit Connor)—sit in watchful wait. There are neither crude jokes nor wise-ass anecdotes, only quick, indecipherable bursts of jargon. Occasionally, there are cutaways to drone footage of the area, or to Elliott's sniper's-eye view of Iraqi men, women, and children congregating across the street.

“Warfare,” in other words, is a work of hyper-exacting realism, an exercise in slowly enveloping claustrophobia. The movie barely leaves the building and never leaves the neighborhood. Despite the stray details that pour in through scopes and headsets, the soldiers are walled off from any clear sense of who or where their enemies are. The film was written and directed by Ray Mendoza, a former Navy *SEAL*—he’s the Ray played by Woon-A-Tai—and Alex Garland, who’s known for creepy mind-benders like “[Ex Machina](#)” (2014) and “Men” (2022). Theirs is an unexpected yet alchemical fusion of talents, strengthened by at least two dimensions of rigor. Garland brings tremendous formal acumen and, perhaps by dint of his Britishness, a preternatural aversion to American jingoism; Mendoza leans on his own arduous experience of the 2006 Ramadi evacuation. The pair also interviewed several former *SEAL* comrades for the script. “This film uses only their memories,” a title card announces at the outset, and that portentous “only” is a tipoff: here is a war film defined as much by what it doesn’t do as by what it does.

The first half hour or so unfolds under a disquieting hush, though it’s not exactly silent. Glenn Freemantle has designed an extraordinarily varied and intricate soundscape, as crisply attuned to birdsong and civilian chatter as it is to the pop-pop of distant gunfire. Yet you can still hear the proverbial pin drop, and drop it does: through the hole in the wall comes a grenade, deposited, with almost comical nonchalance, by an unseen enemy. Amid the

ensuing chaos, the men realize that they must evacuate forthwith. This is easier said than done—even under fire, there are bags of gear to be packed up and exit protocols to be adhered to—and part of the point is that, in most movies, the doing looks much too effortless. Nearly every war film knows that war is [Hell](#), but far fewer understand that Hell is still beholden to rules and regulations, including the laws of time and physics. “Warfare,” you come to discover, is waging a war of its own—against the glamorizing tendencies and readily digestible classical conventions of its genre.

Here, then, there are no fierce battles that end within a matter of minutes, and no miles-long journeys glossed over by a convenient dissolve. Most of the film plays out in something close to real time, and the directors, loath to hurry scenes along, slow the action down with a technical virtuosity that sometimes tilts into self-admiration. Midway through the film, an I.E.D. explodes just outside the apartment building, and the sequence that follows, in which the survivors gradually regain consciousness, is a tour de force of sensory deprivation and temporal dislocation. The sound design suddenly feels submerged in water—the men, their vision clouded by smoke and their bodies covered with dust, struggle to rise to their feet. Elliott and Sam, their pain receptors presumably short-circuited, don’t immediately comprehend that they’ve suffered grave, immobilizing injuries. Not for them the merciful expedient of a minor flesh wound or a swift death. (Others are more or less fortunate; the film can’t resist lingering on a dead soldier’s lovingly designed prosthetic guts.) The two men don’t stop yelling after a shot of morphine and a few bandages, and Sam’s screams of agony, in particular, seem to go on forever. “Warfare” runs for just ninety-five minutes, but in these moments it feels closer to nine hundred.

The story’s second half plunges into the messy logistics of survival: brutally improvisatory medical interventions, repeated requests for evacuation, and attempts to distract the enemy, whether by using smoke grenades or by calling for “a show of force” from fighter jets whooshing overhead. The true show of force comes from Garland, always a skilled orchestrator of peril in hostile environs and of tense camaraderie in close quarters. Those talents were apparent in his previous work, “[Civil War](#)” (2024), on which Mendoza served as a military adviser. But that film, a speculative thriller set in a severely divided America, proved fatally incurious about its own political

dystopia; the battle-ravaged production design was transporting, but conceptually the world-building was threadbare.

Some will argue that “Warfare” evades context as egregiously as its predecessor did, but the focus here is on documented history, not an imagined future, and the political implications are there from the first frame. Even the film’s choice of skirmish—an ostensibly simple operation, insignificant in the grand scheme of things, but still doomed to go lethally awry—feels like a commentary on the larger misadventure, a microcosmic exercise in futility. Certainly, it is hard to come away from “Warfare,” with its soldiers’ screams still ringing in your ears, and see the American military’s presence in Iraq as anything but a violent, misguided intrusion.

The Iraqi characters, for their part, are neither foregrounded nor forgotten. From time to time, we return to the family, huddled in a bedroom as the building quakes and shudders, or glimpse the enemy on rooftops, spraying gunfire in our general direction. There’s a moment near the end when the insurgents wander out into the street and watch in silence as U.S. armored vehicles roll off into the distance. At first, it struck me as an inane afterthought—a narrative bone thrown at an otherwise nameless, faceless enemy—but the more I think about it the more it beckons toward a fascinating, if improbable, possibility. A film that chronicles the insurgents’ perspective, with the same de-sentimentalized humanity and granular attention to detail, may exist beyond Garland’s capabilities and Mendoza’s purview. But, if “Warfare” is a self-conscious rebuke of other war movies, it also leaves us pondering all the war movies we will never see. ♦

*An earlier version of this article misidentified where the film takes place.*

By Richard Brody  
By Richard Brody  
By Richard Brody  
By Richard Brody  
By Justin Chang  
By Doreen St. Félix  
By Justin Chang  
By Richard Brody

# Poems

- “[Cirrus](#)”
- “[What I Meant to Say Was](#)”

By [Rosanna Warren](#)

“I don’t have time,” I told  
myself, “to kill myself: I have  
to write a paper on Rimbaud.” Which even  
at the time I thought funny.

Those were the days I could hardly tell  
the difference between hospital and classroom  
and walking the dog at 1 A.M.  
seemed the only way to preserve an illusion  
of balance. Which it did.

Well, that was a long time ago.

Such different tempi now:  
as Joel prods the slow,  
private smolder in the pile of damp brush, releasing  
wisps of blue smoke to waver in air,  
the mountain stream pelts over stones, wrinkling silver, frothing lace,  
ripping laughter out of its own current while  
silently moss prays the terrace flagstones apart  
and cloud shadows race across the meadow, chased  
by slashes of sunlight. In the daffodil spears  
thrusting up through dead leaves,  
each stalk swells with the pulse of a blossom-to-be.

*This is drawn from “[Hindsight](#).”*

By Richie Hofmann  
By Cynthia Ozick  
By C. D. Wright  
By Sophie Cabot Black  
By Robin Becker  
By Laura Steinel  
By Aysegül Savaş  
By Mary Norris  
By Joyce Carol Oates  
By Sarah Larson  
By Nick Paumgarten  
By Bryan Washington

By [Sophie Cabot Black](#)

*(Anne Bradstreet—Andover, Massachusetts—Autumn, 1669)*

Let the house burn again;  
Already I outlive the New World,  
The last dog dead, one cow  
Remnant in the gleaning wind

Of leaf-fall and each child left  
For elsewhere. To stay  
Past those I buried; I do not know  
What more to spend—

The government of man  
By man brings no one home.  
No longer do I want  
To be upon this hill,

This place of so much wind  
Where I keep writing  
Past the end. I have broken  
Each sentence, halved

Then half again, each word  
Simplified down like old oxen  
Kept as if to cover  
The whole field, turn

By turn. Now the words  
Come less, the clouds so fast  
And not what I thought  
I thought. For what

Have I survived:  
To save each house,

A door sprung open, plain,  
Willing each hinge

To work, verse  
By verse to outlast,  
Outlove whatever it is  
You bring forth.

*This is drawn from “Anne Bradstreet Today.”*

By C. D. Wright  
By Richie Hofmann  
By Robin Becker  
By Rosanna Warren  
By Nick Paumgarten  
By Cynthia Ozick  
By Joyce Carol Oates  
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