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# THE NEW YORKER



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## Goings On

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## Hilton Als

Staff writer

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

I was very excited when I heard that the filmmaker Bruce David Klein was working on a documentary about Liza Minnelli. My excitement had to do, in large part, with what I hoped the film would be: a serious consideration of an artist who deserves more critical attention and admiration than she normally gets. The resulting movie, “**Liza: A Truly Terrific Absolutely True Story**” (opening Jan. 24, at IFC Center) shows how hard Minnelli has worked, and in a number of genres—stage, screen, television—as one of the last of the great actor-singer-dancers. But the depth I hoped for in the film is not Klein’s; it’s Minnelli who brings it—she’s a seventy-eight-year-old star who conveys, still, an inner pathos and wit that speak of her great power, and her will to survive and express herself.



*Photograph by Steve Schapiro / Getty*

The facts are deftly handled: born in Los Angeles to the performer Judy Garland and her then husband, the film director Vincente Minnelli, Liza was their only biological child, and you wonder what it was like to be the offspring of two such tremendous artists. But you don’t have to wonder

long: instead of sinking into a kind of indulged apathy that seems to haunt a lot of children of the talented and driven, Minnelli set out to make herself through perseverance, and by watching how and why the great were great. She was only nineteen when she starred in “Flora the Red Menace,” her first Broadway show (for which she won the 1965 Tony for Best Actress in a Musical), where she became emotionally and professionally involved with Fred Ebb, the lyricist, who went on to write, with his songwriting partner, John Kander, some of her signature tunes, “Cabaret” and “New York, New York” among them.

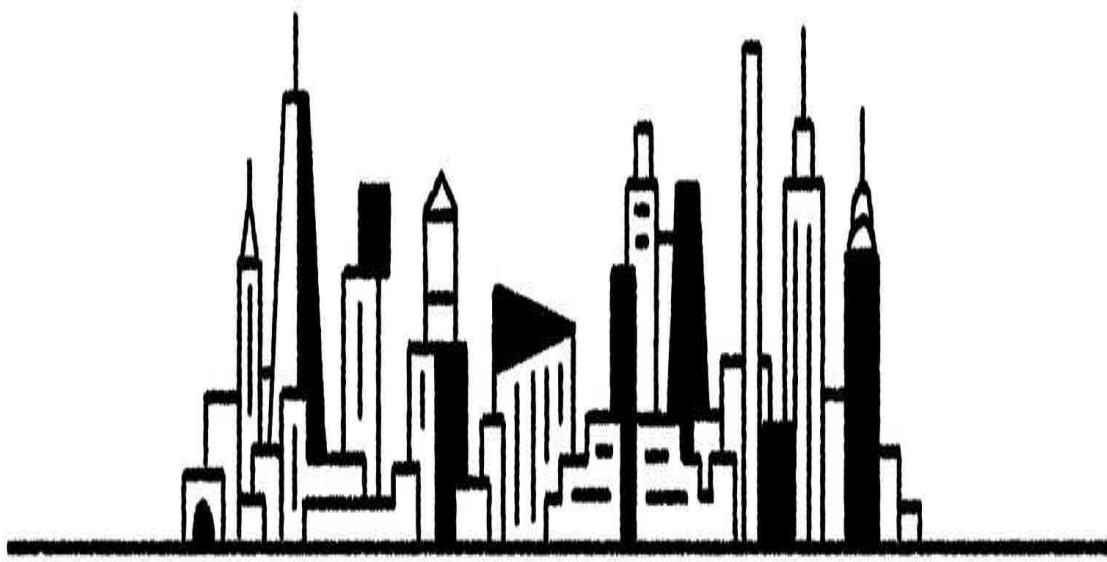
Indeed, the more interesting moments in the film are about Minnelli’s mentors, and it’s smart of Klein to structure the movie around the stories of artists and friends whose love and approval Minnelli sought out, including Kay Thompson, “Funny Face” ’s legendary “Think Pink!” star and the author of “Eloise at the Plaza”; Bob Fosse, who directed Minnelli so brilliantly in “Cabaret,” in 1972, for which she won the Best Actress Oscar; and Charles Aznavour, who taught her how to act a song.

The film has a wound in it: Minnelli’s rising star made some of her collaborators and trusted friends bristle. They had talent—like Thompson—but I think they didn’t have what Minnelli had: a *general* charisma, one that could touch many different people all at once. I remember watching Meryl Streep being interviewed, and describing being a young performer and going to see Liza Minnelli in a Broadway show. Streep never got over Minnelli’s desire to reach the audience, all the way up there in the balcony, and I think that’s the kind of testimony I was interested in hearing more of in “Liza” (the Streep reminiscence isn’t in the film), because it articulates what we see in a Minnelli performance: a desire to touch us, not out of the usual egocentrism but, rather, a certain humility. One feels that she considers performance a vocation, not a career, and I think that the gay men she was involved with post-“Cabaret”—her friend Halston, for one—were as taken by Minnelli’s uncertainty in life as they were by both the fragility and the indomitability she admitted to onstage.

We also see what it’s like to be a child of an addict. When Minnelli’s fame heated up after “Cabaret” came out, you see her on endless tours, in limousines, at after-parties for yet another show, and when someone asks her if she’s tired she can barely admit it: if you’re tired, that means you’re

vulnerable, and if you're vulnerable how are you going to take care of your addict parent? At the end of the film, friends of Minnelli—never Minnelli herself—talk about Garland's competitiveness with her daughter, and there's a photograph, so beautiful, that nearly closes the film. It shows a sad Minnelli looking at her mother, wondering who she is—which is one way of wondering who you are, too.

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## About Town

Off Broadway

The Australian comedian Sam Kissajukian spends part of his beautifully frank solo performance “**300 Paintings**” explaining that, whatever we may think of his addressing us alone, from a stage, being funny, he isn’t a standup comic anymore. What he actually *is* becomes an increasingly desperate question, one the show helps him answer. In 2021, during a five-month manic episode, Kissajukian—his bipolar disorder as yet undiagnosed—painted hundreds of (often spectacular) monumental paintings and developed wild business plans, themselves works of art. He displays them to us now as a healthier man, full of a wry admiration for the truly impressive accomplishments of that whirling, unsleeping side of himself, and the calm

knowledge that he cannot afford to be that man again.—[Helen Shaw](#)  
(Vineyard; through Feb. 23.)

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## Opera

The avant-garde company **Heartbeat Opera** is engaging in another innovative game of source-text telephone, this time with a new iteration of “Salome.” The original draws from Oscar Wilde’s eponymous play, with a German libretto adapted from Wilde’s French, and music, famously, composed by Richard Strauss. Now Heartbeat presents the hundred-and-twenty-year-old opera in English—a rare occurrence for this particular tale—with instrumentation boiled down to a simple eight clarinets and two percussionists. The intent is to foreground and amplify the story’s scandalous underpinnings, which, in all fairness, were loosely veiled to begin with. Some patrons can pay what they wish (\$10 or more), though severed heads are not an option.—[Jane Bua](#) (Irondale; Feb. 4-16.)

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## Hip-Hop



Photograph by Gianni Gallant

Since her emergence as the secret weapon for Kanye West’s Wyoming sessions, in 2018, the singer and rapper **070 Shake** has embraced outsider status. Stardom never came knocking for the protégée of one of the world’s

most watched artists, but Shake has thrived without the pressures of the attention economy, working closely with Dave Hamelin, of the indie-rock band the Stills, on sumptuous, melodramatic songs that test form. Her sound has exploded into a kind of psychedelic opera, first spawning from emo rap, then eventually evolving into distorted electropop. Last year, Shake released the most grandiose music of her already ambitious career, “Petrichor,” a maximalist opus that conjures eighties power-pop, channels surf rock, and covers Tim Buckley with Courtney Love. Her theatrical impulse is matched only by her desire to shatter all previous notions of what her music should be.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*Kings Theatre; Feb. 1.*)

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## Television

In the puzzle-box office-allegory sci-fi series “**Severance**,” created by Dan Erickson, for Apple TV+, most of the employees on the “severed” floor of the secretive biotech firm Lumon have undergone a procedure that separates their work selves (the “innies”) from their at-home selves (the “outies”). After a rebellion in the first season, the second season opens with Lumon’s efforts to lure Mark (Adam Scott), Dylan (Zach Cherry), and their colleagues back to work with the promise of “kindness reforms.” But the writers now seem less interested in poking fun at real-life corporate culture than in mining the tension between innies and outies. The season seems to pull back from bleakness, losing itself in abstract ethical conundrums and rote emotional ones. It’s far from a dissection of work and life as we know them; the incisions are only skin deep.—[Inkoo Kang](#) ([Reviewed in our issue of 1/20/25.](#))

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## Dance



Photograph by Nathalie Sternalski

**Compagnie Hervé KOURBI** performs “What the Day Owes to the Night,” a vision of desert sands in wind—drifting, amassing, dispersing, whirling up and settling down. But instead of sands we see thirteen bare-chested, muscled men in culottes, who skim the ground and tumble slowly and toss one another high through the air. Elements of street dance and capoeira blend into a dream of the Maghreb and brotherhood. Several times, a man climbs a tower of other men, then plummets backward into the arms of his brothers. The work, which has been drifting across the world since 2013, now settles in again at the Joyce.—[Brian Seibert](#) (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 28-Feb. 2.)

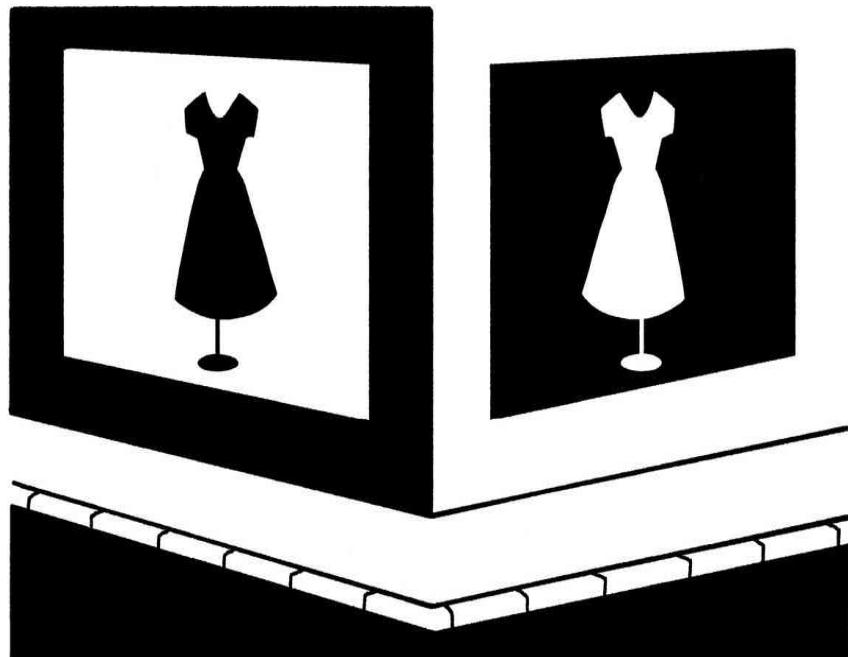
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## Movies

The Chinese independent filmmaker Alan Zhang’s first feature, “**This Woman**,” is a startlingly intimate and alluringly intricate tangle of fiction and faux documentary. It stars Hihi Lee (who also co-wrote the script) as Beibei, a young striver of the Beijing bourgeoisie, a married mother of a toddler who is emotionally involved with a colleague from her job in a real-estate office, leading to threats from the colleague’s wife. But as Beibei’s romantic commitments and professional activities move from city to city, her very identity—amid tension with her husband and her widowed mother

—seems to shift. Focussing on high-stakes conflicts of love and money, noting the constraints of tradition and bureaucracy, Zhang views her protagonist (who is interviewed on-camera) as a free-range prisoner in every scenario.—[\*Richard Brody\*](#) (*Metrograph*; opens Jan. 31.)

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## On and Off the Avenue

[\*Rachel Syme\*](#) on T-shirts to benefit victims of the Los Angeles fires.



*Illustration by Melanie Lambrick*

In early January, the graphic designer Chris Cristiano, who lives in Rockaway Beach, was on a surf trip in Morocco with his girlfriend, the stylist Jesse James, when they saw the distressing news: Los Angeles was being ravaged by wildfires, and many of their friends were posting about evacuating or losing their homes. They wanted to help. “NY Loves LA” suddenly popped into Cristiano’s head—he felt it was important to show solidarity between two cities that have long postured themselves as rivals—and, to his surprise, the [handle](#) was available on Instagram. Cristiano and James quickly designed a piece of bootleg merch—an “NY ♥ LA” T-shirt, inspired by Milton Glaser’s classic “I ♥ NY” logo—and put it on Instagram, noting that all proceeds (\$50 per shirt) would support the grassroots relief group Mutual Aid LA Network. They partnered with a screenprinter, Sara Gates, at Kingsland Editions, in Brooklyn, to help with production, and took initial orders through Instagram, thinking they might sell twenty shirts, at best. Then the post went viral. Several high-profile users, including the musician Cat Power, shared the post, and orders rolled in. “I have, like, almost twenty-five thousand dollars in a Venmo account right now,” Cristiano told me. (He has since moved orders to the [Kingsland Editions site](#).) The shirt joins a growing flock of benefit tees—the cheery L.A. clothing company Big Bud Press released a retro [“I Love L.A.” shirt](#), and the movie-merch brand Director Fits put out an [“LA Movies” tee](#) featuring the names of dozens of movies shot in Los Angeles (\$40). Another movie-

merch brand, Human Boy Worldwide—run out of L.A. by the designer Eloy Lugo—will donate all profits from the sales of its [\*\*“Movies, now more than ever!”\*\*](#) shirt (\$40), that evokes the classic Robert Altman film “The Player,” to underfunded GoFundMe pages. Now you can quite literally wear your desire to help out on your sleeve.

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### P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [An emotional time machine](#)
- [New residents of the National Zoo](#)
- [Kevin Smith’s “Dogma” confessions](#)

*An earlier version of this article mischaracterized the price of admission to Heartbeat Opera’s production of “Salome.”*

By Richard Brody  
By Richard Brody  
By Ian Crouch  
By Victoria Uren  
By Ian Buruma  
By Michael Schulman  
By Alex Ross  
By Arthur Krystal  
By Rachel Syme

By [Helen Rosner](#)

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

Among New York's restaurant stars, Alex Stupak is one of the most reliably interesting. He made his name, twenty years ago, as the original pastry whiz at Alinea, in Chicago, where he was instrumental in shaping the restaurant's boundary-pushing idiom of molecular modernism and gastronomic puns with dishes like a vanilla sponge cake that, somehow, also served as its own utensil. He then came to New York to work at wd~50, the now closed temple to culinary weirdness run by the visionary chef Wylie Dufresne. In 2012, as the molecular-cuisine era was waning, Stupak left it all behind to open Empellón Taqueria and, a year later, Empellón Cocina, casual Mexican restaurants in lower Manhattan with a slightly goth-punk edge. (Stupak's wife, the pastry chef Lauren Resler, is Mexican American; he's said that he became obsessed with the cuisine thanks to his mother-in-law's cooking.) He brought to tortillas and moles the same rigor he'd brought to his expectation-defying desserts, and the restaurants grew over the years into a mini-empire. The total number of Empellóns seems always to be somewhat in flux; there are currently three casual taquerias and a big, fancy destination restaurant in midtown.

Stupak ventured beyond Mexican fare a few years ago when he opened Mischa, an excellent restaurant that was, alas, doomed. One could blame any number of factors: the vagueness of the concept (sort of Mediterranean? Sort of Mitteleuropean?), the vastness of the dining room, or just the awfulness of the timing—Mischa seemed to be targeting the C-suite lunching crowd, but it opened in 2023, to the dead air of late-pandemic midtown office life. It closed less than a year later, just as return-to-office initiatives were repopulating Manhattan's expense-account dining rooms. Undaunted, thank goodness, Stupak opened the Otter, on Thompson Street, late last year inside the new Manner hotel, in SoHo. It's a seafood restaurant—not a fish shack, not a raw bar, but a proper moody bistro, replete with leather and velvet and Art Deco murals. The tables are set with oyster forks. A marble-framed fireplace anchors the back half of the room. The walls are lacquered a deep, thalassic navy blue.

Everything about the setting communicates that the Otter is a serious restaurant, but Stupak, to his credit, knows how to keep serious endeavors feeling light. Since his Alinea days, he's found playful inspiration in high-concept reimaginings: at Empellón, his menus of meticulously researched Mexican dishes occasionally featured specials like tacos inspired by Chicago-style Italian beef sandwiches; at Mischa, he served a twenty-nine-dollar hot dog that was, unbelievably, worth every penny. This kind of high-low play isn't uncommon in the food world, but it's tricky to pull off without veering into snobbery or kitsch. What gives Stupak his edge is that he's never seemed interested in toying with the idea of sophistication (dangerous territory); he's driven, instead, to explore the relationships, deep and emotional and strange, between form and flavor. A hot dog is just a hot dog; a twenty-nine-dollar hot dog, done right—magnificent in size, with a snappy casing, a garlicky bite, and a lingering smoky taste—makes you start to think about what the boundaries of a hot dog can be.

At the Otter, Stupak continues to indulge his impulse to riff and reinterpret and perform tricks of the tongue. A dish called Clams and Shells marries elements of your classic Italian-style clam pasta (garlic, white wine, parsley) with the crisp-toasty profile of Catalan *fideuà* (sort of like a paella made with short, straight noodles), and drives the pun home with *conchiglie*, shell-shaped pasta. Tiny, delicate agnolotti are filled with parsley root and cream and presented beneath enormous pieces of crabmeat and a dusting of crushed Ritz crackers. On the table, it's an elegant bowl of pasta; in the mouth, down to the tiniest speck of pepper, it's a mid-century cocktail-party crab dip. I found the idea laugh-out-loud funny, though maybe it was the influence of the Seaspray Sour, a whiskey cocktail made bizarre and delicious with the addition of kombu and dill.

This isn't to say that the menu at the Otter deals only in gimmicks. There's remarkable grace and ingenuity in an appetizer of tuna tartare in what the menu calls *gilda* dressing, a chopped-up relish of green olives, anchovies, and *guindilla* peppers, the traditional ingredients of a Basque *pintxo* that's purportedly named for the 1946 Rita Hayworth vehicle. Raw tuna is often presented in ways that emphasize its subtlety and richness; here, instead, all those piquant, pickly bits seem to give the fish's oceanic sweetness permission to flex and flow, revealing its character the way a few drops of water open up a rare single malt. (The dish comes topped with three tiny

devilled quail's eggs: very cute, totally unnecessary.) A shrimp cocktail is also uncommonly excellent—and that's saying a lot, in a town that often seems to be overspilling with plump crustaceans on beds of pebbled ice. The Otter's version is both generous (eight entire shrimp, in *this* economy?) and unique, with two accompanying sauces, again Basque-inspired: a dense, mega-garlicky allioli (the Spanish version of aioli) and a sultry, deep-red romesco whose silken, nutty smoothness should be no surprise to anyone familiar with Stupak's prowess with nut-based salsas at Empellón.

The Basque region is a big influence on the Otter's ever-changing menu, as is New England (Stupak grew up in Massachusetts), not only in the crab-dip pasta but in a lobster roll (perfectly nice, if you like paying for lobster rolls) and a clam chowder so billowy with cream that it's almost mousse-like. I had been wary of Stupak's take on fish and chips, which uses oily, intense Spanish mackerel in lieu of the usual featureless white fish, but my skepticism was unwarranted: the flavor was, indeed, more assertive, but it was balanced beautifully by a beer batter as curly and bronzed as a goldendoodle, plus a kicky, salty tartar sauce. The menu nods, as well, to the Gulf Coast, to the Mediterranean, and to East and Southeast Asia, but the global pantries remain segregated dish by dish. The closest anything comes to fusion is the bread service, which pairs New England-style Parker House rolls, fresh from the oven and marshmallow-soft, with a lineup of compound butters, including one, lusciously saffron-infused, inspired by bouillabaisse, the Provençal seafood stew.

The Otter is quite beautiful. The room is weighty and masculine in an unoppressive way. The people, by virtue of both the SoHo location and the forgivingly diffuse lighting (including flickering taper candles; watch out for the corner of that menu!), are notably gorgeous. A perhaps inevitable upshot of such aesthetic concern is that a few dishes are more exciting to look at than to eat, like a photogenic pair of raw scallops, each served on its own shell, one zhuzhed up in red chile and the other in green, neither tasting of much except salt, lime, and a distant flicker of spice. A centerpiece plateau of dressed seafood, priced per person, is disappointingly constrained where it ought to be dramatic; comprising a tray of pre-portioned little bites on their own tiny plates—including oysters, razor clams, a tuna-uni thing, a bit of smoked salmon panna cotta with trout roe—the arrangement feels like wedding catering (albeit for a very fancy wedding). There's a steak on offer,

a brawny New York strip, cooked to a perfect medium rare but presented, for some reason, next to a pile of vinegary sautéed red bell peppers, and a saucier of funky, fishy crawfish béarnaise. Taken all together, the dish was total nonsense, but I suppose if you're the kind of person who orders the steak at a place like the Otter you get what you deserve, especially when there's a terrific swordfish frites right next to it on the menu. A hunk of meaty loin draped in a rich, mahogany sauce au poivre, it's as close to bovinity as a fish could possibly dream of being.

### Helen, Help Me!

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

It's been well over a decade since Stupak left the pastry kitchen, but it would be a mistake to skip dessert at any of his restaurants. At the Otter, there's a lush, minimalist take on a Boston cream pie, and a pistachio tiramisu green as a fresh-mown suburban lawn, but give yourself the gift of ordering an ice cream. No tidy, freezer-hardened little scooplets here: the portions are big enough for two or three, and come swirled up and around the inside of a ceramic bowl like a frozen whirlpool or, as one of my dining companions noted, like hummus. On one wintry visit, a bite of cantaloupe sorbet rocketed me straight into summer; on another, a plain vanilla ice cream sent my whole party into swoons. Served alongside whatever variety you end up getting are two more bowls, one filled with an olive-oil whipped cream, slightly sweet, slightly savory, the other with a pile of candied grapes, tart little purple spheres like maraschino cherries reflected in a fun-house mirror. During my first meal at the Otter, not long after the restaurant opened, a serving of ice cream cost twenty dollars—awfully high, but I came away feeling that the price was justified. Now a slightly smaller but still substantial portion is nine dollars, the bargain of the century. It's not a high-wire act, not a wacky food-science ripple in space-time, not a throwback, or a callback, or a play on words—it's just fantastic ice cream, and it's more than enough. ♦

By Michael Schulman  
By Anna Russell  
By Jessica Winter  
By Anna Russell  
By Graciela Mochkovsky  
By Doreen St. Félix  
By Keith Gessen  
By Emily Witt  
By Daniel A. Gross  
By Charles Bethea  
By Ben McGrath

**By Peter Hessler**

## The Talk of the Town

- [Trump's Attempt to Redefine America](#)
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- [Kim Hastreiter, the Queen of Stuff](#)
- [How to Tag a Skyscraper, Six Hundred Feet Up](#)
- [The Met's New Aida Visits the Other Met](#)

[Comment](#)

# Trump's Attempt to Redefine America

The effect of the President's executive orders was to convey an open season, in which virtually nothing—including who gets to be an American citizen—is guaranteed.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Cold bedevils Presidential Inaugurations, Washington, D.C., tending to be chilly the third week in January. *The New Yorker's* correspondent in 1965 (Lyndon Johnson's inaugural) donned “red-white-and-blue thermal underwear”; the magazine’s dispatch from 1977 (Jimmy Carter’s) noted “shining white ice everywhere.” Anticipating frigidity, the organizers of the 2025 iteration (Donald Trump’s, reprise) moved the event indoors, to the Capitol Rotunda, whose limited capacity of six hundred people helpfully delineated who was in and who was on the outs. In: the First Family, seated behind the President, and punctuated visually by the six-foot-seven-inch, eighteen-year-old Barron Trump. In, too, were the billionaires Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Jeff Bezos, and Google’s Sundar Pichai, seated in the next row, and co-ideologues from abroad: Italy’s Giorgia Meloni, Argentina’s Javier Milei. Out—consigned to the Capitol Visitor Center—was Governor Ron DeSantis, of Florida, who at this point in 2023 enjoyed influence in the

Republican Party broadly equivalent to Trump's, and whose sidelining was a reminder of what an extraordinarily long time two years is in politics.

Eight years is even longer. In the Rotunda, Trump said that, since his first election, "I have been tested and challenged more than any President in our two-hundred-and-fifty-year history. And I've learned a lot along the way." Perhaps more important was what his movement had learned: the virtue of preparation. Detailed policy and hiring programs had been negotiated and assembled. "For American citizens," Trump said, "January 20, 2025, is Liberation Day."

It was, if not that, Executive Order Day. Papers flowed. At the Resolute desk, an aide handed Trump orders for signing from a tall stack of navy-blue binders. Within a few hours, the United States was pulling out of not only the Paris climate accord but also the World Health Organization, which it had helped to found, in 1948. On immigration, the President reinstated his Remain in Mexico policy, and cancelled interviews for asylum applicants; in a Latino neighborhood in Detroit, *ice* agents were reportedly going door to door. Federal diversity programs, some dating back to an executive order signed by L.B.J. in 1965, were eliminated. Offshore wind projects were paused, restrictions on drilling lifted. Fifteen hundred people were pardoned for their roles in January 6th, including some of the most violent actors; Politico speculated that many would soon run for office themselves.

Some of the initiatives sounded less like amendments to bureaucratic procedure (the usual scope of executive orders) than like a manual for a startup society. Basic rules were being rewritten. Trump declared that the policy of the United States is that there are only two sexes, male and female: "These sexes are not changeable and are grounded in fundamental and incontrovertible reality." Since the adoption of the Fourteenth Amendment, in 1868, any person born in the United States has been a citizen, but, on Monday, Trump signed a document declaring that this is no longer so—that from now on someone born to parents who are in the country illegally, or even legally but only temporarily, will not be an American. The effect of these executive orders was to convey, much more effectively than in 2017, an open season, in which virtually nothing—from the boundaries of the U.S. and the solidity of jury verdicts to who gets to be an American citizen—is guaranteed.

Meanwhile, we are awaiting deals. Trump's instincts are transactional, and he has his eye on Greenland (and its mineral deposits) and on the Panama Canal. ("America's ships are being severely overcharged," he insisted, during a long riff in his Inaugural Address, and vowed, "We're taking it back.") Having spent much of the past decade inveighing against what he saw as Chinese perfidy, and promising a policy of high tariffs, he now indicated that he'll forget all about that if Beijing will sell fifty per cent of TikTok to U.S. investors. (Shou Zi Chew, the C.E.O. of TikTok, was in the Rotunda, too, seated next to Tulsi Gabbard.) Were these gambits made on behalf of the country, or certain supporters, or Trump himself? The President's family, at least, got into the action early, issuing a \$TRUMP meme coin a few days before the Inauguration, which briefly surged to fifteen billion dollars in market capitalization, before falling to around half that. The day before the Inauguration, they rolled out \$MELANIA.

The Trumps are always the Trumps, of course, but what has given the President a second political life is the way much of the country emerged from the pandemic—frustrated with rules, strictures, and instructions of all types, and with the principles behind them. What was once a niche campaign against diversity-equity-and-inclusion programs has metastasized into a general anti-idealism. In pardoning the violent January 6th criminals—and Ross Ulbricht, who created the crypto-enabled online drug bazaar Silk Road—Trump made it clear that accountability is for him to decide. Some billionaires, in particular, seemed to detect a societal shift in Trump's election: Mark Zuckerberg, not long after cancelling Meta's fact-checking program, told Joe Rogan that the "culturally neutered" corporate world could use more "masculine energy," and that it would be good to celebrate "the aggression a bit more." It took only a few days for the new President to take that sentiment and run with it, right through the rule of law.

Is he going too far for his own good, again? Trump is often self-waylaying (as with, last time around, the Muslim ban and the never-ending boondoggle of the wall), and last week even his supporters in the Fraternal Order of Police condemned the January 6th pardons. Twenty-two Democratic state attorneys general filed suit to block the executive order threatening birthright citizenship—on Thursday, a federal judge blocked it temporarily—and at the National Cathedral Trump had to endure a sermon from Bishop Mariann Budde, urging him to show compassion for "the people who are scared

now.” But it is both bewildering and alarming to remember how furious and how widespread the resistance was to Trump’s first Presidential acts, in 2017—the Women’s March, the airport protests over the Muslim ban—and to notice how the response to a much more confrontational agenda has so far been marked mostly by a lone woman’s voice from a pulpit. One working week in, it looks as if Trump is right that he learned a lot from the past eight years—and more than his opponents did. This January, what’s missing is the heat. ♦

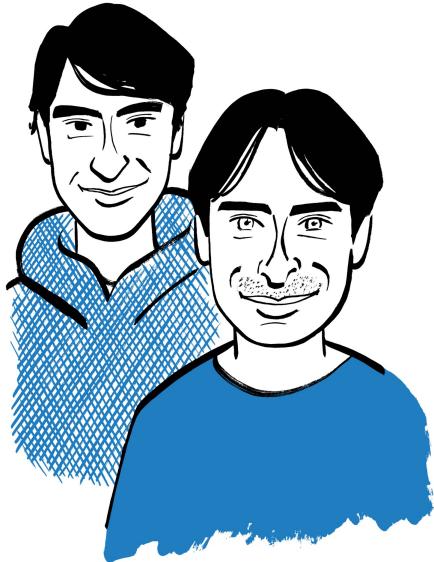
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By Daniel Immerwahr  
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By Louisa Thomas

[Here To There Dept.](#)

# The College Kids Tracking Your Decongested Commute

Benjamin Moshes, a senior, and his brother, Joshua, a freshman, built the Web site that congestion-pricing watchers rely on during a family trip to Japan.

By [Dan Greene](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Congestion pricing's first month has offered New Yorkers plenty of immediate ways to measure its impact: their E-ZPass bills, the decrease in honk-inducing gridlock outside their windows, the number of exclamation points in a bridge-and-tunnel uncle's Facebook posts. For more detailed analysis, the *Times* and other publications have turned to the Congestion Pricing Tracker, a Web site that collects data on commute times and displays them in a series of before-and-after line graphs. The data compilers, Benjamin and Joshua Moshes, are college-age brothers from Newton, Massachusetts, near Boston, who built the site during their winter break. "We feel like honorary New Yorkers, of a sort," Benjamin said recently. The brothers sometimes visit Brooklyn and Staten Island to see family. "But they

usually don't drive into Manhattan, so they don't have really strong feelings," Benjamin added.

The other day, the brothers convened on Zoom. Joshua, a freshman studying computer science at Northeastern, wore a scarlet school hoodie in front of a blank whiteboard on campus. Benjamin, in a gray T-shirt, was at their parents' house, beneath wall-mounted maps, on the eve of his final semester at Brown. Their project was inspired by Benjamin's study of taxi-fare data for an econometrics competition held at the University of Chicago. Back at school, his thesis adviser, the economist Emily Oster, suggested that he look into the upcoming congestion-pricing program. With his brother's help, Benjamin began pulling drive-time estimates for nineteen different city routes from Google Maps. Most choices were easy: tunnels, bridges, major thoroughfares across the congestion zone. When Benjamin wanted a Brooklyn route with lots of rush-hour traffic but less traffic during the day, he called an outside consultant—a friend who grew up in Brooklyn. The result: a journey from South Slope to Dumbo via the B.Q.E. "That was his suggestion entirely," Benjamin said.

About two weeks before the program launched, Benjamin pitched his brother on building a Web site. One hitch: they were on a family vacation in Japan, visiting ancient temples and sumo halls. "This was, like, a secondary priority for my parents," Joshua said.

Benjamin was confident that the tolling would have an effect. "It just didn't seem right to me that you ask people to pay nine dollars and no one changes their behavior," he said. More surprising was how popular their tracker became: in its first week, it had more than a hundred thousand users. On the Sunday that congestion pricing went into effect, the brothers were fielding messages—and making sure that the tracker stayed tracking—until five the following morning. "I don't even know how we were functioning," Benjamin said. Hours later, Joshua had to move back into his dorm and begin classes. "I think I got, like, one or two hours of sleep that day," he said. "It was tough." Worse still: he had waited to pack until that morning.

After a few weeks, they began to see clear patterns. During peak hours on the Williamsburg Bridge and other thoroughfares, commute time is down some forty per cent; getting through the Holland Tunnel on a Sunday night,

once a thirty-minute slog, now takes ten. “We are very confident that this is not a fluke,” Benjamin said. There have also been more moderate traffic increases in some spillover areas, like the F.D.R. Perhaps most unexpectedly, travel times within the congestion zone have hardly budged.

This mixed bag has allowed observers on all sides to crow. “We’re reading one post that’s, like, ‘Look at this graph of the Holland Tunnel—this is magical!’” Benjamin said. “The very next post we see is someone, like, ‘An increase in traffic, just like we expected, in the Carey Tunnel.’ Same exact news source, same exact data.”

During the first weeks of this semester, Joshua spent most of his lectures reading and responding to tracker-related e-mails. “All but one of my classes are computer-science classes, and I’m pretty good at computer science, so I don’t necessarily need to pay attention,” he said. The lone exception is an acting course that fulfills one of his major’s requirements. “I guess they want us to practice talking to people,” he said. Benjamin admitted that the M.T.A. was among those who’d reached out. About what? “We don’t like to comment on that,” he said.

The Moshes’ original data-storage plan cost them six cents for every hundred thousand data requests. The first week’s bill cleared four hundred dollars. “We were worried we would be in debt,” Benjamin said. (They have since started a successful online fund-raiser.) At some point, as congestion pricing becomes a fact of life, they expect to end real-time updates —“Probably when users stop actually looking at the Web site and we see that our traffic is close to nothing,” Joshua said. ♦

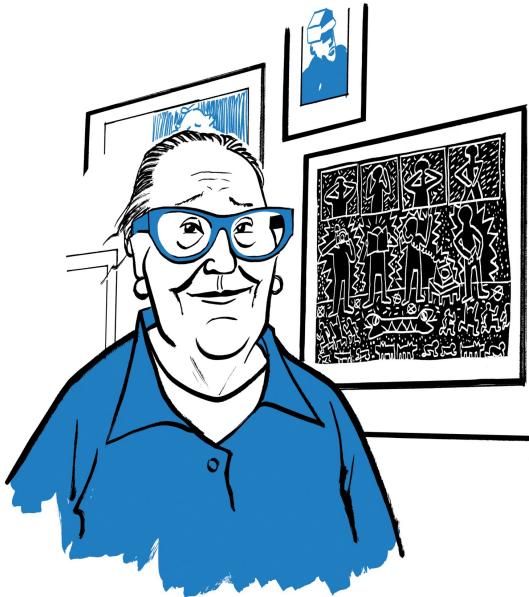
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[Collections Dept.](#)

## Kim Hastreiter, the Queen of Stuff

The co-founder of *Paper* magazine recounts Kim Kardashian's famous photo shoot and serving Jackie Kennedy.

By [Ariel Levy](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Recently, Kim Hastreiter—artist, curator, co-founder of *Paper* magazine, and legendary downtown bon vivant—was having one of her parties. There were six kinds of soup and at least as many kinds of people: the tennis player John McEnroe; the artists Sarah Sze and Lisa Yuskavage; the musician James Murphy, of LCD Soundsystem, and his wife, the activist and restaurateur Christina Topsøe; the guy who did Michelle Obama's vegetable garden. An unusual scent wafted from the kitchen, the merging vapors of tom yum and ribollita.

Hastreiter, who was wearing her “uniform” of a custom-made Mao jacket and a pleated skirt, has been called the Gertrude Stein of her era because of her knack for bringing together extraordinary combinations—of flavors, visual elements, and, above all, creative people. Standing in her living room, in front of a painting of a name tag that read “*HELLO* my name is Satan,” Hastreiter recalled a dinner she once gave for the director Pedro Almodóvar,

her longtime friend, to which she'd invited Todd Solondz, who'd just released his indie hit "Happiness." "It's, like, my favorite movie—I die for it," Hastreiter said. "And I knew Pedro would have a heart attack if I got Todd to come. So I'm getting ready, cooking, I hadn't even taken a shower, it's five-thirty, and the doorbell rang." She had invited her guests for seven-thirty, but Solondz was there early. "He sat for two hours in my house, alone, waiting for the party to start!"

Fortunately, there was a lot for him to look at. Hastreiter's apartment is a kind of aesthetic orgy. (Almodóvar re-created it in his latest film, "The Room Next Door.") Hastreiter breezed past walls with dozens of pictures by artists she has cultivated over the years: Keith Haring, Malick Sidibé, Jean-Michel Basquiat, with whom she used to share a pot dealer. On every shelf in every room: curiosities. Stacks of skateboard decks. A George Rickey kinetic sculpture. Ceramic potatoes.

"What's this all about?" McEnroe, standing on a rug that resembled a pile of Cheez Doodles, asked, pointing at an albino basketball encased in Lucite.

"That's from my friend—James Bond is his name, believe it or not. He had a sneaker store called Undefeated," Hastreiter explained breathlessly. "I used to do these twenty-four-hour 'cultural department stores' in L.A. and invite people to set up these little shops, but they had to make something special you couldn't buy anywhere else."

Hastreiter's collections are the ostensible subject of her forthcoming book, "Stuff: A New York Life of Cultural Chaos," a memoir told through the history of her possessions and the friends who concocted them. "When I turned seventy, I realized, like, God, I see the end," Hastreiter said. "And then you get these young people writing about the eighties who weren't even born yet . . . and getting everything wrong!" She'd come to New York in 1976 and started working as a shop girl uptown, selling clothes to Barbra Streisand, Nora Ephron, and Jacqueline Kennedy. ("She once asked me if navy blue was 'in.'") Bill Cunningham, who used to photograph Hastreiter's outfits on her morning commute to work directly from Studio 54 or the Mudd Club, helped her get a job as a style editor at the *SoHo Weekly News*. In 1984, Hastreiter and her friend David Hershkovits started *Paper*; initially, they'd sneak into the *Times* offices to use various analog appliances. "I know

how to develop film in a can,” Hastreiter bragged. “I know how to do cut and paste with a wax machine.”

A few weeks before her soup party, Hastreiter had learned that she’d be receiving the Cooper Hewitt’s Design Visionary award. “I couldn’t believe I won. It’s, like, crazy—I never win anything!” she said. “And I’m not even in the design world.” She described her job as “helping make great ideas happen.” She recalled the time she paired the French designer and photographer Jean-Paul Goude with Kim Kardashian, a decade ago, for a *Paper* cover featuring champagne, Kardashian’s tuchus, and, for a refreshing change of pace, her grin. “When they came back with the pictures, I was, like, My God, call the tech people,” Hastreiter recalled. “We have to make it not crash! We released the photos at midnight. It was like a *NASA* space launch.” Thirteen million people had clicked by first light. “I remember Jeffrey Deitch called me that morning. He’s, like, ‘Kim, this is art.’”

In February, Deitch will celebrate the launch of Hastreiter’s book with a show, at his Grand Street gallery, of works by sixty-five of the artists and designers featured in it, called “My Amazing Friends.” “My friends are old and they’re young,” Hastreiter said, gesturing around her bustling, soupy apartment. “I love mixing high and low, funny and serious. It’s too boring if you’re only one thing.” ♦

By Michael Schulman  
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By Ben McGrath

[On Belay](#)

# How to Tag a Skyscraper, Six Hundred Feet Up

Two graffiti artists demonstrate, in midair, how their tags have ended up on taller and taller buildings. The secret? Rock-climbing training.

By [Jake Offenhartz](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

A few years ago, around the time that rock climbing made its Olympic début, in Tokyo, many New York City graffiti artists developed a keen interest in the sport. Some joined climbing gyms. Others learned on YouTube. Rope was acquired, not always legally, from R.E.I. The fruits of that education are now visible across the high peaks of lower Manhattan. Deploying the tools of “rappel graffiti,” the vandals have been racing to claim fresh canvases of vertical space once thought untaggable.

Shortly after midnight on a recent frigid evening, two of the form’s most accomplished practitioners, XSM and QZAR, met up on a shadowy street near SoHo, both dressed entirely in black. Their target for this evening: the prominent façade of a residential building facing West Houston. XSM, who is thirtysomething and slender (his tag denotes his stature: extra small),

slipped a balaclava over his head. “The mental thing is probably the biggest barrier,” he said. “It’s actually very safe when you’re on a rope.” They waited until the last of the building’s lights went out. Then XSM shimmied through a crack in a playground gate, leaped onto a fire escape, and tiptoed six stories to the roof. From there, he signalled to QZAR to carry up the supplies: a hundred and twenty metres of static rope, plus harnesses, carabiners, belay devices, and a dozen cans of spray paint. “I always get nervous before I go up,” QZAR said. He had a stud in his left ear and wore paint-splotched pants and a hoodie embroidered with the word “HELLBOY.”

On the roof, QZAR discovered a problem: “My rope is frozen,” he said. It had been soaked the previous week while he tagged a decrepit “Welcome to the Bronx” sign in a downpour. “Fuck, dude,” XSM said. “I don’t know if that’s good.” He paused to think. “Let me ask ChatGPT real quick.” The language model pointed out that alpine climbers often rappel in Arctic conditions. Satisfied, the men secured their ropes to the top of the roof and went off the edge.

They descended side by side, their feet on the wall, adding friction to the frosty ropes using a clamp-like braking device. Each unleashed his tags in quick bursts of royal-blue bubble letters on the building’s red brick. “I feel like my stress has disappeared,” XSM said. “There’s nothing else I can do up here. I can’t go on Instagram. You’re really just stuck.” QZAR said, “I feel like my rope right now. I’m frozen.”

Nearly halfway down, XSM used a tool called an ascender to hoist himself back up, so that he could outline his looping characters in white. “This requires some body strength,” he explained.

His partner was lagging behind. “I’m a little bit perfectionist,” QZAR said. A police cruiser sped by but didn’t stop.

An hour after they started, they returned to the roof, wound their ropes, hurried back down the fire escape, and gazed up at their work. “It’s pretty fire,” QZAR said.

“It’s, like, a sense of accomplishment,” XSM said. “Like you won a game.”

At a nearby café, the pair considered the growing popularity of rope-assisted graffiti. “Before this, everyone did ladders,” QZAR said, sipping a jasmine tea. “It’s the theory of broken windows. It just spreads.” He estimated that, across the city, about a dozen graffiti writers were regularly rappelling, along with international visitors from Paris, Berlin, and elsewhere.

“Brazilians actually like to climb without rope, which is crazy,” XSM said. He has been doing graffiti for more than fifteen years. In 2023, he and two other prominent rappellers, RAMS and NOTICE, sneaked to the top of an unfinished luxury condo near the South Street Seaport, leaving behind a set of multistory tags more than six hundred feet in the air. The graffiti, considered the highest in the city, remains up. Lately, XSM has been trying to pursue a more traditional art career, but has been finding it difficult to stop tagging. “I’ve been saying it’s the last one for, like, years,” he said. “Graffiti is kind of addicting.” In September, RAMS tagged the crown of an unfinished skyscraper at 45 Park Place, near City Hall. “I didn’t even know that building was there,” XSM said, a hint of envy in his voice.

For work, both QZAR and XSM paint murals legally, among other side jobs. Each has been arrested previously. A few months earlier, during a marathon painting session that unexpectedly stretched into the morning rush hour, QZAR locked eyes with a police officer while hanging from a rope above Canal Street. “He looks at me, I look at him, and I wave to him,” he said. “I try to have a little bit of respect and appreciation, even if graffiti is kind of a disrespectful thing.” ♦

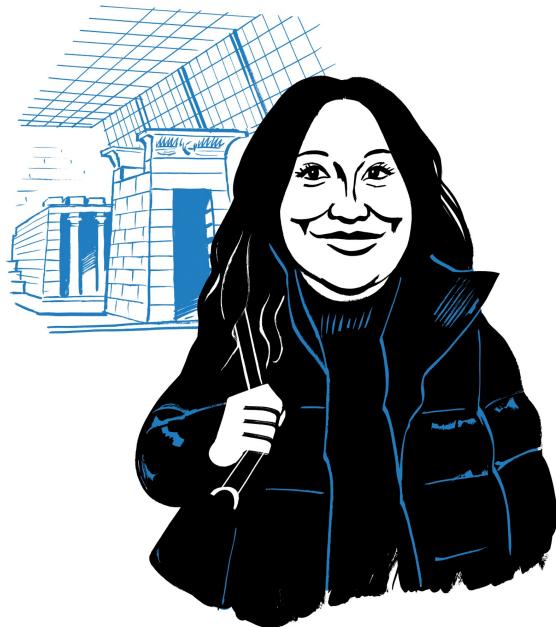
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[Blue Nile Dept.](#)

# The Met's New Aida Visits the Other Met

The soprano Angel Blue, the star of the new production of Verdi's ancient-Egypt spectacle, goes to the Temple of Dendur, crosstown, for the first time.

By [Sarah Larson](#)



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

On a recent snowy afternoon, the soprano Angel Blue travelled from the Metropolitan Opera House to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to visit its Egyptian collection. Blue, who is forty, is statuesque and warmly serene, and she looked elegant in an overcoat, a sparkly sweater, and boots. “I just got out of rehearsal,” she told a companion, in an elevator. “I tried to take off some makeup, but—” An elderly museumgoer wheeled around. “Are you in a show?” she asked. Yes, Blue said—“Aida,” at the Met Opera. Her companion added that Blue was *starring* in it. The museumgoer’s eyebrows shot up. “Wow!” she said. “Congratulations.” Blue demurred, balking at “star.” “Well, it’s the title character,” she said. Later, she said, “Because of how Aida is as a person, she can’t put herself at the center of anything. I like her for that—she and I share that.”

The Met's new production of "Aida," which runs through May, is directed by Michael Mayer and features projections that evoke ancient Egypt, dancing that suggests hieroglyphics, and a narrative frame involving archeologists. Blue, who has lived in London and performed all over the world, has sung many great roles at the Met Opera—Violetta, Mimì, Micaëla, Bess—but this season marks her début there as Aida, and that afternoon marked her début visit to the Met Museum. First, she checked out a new exhibit, "Flight Into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876-Now," which highlights works that take ancient Egypt as a source of contemporary inspiration. Passing an array of Nefertiti heads, Blue stopped in front of a wall of album covers adorned with pharaohiana, by musicians ranging from Fela Kuti to Earth, Wind & Fire to De La Soul. In the middle: Leontyne Price in "Aida." "I had this recording," Blue said.

Blue, who lives in New Jersey with her husband and stepson, grew up in California, listening to popular music, classical, gospel, "everything." "I mean, good grief. My dad listened to Deep Purple, the Ink Spots, Miles Davis, Frank Sinatra," she said. "He had a really good musical palate." Her mother, too: Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Cher. "My dad was a pastor, so I learned about ancient Egypt from the Bible—Exodus and Deuteronomy, basically," she said. "I've learned a lot being in 'Aida.'" She cocked her head, alert to music in an adjacent room. "'The Wiz!'" she said, singing a little. "Ba-ba-ba—the Emerald City scene." She popped into a multiscreen alcove, admiring clips including Michael Jackson's video "Remember the Time," starring Eddie Murphy and Iman as a pharaoh and his bored wife. "Iman came to our opening of 'Porgy and Bess' in 2019," Blue said. "She was really sweet."

Blue headed downstairs to the Egyptian collection and talked about her youth. When she was four, she saw "Turandot" with her parents; afterward, she said, "I want to be like the lady in the light." By fifth grade, "I wanted to be Leontyne Price." At fifteen, she enrolled in a performing-arts high school in Los Angeles, commuting two hours each way and studying alongside classmates including Josh Groban and Taran Killam. "It's funny—whenever I have a moment of 'I'm not going to do this anymore,' I see someone from high school on a billboard." During a low moment circa "La Bohème," she said, "I turned on 'S.N.L.' and I saw Taran Killam. I was, like, 'Oh, my gosh, I gotta keep going.'"

By the Temple of Dendur, atrium windows showcased a deep-blue late-afternoon sky. “The temple was given to us in 1965—I didn’t know that until, like, two days ago,” Blue said. “That’s fascinating. Leontyne Price made her Met débüt in ’61, and a little later was her huge success with ‘Aida.’ ” In the Tomb of Perneb, she took in the rows of hieroglyphs, and talked about Aida and Radamès, who spend the end of Act IV, and then eternity, in a tomb. “It’s, like, ‘This is our home now,’ ” she said. In a gallery, she bent to admire the Mummy of Artemidora, lying peacefully in a glass case. Blue’s father died eighteen years ago. “I don’t mean to be morbid, but I remember looking at him in his casket,” she said. “He had a suit on. He looked very peaceful, and he had a little smile. Whatever the paradise was that he was experiencing, I felt like I got to experience just a little bit of it, to see him like that.”

Her vocal talent is “a magical thing,” Blue said. “And it’s great to have it. But I didn’t give it to myself, you know? I’m borrowing it while I’m here.” She laughed apologetically, then went on. “And when I get *there* it’s going to sound even better. My dream is to sing in a choir in Heaven. If I could sing in a choir next to angels—seraphim, cherubim, streets of gold, and all that—that’s where it’s at for me.” Being named Angel, in short, is just fine. “My dad named me, and I’m thankful,” she said. “My mom wanted to name me Tiffany.” ♦

By Michael Schulman  
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By Charles Bethea  
By Helen Shaw  
By Naomi Fry  
By Jackson Arn  
By Helen Shaw

## Reporting & Essays

- [Inside the Fight Against a Los Angeles Inferno](#)
- [The World-Changing Gaze of Celia Paul](#)
- [A Witness in Assad's Dungeons](#)
- [How the Capybara Won My Heart—and Almost Everyone Else's](#)

By [M. R. O'Connor](#)

On the seventh day of the Eaton Fire, the most lethal of several wildfires burning in Southern California, I woke up in a tent at the Rose Bowl, which had become a staging area for first responders, called “fire camp.” At 7 A.M., an emergency-management team known as incident command gave a briefing at the stadium entrance. We were told that the blaze now encompassed fourteen thousand acres and was only fifteen per cent contained. It had risen into the San Gabriel Mountains to the north and spread into the suburbs to the south. “It does not get much worse than it’s going to be the next few days,” an expert on fire behavior warned us. “We could have rapid fire spread in basically any direction.”

At eight o’clock, I climbed into one of several white pickup trucks as part of a twenty-person handcrew, a team of wildland firefighters who dig lines around fires to contain and control them. (If fire engines are the artillery of firefighting and airtankers and helicopters are the air force, handcrews are the infantry.) Our caravan drove east to Sierra Madre, a community of about eleven thousand in the foothills of the mountains. Police officers, parked on the streets to enforce mandatory evacuation orders, waved us through, and we unloaded at the eerily vacant Eaton Canyon Golf Course. Behind us, the houses were untouched, but we knew that in front of us hundreds of homes had been reduced to rubble. Nearly everyone in the crew carried hand tools, and two people, designated sawyers, carried chainsaws. We shrugged on our backpacks—which included silver, cocoonlike fire shelters that we could deploy if we were overtaken by flames—and lined up. “Assume you’re not coming back to the trucks till tonight,” our captain instructed. “Stay vigilant! Stay alert!”

We began to hike along the edge of the burn scar, the charred area that a fire leaves behind. Our job was to cold trail—to scour the boundary where the fire had stopped, looking for hot spots that could reignite. Walking side by side, we marched into drainage ditches, scaled chain-link fences, crossed culs-de-sac, and passed through back yards that sloped steeply upward, toward the mountains. Each of us was responsible for scanning the ground for anything that might hold heat. At one end of the line, a crew member shouted, “Feel all white ashes! Don’t pass the person on your left!” Each

firefighter repeated the message, one person to the next, as though it were an echo.

When we saw ashes, we touched them gently with the backs of our bare hands to detect warmth. If we felt any, we shouted “Hold for heat!,” and the line stopped long enough for us to dig the hot spot out of the earth and cool it in the open air. Cold trailing is extremely dirty and laborious work, but this is by design. Aerial imaging can detect hot spots and show crews like this where to look, but every inch has to be checked by a person in order for an area to be declared fully contained. The perimeter of a wildfire is typically walked over three or four times, and sometimes more.

By California standards, the Eaton Fire was not especially large. It wasn’t even close to being a megafire, which is generally defined as one that burns at least a hundred thousand acres. But it was already the fifth deadliest fire in the state’s history, with a confirmed death toll of seventeen, and authorities were still searching for victims. The destruction in parts of Altadena, a few miles to the west of Sierra Madre, and Pacific Palisades, which had burned in a separate fire on the other side of Los Angeles, made these areas appear bombed out. Sierra Madre looked more like a place where missiles had fallen here and there; the damage was not total. We would circle the charred husk of a house and find a back-yard pool whose water was black with ash, yet neighboring homes would be unscathed.

A chief with Cal Fire, the state agency that fights wildfires, drove by the crew and stopped to talk to the captain. Some of the homes in the neighborhood had basements, he said, and this raised concerns that people had sought shelter underground and perished. (As of January 20th, there were more than twenty people missing.) Looking inside the burned homes, I found it difficult to recognize anything at all, but one time I saw what looked like a blue-and-white vase. Miraculously, it was still upright. When I looked closer, I realized that it might be an urn—a container for ashes in the ashes.

The handcrew I had joined referred to its captain as D. At midday, D instructed everyone to break for water and food in the back yard of a burned house. I peeled the first of two mandarin oranges that I’d plucked from a tree. We’d seen lemons whose rinds had started to melt away, but these were perfect orange orbs. After eating the first, however, I thought of the toxic air

—chemicals from burning houses and cars—that had swirled around the fruit for hours. I threw the second mandarin into some bushes.

D began his career as a firefighter in his late twenties, when he was serving time in state prison. (More than a thousand of the firefighters who have worked Southern California’s deadly fires this year are currently incarcerated; in an emergency like this, they might earn a few dollars an hour.) Unlike the vast majority of wildland firefighters, he is Black. While we rested, he leaned against his pack, a gray helmet on his head, but he didn’t eat or drink anything. As a practicing Muslim, he chose to fast on Mondays and Thursdays—a reminder, he told me, of those who have no food or water. After seven years of fighting fires, he had recently decided to move on. The Eaton Fire would be his last assignment. He had a baby girl at home and another child on the way, and he wanted to spend time with them. He planned to focus on a side business—cleaning windows and gutters—and a Ph.D. in Islamic studies.

I asked D if he would miss firefighting. “Yes,” he said. “If I was rich, and I could choose anything to do for a living, I would choose this work.”

“What have you learned about fire?”

“I view it as a kind of animal. If you take away the air, it dies. You can feed it by giving it more fuel. It can sleep. That’s basically what we’re doing now—finding dormant fire. It’s an entity that you have to respect, not just some dumb element that, if you put water on it, it stops.”

As he spoke, I realized that we were sitting in front of what had been someone’s bedroom. The blackened timbers of the roof had caved in on a scorched mattress and a blue bedspread.

If we are going to live in places where fires like to burn, D went on, we need to become comfortable with small or controlled fires that consume accumulating fuel. “Fire was here before us,” D told me. “It’s good for the earth. Everything grows back better. It keeps the tree density down. We interfered with that and created these conditions.” Research has shown that during the twentieth century a combination of aggressive wildfire suppression, temperature increases, and water scarcity encouraged the

growth of smaller, more tightly clustered trees across much of California. “Now, when wildfires start, they’re hard to stop,” D said.

Our break was almost over. We had half a day of cold trailing ahead of us. Before we got back on our feet, D asked a question: “How do we live in peace with fire?”

I spent three nights at fire camp, embedded with a private wildland firefighting company that had been hired as a contractor. (Several of my sources requested that I use only their first names.) I had previously trained as a wildland firefighter and maintain my qualifications, so I worked alongside the crew when I wasn’t reporting. We slept in the Rose Bowl parking lot, not far from supply depots, laundry and shower facilities, therapy dogs, and kitchens that fed more than two thousand first responders. Almost every major fire has a camp like this one—a fairground or a sports field where a command center can operate and people can recuperate between shifts. Of course, most fires are not ten miles from downtown Los Angeles. The community affected by these blazes in some way encompassed millions of people, including many who were wealthy and influential; the national news coverage and the public’s response were unusually intense. At one point, the rapper the Game brought firefighters coffee and paid to have fire engines detailed. At breakfast one morning, I heard a rumor that Angelina Jolie had attended one of the incident command’s briefings, and she was photographed at the stadium alongside World Central Kitchen workers.

The handcrew had difficulty believing that they were being treated so well. A McDonald’s trailer showed up at the stadium and handed out free breakfasts. Food trucks doled out burgers and tacos. Locals arrived with portable grills and fed anyone who passed by. “It’s one of the coolest things I’ve ever seen on a fire,” I overheard a crew member say. Out on the line one day, a firefighter expressed his shock that he had been given a pillow and, moreover, that it was still sealed in plastic. “It was brand new!” he said. Another jokingly compared these offerings to the miracle of the loaves and fishes.

At night, the temperature was near freezing. I pulled my sleeping bag over my head to keep warm and looked at my phone. I wanted to understand how

people outside the camp were processing and extracting meaning from the fires. An interview with the actor Dennis Quaid, looking shaken as he evacuated his home, seemed weirdly profound.

“We’ve all had a really big lesson,” he told a TV reporter.

“What is it?” the reporter asked.

“That our experience of reality can change in a moment.”

An entire city, maybe an entire country, was starting to appreciate the reality that wildland firefighters inhabit. Dirty work is often assumed to be unenlightened work, but wildland firefighters have a unique empirical understanding of natural forces. This includes troubling facts, such as the distance that floating embers can travel (miles) and the speed with which a wind-driven fire can move (about ten per cent of prevailing wind speeds). Firefighters also have access to a ground truth that is out of reach for the general public, and even for many scientists, about how our world is changing. In the past ten years, they have witnessed new and dramatic kinds of weather, unfamiliar fire behavior, and blazes that grow to an unprecedented size and intensity. Firefighters told me again and again how much they loved their job: the physical labor, the adrenaline, and the freedom of working outdoors. But they expressed how frustrated they were that, as a society, we are not doing routine work—creating defensible space around communities, managing landscapes, igniting prescribed fires—to help prevent such devastation.

The most visible part of the Eaton Fire was in the suburbs, where it destroyed thousands of structures. The largest part of the fire, however, was burning through woods and chaparral—shrubland—in the mountains, largely out of sight of the public. Many firefighters were working in the Angeles National Forest, miles north of Sierra Madre and Altadena. This is the landscape that gives wildland firefighters their name.

On my first day embedded with the firefighting company—day six of the fire—I’d joined a separate crew that drove north from camp, following a twisty highway uphill for an hour. We passed a law-enforcement vehicle that was blocking the road to the public. After parking on the shoulder, we

clambered out of the trucks, shivering in the morning air as we changed out of hoodies and jackets and into yellow shirts made of Nomex, which is fire-resistant up to seven hundred degrees Fahrenheit. We lined up with our packs and tools, then set off at a fast pace along a dirt trail that hugged the mountain.

In a handcrew, physical stamina is at once a point of pride and a safety requirement; falling out of line is considered a severe transgression. After a couple of miles we circled up for a briefing, and some of the firefighters turned away and retched unself-consciously into the dirt. “We got a moderate Santa Ana wind for the first half of the day,” a crew member said, examining a weather report and using the term for strong, dry winds that push into the area from the desert. “Winds up to forty miles per hour on the ridgetops. It’s getting cooler, but the R.H.”—relative humidity—“is also getting lower.” Wind both adds oxygen to the flames and transports them, and the drier the air the drier the vegetation that feeds fires.



*“Thank you, Cleveland! This next song came from the blackest depths of my despair, but then the band put a syncopated rhythm to it and now it’s a stupid dance anthem that everybody loves, which only compounds my agony! Are you ready to rock?!”*  
Cartoon by Guy Richards Smit

A man named Ben was crew boss, meaning that the captain reported to him. “The next few days, they’re talking about Santa Anas bringing winds up to sixty miles per hour,” he said. “Six. Zero. O.K.?”

From our position, more than a mile above sea level, we could see that the Eaton Fire was alive below us, wafting smoke from the low points between the mountains and creating an ethereal haze. Those steep canyons were too treacherous to hike into—a broken ankle would require an air evacuation—so the crew’s assignment was to create a mile-long containment line in the peaks west of Mount Wilson Observatory. We would remove a forty-foot swath of vegetation to insure that, even if winds energized the fire and it made another run, “we don’t get anything in Canada,” as a member of the incident command had put it. (Canada wasn’t in danger, but there were hundreds of miles of dry forest to our north.) There was also the risk that Santa Anas would blow the fire into another densely populated part of Los Angeles. The crew spread out, and sawyers began to cut the chaparral with their saws. Their partners, known as swampers, grabbed at underbrush and dragged it away.

To gain a better vantage point on the fire, Ben and I hiked a mile toward an improvised helispot at the end of the ridge. Ben, who was in his late thirties, was tall and lanky—the latter, he said almost apologetically, because he had lost a lot of weight last year while working the Park Fire, in Northern California, which burned some four hundred thousand acres. He said that in one month he had hiked more than a hundred miles to put in containment lines. He and the crew had done the same work that we were doing now, removing vegetation with chainsaws and hand tools, and had also strategically lit fires to starve the main fire of fuel. (Last year’s Smokehouse Creek Fire, which started in Texas, was even bigger than the Park Fire: it burned more than a million acres, making it a “gigafire.”)

Ben’s adult life has been defined by fire. He became a firefighter after serving in the military. “I’ve pretty much been on every megafire the last decade,” he told me. In 2018, he and his mother were living in Paradise, California, when intense winds and abundant fuel helped the Camp Fire grow into the deadliest and most destructive blaze in the state’s history. He had a hard-won understanding that wildfires are incredibly difficult to fight in windy conditions; his and his mother’s homes were destroyed. “I was fighting to protect another person’s house when mine burned,” he said. “There is a reason that old fire brigades used to show up with hooks. It’s almost impossible to save the house. You can only pull it down to try and stop the spread.”

One difference between the Camp Fire and the Eaton Fire, Ben said, is that the former happened in November, which is considered part of fire season. “Firefighters were prepared, and had more resources,” he told me. “The fact that this fire is able to burn like this in January—that’s *weird*.” January is typically one of Southern California’s雨iest months. Richard Seager, a climate scientist with Columbia University’s Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory, told me that researchers attributed the unusual conditions to “human-driven drying and warming”—climate change—combined with relentless Santa Ana winds (and “a possible nudge from an emerging La Niña”). These factors together, he said, helped fuel “an appalling inferno.”

Ben and I came to a dip at the top of a mountain ridge called a saddle. A steep slope, covered with charred loose rock, descended toward the fire. Hundreds of feet down, I could see a forested canyon; bluish smoke was pouring from the trees. So far, the fire was not pushing its way up toward us. A Chinook helicopter was circling, its rotors thumping, and we watched it dump an estimated eight hundred gallons of water on the trees. Beyond was the city of Los Angeles and, in the distance, the shimmering coast, where the Palisades Fire had killed at least ten and destroyed thousands of buildings.

Ben had hoped to spend part of January in an ecological preserve along the coast of central California, igniting piles of vegetation that he and his crew had painstakingly removed from an overgrown forest. The preserve was adopting an approach that is understood to make for a more resilient ecosystem: reintroducing fire to a landscape that hadn’t been allowed to burn in centuries. “When we started, you couldn’t see through the forest,” Ben said. “Now there’s fifteen-to-twenty-foot spacing between the trees. It’s beautiful.” We watched an airliner-size *VLAT*, short for Very Large Airtanker, fly in the direction of the Palisades Fire. It could carry thousands of gallons of pink fire retardant.

Around midday, I hiked a little foot trail through thickets of mountain whitethorn and scrub oak. I passed a crew of incarcerated firefighters who were blowing out—or removing nearly all the vegetation from—both sides of another saddle. (Fires often halt as they crest a mountain, but strong winds can help them jump over saddles and ignite vegetation on the other side.) The crew’s sawyers were running their saws at full power; the rest of the crew had their heads down in concentration as they cleared brush. Every

so often, one of the firefighters howled like a wolf and the crew howled back.

At one point, the superintendent of the incarcerated crew came over to chat with Ben. They compared observations on the weather and the fire. Then the superintendent asked Ben if he knew a young wildland firefighter who had learned the trade in prison and kept it up after his release. He had been killed by a falling tree a few years earlier.

“I hired him,” Ben said, surprised.

“He was one of mine,” the superintendent said. They both seemed moved to have made the connection, and for a while they just stood there and reminisced. “His mom kept saying at the funeral how much he loved this job,” Ben said.

The crew I was with was remarkably diverse. Some of its members had learned wildland firefighting in prison. One had heard about it from a cousin; another had seen a recruitment flyer. A rookie firefighter had just finished a year as a conscript in the Finnish military. The crew’s lead E.M.T. was a member of the Hopi Tribe. A man who’d worked for a hot-shot crew—essentially the special forces of firefighting—had been the first Black firefighter to be named its Rookie of the Year. Unusually, one of the sawyer teams was all-female.

One commonality among wildland firefighters is that they have an almost pathological aversion to the idea of being in an office, or really any type of building. Their fondest work memories always seem to be about “spiking out,” camping so far from any roads that food and supplies have to be air-dropped in. Yet wildland firefighters are increasingly being drawn out of forests and mountains and into the growing number of suburbs and cities that border the wilderness. Some of the most terrifying fires in the so-called wilderness-urban interface have occurred in the past three years. Devastating fires in Boulder County and Maui began after droughts intensified by climate change sucked the moisture out of vegetation, drastically increasing what’s called the energy-release component—the available energy, measured in B.T.U.s per square foot, within the flaming front of a fire. (On the day the Eaton Fire began, the energy-release component was setting records for the

season.) Both fires involved power lines in brush; intense winds then pushed their flames and embers through densely situated homes. Officials are investigating whether electrical infrastructure also started the Eaton Fire.

On my last day with the firefighting company, day eight of the wildfire, the Santa Ana winds were predicted to return in force. Meteorologists warned of a “particularly dangerous situation,” a rare official designation used only for the worst conditions. The winds would test the containment line that Ben’s crew had established; they were sent back into the mountains to make sure it held. At a mobile base that had been established nearby, powder and water were being mixed into tens of thousands of gallons of fire retardant, in anticipation of an extensive air-attack operation that was meant to paint the ridge pink.

On the hike in, I followed the most senior member of the crew, Joss, who grew up in South Central L.A. He was homeless for a long time before he became a wildland firefighter, a decade ago. Joss was a mentor to younger members of the crew, but he admitted that he was kind of a big kid himself. He loved cereal. At fire camp, he slept with a Baby Yoda pillow and a blanket he had brought from home. He liked to compete in *lucha libre* competitions.

This was Joss’s first time fighting fire in his home town, an experience he found surreal. A close family friend had been forced to evacuate her home in Altadena. “I love the camaraderie on fire,” he said. Our feet crunched through the dirt. “Everybody is from somewhere else. You have different political views, different religious beliefs. We’re all on the line together, working.”

We caught up with the rest of the crew, which had circled up for a briefing. A sudden gust hit us and we all hunched our shoulders, bracing ourselves. “There’s that wind,” Joss said. A crew member taking weather readings up on the ridge was now registering forty-five-mile-per-hour winds. Reconnaissance helicopters flew in to gauge the conditions, and it soon became clear that the planned air operation would be unsafe, and the retardant would probably scatter in the wind. “It’s going to look like kids finger-painting,” a voice said over the radio. A new plan was quickly

devised. A hot-shot crew would be sent into the canyon. They would put out as much of the heat as they could with hand tools and chainsaws.

Near the top of the ridge, the charred skeletons of shrubs suggested that the fire had made a fierce upslope run several days earlier. At first glance, the entire landscape looked grim and desolate. But hawks were gliding on air currents, hunting for prey. A peregrine falcon landed on a dead branch and stayed for a while. A lizard scampered over sharp, blackened rocks.

Satellite images of the Eaton Fire showed that the mountain chaparral had burned with characteristic intensity. In canyons at higher elevations, however, images showed streaks of green where trees had survived. This type of patchwork landscape is called a mosaic, and fire scientists have studied it extensively. Mosaics have been shown to promote biodiversity and create gaps between fuel sources, which can interrupt or slow the spread of subsequent fires.

I could hear the hot-shot crew's chainsaws roaring. It seemed impossible to reconcile the potentially positive ecological benefits of fire, up here, with the wreckage at the base of these mountains. Such a reconciliation would require a profound realignment in our society—a shared understanding that our lives and our infrastructure must coexist with fire.

The winds started to quiet down. I watched a helicopter complete its last water drop. The fire was still burning, but the line had held for another day. Before we hiked out, I spent a few minutes with Leo, a firefighter who was born and raised in East Hollywood. He was wearing oil-stained chaps and carrying a red container of chainsaw fuel. He reminded me of something I'd asked the crew earlier: Was there anything they wanted people to know about their work?

"It's devastatingly beautiful," Leo said. Sometimes the remote places he works strike him as sacred; he often wishes that he could show people scenes like this. A cold gale hit our backs and I gripped my helmet to keep it on my head. If I lost it down the side of the mountain, I wasn't getting it back.

Like many wildland firefighters, Leo was a seasonal employee, so he was laid off at the end of the 2024 fire season. The assumption has always been that the risk tails off as winter approaches. Leo took a temporary job up north to make ends meet, and when he heard about the Los Angeles fires he was hours away, installing cabinets with his dad. He couldn't believe that his own city was burning and he wasn't in a position to help. All he could think was, I wish I could be there.

Ten minutes later, he got a call telling him that crews were being mobilized. He left so quickly that he didn't pack any bedding; the first night, in a tent at fire camp, he had to wrap himself in every piece of clothing he had. Even then, he was cold. But the next day he started receiving grateful messages from friends in the area, and one of them drove over with a sleeping bag. "I've been fighting fire in California, up and down, for four years," he told me. "They finally see what I do." ♦

By Emily Witt  
By Emily Witt  
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[Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)

# The World-Changing Gaze of Celia Paul

Paul has spent nearly fifty years painting her family, her lovers, and herself in a single apartment. Each portrait reveals not just a person but the power of looking itself.

By [Karl Ove Knausgaard](#)



*In her new exhibition, "Colony of Ghosts," Paul bridges the past and the present. Photograph by Alice Zoo for The New Yorker*

It was the fifth of September, 2023. The street where I was standing was full of people, most of them on their way in or out of London's British Museum, which sat right behind me. The sky was perfectly blue, the air was warm, and the sun's rays, I had noticed only a few seconds before, glowed against my skin. Everything around me cried summer—the tourists wore shorts, T-shirts, skirts, sunlight flashed off glass and metal and made the white stone of the museum shine—but the sensation I had was of autumn. It wasn't the date, I wasn't thinking of the fact that it was September, it was something about the light, it had a different fullness, and that created a different space. It was as if summer, self-assured after having been allowed to rule unopposed for so long, still hadn't noticed that it was in a new place, and simply carried on as before.

I was there to meet Celia Paul. I had been interested in her paintings for a long time, in their distinctive combination of weightlessness and heaviness. The physical, material world that they depicted seemed light in some peculiar way, while their emotional presence was always heavy: the paintings were grounded in feelings. Usually it is the other way around, isn't it, the material world has weight, and the inner, the spiritual, the abstract are light, and ungraspable, really. There was another aspect of the paintings that fascinated me—namely, that on a certain level there was something timeless about them. The majority of the paintings were portraits, and not only were their subjects mostly depicted in a bare, neutral room, devoid of things or objects that might date it, they were also most often shown wearing plain, monotone, smocklike clothes. In the paintings that were not portraits, the most frequently recurring motif was water, and in particular sea surfaces, which move in time but cannot be fixed in it. This timelessness ran against another tendency, which was that most of the portraits Paul painted were of people close to her—especially her mother and four sisters, but also her father, her son, and the two partners in her life. In other words, we were in her time, Celia Paul's own time.

She lives on the top floor of the building I was standing in front of. I knew from her autobiography that she had lived there since the eighties, that she also worked there, and that only people she had explicitly invited were allowed to set foot inside. I had been invited, but even so I had to wipe the sweat from my palms before pressing the intercom button. A reply came immediately. The kindness in the voice was apparent even through the small, crackly speaker. There was a buzz, I went in and walked up four flights of stairs, slightly out of breath as I reached the top. The door was already open, and Celia Paul stood waiting in the hallway inside.

"I'm not a portrait painter," Paul once wrote. "If I'm anything, I have always been an autobiographer." She paints her life. This implies that she also paints her place. She was born in 1959 in India, where her parents were Christian missionaries, and one painting, "My First Home" (2016), shows the house she grew up in, shining forth with the luminosity of an early memory. Another painting, "My Father's House" (2020), shows the home the family moved to in the early eighties, when Paul's father was appointed Bishop of Bradford, in England. It depicts a stately, withdrawn structure, surrounded by green, under an all-encompassing light. Paul had been twenty-one at the

time, in her final year at the Slade School of Art, using her bedroom as a studio. It was there, she has said, that she became a real painter. Her father died just two years later, from a brain tumor.

Paul's central place, however, is the flat in London. A common motif is the museum building outside the windows, painted in countless variations. Another is the soaring BT Tower, it, too, visible through her windows, and the spire of St. George's, seen through a window on the other side of the flat. There are many pictures of a bed in a room, that is the room where Paul sleeps. Then, there are the portraits, which were largely painted in the apartment, and, of course, the many self-portraits, where she has stood alone in front of her easel and painted her own face.

When I followed her into the flat on this early-autumn day, it was therefore a little like stepping into a painting. I recognized the floor, worn and dark and made of linoleum, I recognized the plain, white walls, I recognized the window facing the museum, the light that fell through it. And Paul's face was so familiar that it might have belonged to one of my close friends. But—and this struck me at once—reality is always much more than that which can be fixed in images, infinitely more. The other's face continually changing, one's own thoughts in constant flux. The various surfaces, the way light is reflected off each of them, always shifting. The history of objects, and what they signal about status, class, the personality of their owner. Every single moment is so full of information that you could spend a lifetime surveying it. So what we do is look for patterns, for whatever can be fitted into a stable structure. It is a way of managing reality: we must be able to pull out a chair and sit without expending time on the chair itself. And why should we spend time on a chair, anyway? What point would there be in taking a closer look at it, in seeing what it is really like?

In 2020, Paul painted the same chair three times. It stands in an empty room, bathed in the light of a window to the right. Nearly every detail in the room is erased, the only things that can be discerned are the floor and the wall. It is a moment, but nearly all the information it contained has been removed.

The painting seems alive. The chair is not alive, the wall and the floor are not alive, and the light is not alive. And yet the painting seems just that, alive. This is, I think, because the painting consists of encounters. The chair

first meets the gaze of the painter, who paints a chair on a canvas. It emerges brushstroke by brushstroke, in a long-drawn-out moment, continually adjusted, and there are two chairs in play, one of them unchanging in a changeable moment, which is the chair in the room, and another changeable in an unchanging moment, which is the chair on the canvas. The painting is alive in the sense that it arises out of a process, led and corrected by the artist's gaze, but also by her ideas, emotions, and expectations, until she considers the painting finished and it is our gaze it encounters. We see not the chair in itself, as that is for sitting on, but the moment it represents, the here and now it lifts forth. Not the world, but our connection to the world.

Shouldn't someone have been sitting in that chair? In a strange way, the absence of a person reveals another presence, for, though the room is certainly empty, it vibrates with life, and it does so because someone sees it, and that someone exists in the painting, in its colors and shapes. Feelings have charged it, and when we look at it the gaze and the feelings, which lie latent in it, are released. Paul's self-portraits, which make up a considerable part of her œuvre, share this presence, but in them the presence is complicated, since the artist's gaze is not merely fused with the elements of the painting but articulated directly: the painter sees herself looking at us. What happens when the interior gazes at its own exterior and paints it, like a chair?

It is easy to think art that leans toward the autobiographical is first and foremost a representation of things or events. But the essential fact about art is that it is an event in itself. It is something that comes into being.

In her flat, Paul and I stood chatting for a short while in her living room, which was almost entirely empty of furniture, before she showed me into her studio, it, too, stripped of furniture. The floor was covered in paint specks, in the corner was a pile of old paint tubes and smocks. A couple of new portraits were mounted on easels. We looked at them for a long time. She asked me if I wanted some coffee, I said yes to that, and we went into the kitchen, which faced south and was full of light. A table stood there, along with some chairs, and the walls were full of family photographs. Paul was friendly, shy, her voice low and soft. She smiled a lot, often with downcast eyes. We talked about our children, and also about her grandchildren, we talked about the summer that had passed and about literature and artists.



*"The new skyscraper is an eyesore and the residents are jerks."*  
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

I asked her about Dostoyevsky’s “Crime and Punishment,” which she mentions in her autobiography. She talked about how gripping and terrifying it is, how alive, despite being a century and a half old. “Dostoyevsky’s writing makes me think of Francis Bacon’s portraits,” she said. “All the action seems to happen within a closed, claustrophobic space where the figures are garishly lit, like actors on a dark stage.”

I asked if there was something of Dostoyevsky in her paintings.

“When I paint interiors, I sometimes think of him, because my perspective is emotional rather than representational,” she said. “I always imagine the floorboards in a Dostoyevsky room to slope vertiginously, to echo the highly strung emotions of the characters. But my favorite writer is Proust. I think about him almost every day. How he weaves the present and past together.”

Paul had an exhibition coming up at the Victoria Miro gallery in London. It was called “Colony of Ghosts,” and it drew its title from a work she was going to paint, inspired by a famous photograph—it showed Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, and Michael Andrews, had I seen it? No, I hadn’t, and I went with her into the next room, where she looked for a book with the photo in it. She found it and handed it to me.

The photograph, titled “The Last Supper,” was taken by John Deakin in 1963. It wasn’t difficult to understand why it had become iconic. There they sat, three of the greatest British painters of the century—Bacon, Freud, and Auerbach—side by side in a Soho restaurant, at the start of the sixties, together with their now somewhat less famous but then just as well-known colleague Michael Andrews, in addition to a younger painter named Timothy Behrens, who sat for Freud at the time. The meal appears not to have begun yet, the napkins are still standing upright on the plates like small checkered sails, and a large loaf of bread lies unsliced on a platter. Andrews is seated to the far right, he is holding a cigarette and looking down in front of him with a smile on his lips. To his right sits Auerbach, he has a cigarette in his mouth, and he is holding out a match to the man next to him, that’s Bacon, who is bowing his head to light a cigarette. In front of Bacon is an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne. Next to him sits Freud, wearing a suit and tie and looking down at the table, as if set apart from everything around him. On Freud’s other side is the young Behrens, who appears to be wriggling uncomfortably in his chair while holding on to a glass of wine.

I knew that Paul had been in a lengthy relationship with Freud, and that she’d had a child with him, Frank, named for Auerbach. They had met when she was eighteen and studying at Slade. He was fifty-five and a visiting tutor there, a world-famous artist. Their relationship lasted for ten years. All artists must struggle to find their place; for Paul that struggle has been more complicated and, in a certain sense, more extreme because of her association with Freud. Her autobiography describes the struggle from within. “By writing about myself in my own words, I have made my life my own story,” she writes. “Lucian, particularly, is made part of my story rather than, as is usually the case, me being portrayed as part of his.”

So, for Paul, the picture she showed me wasn’t just an iconic photograph of some famous artists but a picture of people she’d had a deeply personal relationship to—taken when she was three years old, long before she knew them.

She said I could come back and look at the painting when it was done, if I wanted to.

I said I did.

So it was that six months later, in March, 2024, I stood in the street outside the British Museum and rang Paul's doorbell again. The air was cold, it couldn't have been more than forty or so degrees, although the sun was shining.

I was excited about what I was about to see. It felt as if I had been initiated into something, a process from the moment when nothing concrete existed, just an idea about a future painting, to when it manifested itself as a physical reality in the world. And it wasn't just any painting, it was a painting of a time that no longer existed—four of the five men in the photograph were dead. Finally, the men were painters, three of them still hugely significant. Celia Paul was a painter, and, no matter how self-effacing she was as a person, it was impossible, I thought, that there wouldn't be an element of competition, an element of combat, in the work, if only as negation, something she had to shake off in order to be firmly rooted in herself.

One of the best and most striking passages in Paul's autobiography deals with artistic jealousy, as it unfolded when she was a teen-ager at boarding school and became close friends with a girl named Linda, whom she drew and painted with; a fierce competition developed, which culminated when Paul discovered a painting her friend had made in secret. It was very beautiful, and Paul writes, "the surge of jealousy I felt was sickening and I thought I was going to pass out." These are powerful, intense emotions, and I think all artists have felt them. There is the abyss of self-doubt and insecurity on one hand, the desire to create something unique and universally admired on the other, and jealousy and envy in the middle. We are in the netherworld of emotions here, and no matter how existentially complete a work of art may be, no matter how rich and life-giving it appears, it has arisen out of something incomplete, where the mean, banal, and petty-minded live side by side with the most sublimely visionary thought, and where it isn't clear which of them holds precedence.



*"I need to know the person well, or at least feel some emotional connection, for a portrait to succeed,"* Paul says. Photograph by Alice Zoo for *The New Yorker*

But before that? In his book about Francis Bacon, the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze writes about “the painting before painting.” There is no such thing as an empty canvas, something is always already there—historical ways of painting, contemporary ways of painting, your own way of painting, clichés, the culture’s entire repertoire of motifs and methods. If you are going to paint a man or a chair in front of you, you have to force your way through the whole thicket of inner images, as the painting has to emerge in its own right, and for this to happen it can’t be governed by what was there before, it has to be present in the moment. All art, I dare to affirm, is about getting to that point. And here self-doubt and inadequacy offer an access. Not being able, not knowing—that is the starting point of creation. Such a thing as a new beginning, a place emptied of the past, of course doesn’t really exist, but the moment exists, and if we are able to disregard ourselves we can become a part of it instead of it being a part of us.

This is what I see in Paul’s “Ghost of a Girl with an Egg” (2022), which is not just an obvious reference to Lucian Freud’s “Naked Girl with Egg,” from four decades earlier—it is a copy of it, with an extremely complex relationship among painter and model and painting. Freud’s painting depicts a naked woman reclining on a bed, one hand pressed to her breast, the other resting under a cheek, and on a small table in the foreground there is a bowl with a boiled egg sliced in half. The model is Celia Paul, twenty at the time

the picture was painted. As in so many of Freud's nudes, the attention is directed toward the skin, all its surfaces, folds, and curves, and still, fifty years on, there is something shockingly direct about them, devoid of beautification, naked the way animals are naked, but with human bashfulness intact. When Paul paints the same motif more than forty years later, the pose is the same, the egg is the same, but the light is nocturnal, the colors pale, clouded. The body is white and ghostly, quite without the original painting's brutal attention to reality. While the gaze in Freud's painting is fairly neutral, the gaze in Paul's painting is not. It appears, rather, to be charged—with what, it is up to the viewer to determine, but in my eyes the gaze is filled with distaste, a kind of withheld dismay. The most interesting difference lies in the bodily presence, which is so much fainter in Paul's painting—because of the light, which in Freud's picture falls in the daytime, and also because the corporeal in Paul's painting is about to fade away, as if it isn't reality she has painted but a memory of it. We see Paul's gaze seeing Freud's gaze on her. And not only is the gaze doubled, and the roles reversed from model to painter, but Paul is also painting as Freud here, she is retracing his steps with her brush, becoming him—she is a ghost model, he is a ghost painter. The result is frightening, as it must be when the boundaries between usually distinct entities—past and present, art and reality, power and powerlessness—become unclear.

A model is of course an object, but in Paul's paintings the object, this person sitting on the chair or reclining on the sofa, is drawn into a relationship, and this relationship is often the real subject of the picture.

"I need to know the person well, or at least feel some emotional connection, for a portrait to succeed," Paul told me. "I started painting my mother when I was seventeen. I realized immediately that I had found my subject. I painted her again and again—for over thirty years she sat for me twice a week. Over the years, the portraits of her deepened and became more compassionate. When my four sisters sit for me, there is a particular atmosphere due to the silence in the room. They are remembering my mother—who had sat with them for me in earlier portraits—and they are remembering their childhood, as well as thoughts about their own children and families."

Two major paintings in Paul's œuvre are undoubtedly "Family Group" (1984-86) and "My Sisters in Mourning" (2015). Both are group portraits,

the first of her mother and four sisters seated on a bed, the second of her sisters. In the first, the mother forms the center of the painting. She sits in the middle of the bed looking out of the picture, her hands folded over a long multicolored skirt. The daughters seated around her are all looking in different directions. One is looking at her, another lies with her head on a pillow and her eyes closed, a third gazes away to the left, and the last looks down before her. The five women are also distinct in their clothing and facial features, the picture abounds in clear, individualizing detail, and one might think that this would pull the painting in many different directions, creating a visual unrest, but for some reason the opposite effect arises, these five women are united. We see a little of the room where the bed is standing, and the feeling of space is heightened by a mirror on the wall behind it, but the women take up almost the entire surface of the painting. It was made after the death of Paul's father. In the painting, there is caring (the one who is looking at the mother), there is rest (the one lying with eyes closed), and there is loneliness (the one looking away, the one looking down, the mother gazing into space). But there is a strong sense of community, too, and that is what the painting radiates. That they leave one another in peace, allow one another to be alone, is precisely what unites them in the inverted logic of loss. It is an astounding painting about grief.

"My Sisters in Mourning," painted thirty years later, shares the same motif and theme but is very different in its execution. The four sisters sit close together, dressed in similar long, loose, and featureless dresses, all with their hands in their laps, against a background of subdued color. None of the visual information found in "Family Group" is present here—it could be anywhere, anytime. The only thing that differentiates the sisters is their facial features, but those are not very pronounced, either. Another unifying factor is the light, which comes in from the left, falls upon the back of the figure seated at the edge, erases the contours of her dress, lies around her head like a halo, lights up the cheek of the next figure, and also shines, somewhat more muted, upon the faces of the last two.

The difference between the two pictures is striking. They depict the same sisters, gathered in the same situation—sorrow at the death of a loved one—but in the first picture the emphasis is on external differences, and the sense of fellowship comes from within. In the other picture, it is as if the fellowship is marked by external similarities—the dresses, the poses, the

light that shines upon them all. None of the women are looking at one another, they are sitting each in her separate world, looking inward. It is, I imagine, more an image of grief as an entity, the grief that has taken possession of these people, the way grief has always taken possession of people, while the first picture is of a particular situation of grieving, it belongs to the people we see, there and then. If one takes a step back and regards the pictures at a greater distance, there is one thing they have in common: there are no sharp edges between the persons in either group, there are no visible conflicts, no obvious competition, no one is asserting herself at the expense of anyone else.

When I visited Paul the first time, and she told me about the picture she was planning to paint, she mentioned this dynamic, how different the group portrait of the four artists would have to be from the group portraits she had painted of her sisters. If a friendship existed between the artists, it was hardly without competition, envy, egoism, and idiosyncrasy.

As on the previous occasion, only a few seconds elapsed from when I pressed the intercom button until the sound of her voice came over the speaker. And, as before, she received me in the hallway with a smile. We chatted for a few minutes about what had happened since, and then she brought me into the studio to show me the painting.

There wasn't just one painting in there, there were three.

The first depicted four of the painters at the restaurant in Soho in 1963. But all the details of the photograph had been eliminated; in the painting they were seated behind an empty table in an empty room, and they were sitting very erect, side by side. Nothing was going on between them, nothing was going on in front of them, it was just them—Freud, Bacon, Auerbach, Andrews. All four were peering straight ahead, out of the picture. The wall behind them was greenish, and the table, wavily painted, was green in the shadows. The only object that remained from the photograph was a round painting that had hung on the wall. Here, it resembled a porthole, as if the four were sitting aboard a ship. All that green gave me an underwater feeling. What kind of world they were in wasn't easy to say, other than that it wasn't this one. They looked out at us from the past, that sunken world, the realm of the dead.

Directly opposite this picture, which was large, there hung another newly painted picture. It was a self-portrait, also large, and it depicted Paul in a color-flecked painter's smock, reclining on a green chaise longue. Visually, the smock dominated the image—with all its spots of color, it resembled an abstract painting itself—but the emotional center was the face. It was painted with clear, coarse brushstrokes, typical of Paul's self-portraits—the head small, the mouth broad, the hair dark and tight—and the face was turned toward the viewer. But it was as if the eyes looked past, at something else. They lacked the self-examining quality that so many of her self-portraits have. This was not a soul laid bare but one that sat there and let something come to it.

Hanging like this, it was as if Freud, Bacon, Auerbach, and Andrews were peering at Paul from the depths of that lost world, while she peered back at them from this one. So much was in motion in that room. Death, the past, art, longing, all of it sent whirling and made current by the two paintings. The men were painted as they had looked at the beginning of the sixties, at the height of their careers, but although they are next to one another and practice the same profession, the picture doesn't radiate any sense of fellowship, they are sitting there singly. The figures' passivity and the fact that they are lined up in a row made me think of defendants seated in the dock. The presence of the self-portrait, the painter who sits back to look at her work, complicates the image, for we see Freud, Bacon, Auerbach, and Andrews the way she sees them, but we also see her seeing, and that creates a distance in her gaze upon them, opening up a space for the viewer.

The third painting was of a tree, almost explosively present.

I stood for a long time looking at these paintings, which charged one another in such peculiar yet intense ways. They took hold of the room, and they took hold of me. Not until we left the studio and went into the kitchen to drink coffee and chat about this and that, as we had done the first time, did the impressions of the paintings slowly dissolve, for there everything was in motion, the words, the thoughts, the light, our hands, and reality's jumble of unsurveyable detail, new at every glance. But now, as I write this nearly eight months later, in October, 2024, it is the paintings that I remember, and the feelings they left in me. Of course this is so, because they depicted

presence—of the past, of the painter, of the tree—and what you have once been close to stays with you. ♦

*(Translated, from the Norwegian, by Ingvild Burkey.)*

*This is drawn from “[Celia Paul: Works 1975-2025.](#)”*

By Ben McGrath  
By Ian Buruma  
By Jackson Arn  
By Oren Peleg  
By Jennifer Wilson  
By Daniel Immerwahr  
By Katy Waldman  
By Michael Schulman  
By Arthur Krystal  
By E. Tammy Kim  
By Teju Cole  
By Anna Russell

By [Jon Lee Anderson](#)

A few days after the Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad fled into exile, in December, an elderly woman sat on the sidewalk outside a morgue in Damascus. Her head wrapped in a scarf, she rocked back and forth and clasped her hands, wailing about what she had lost to Assad's regime. "Help me," she called. "They took my sons. Where are they?"

A crowd of people stepped gingerly around her. They were there not to search for the woman's sons but to mourn another of Assad's victims. They had been gathering for an hour or more—a few family members at first, but eventually hundreds of friends and sympathizers. Finally, a coffin was carried from the morgue and placed on the roof of a minivan, which had a photograph of the deceased fixed to the front bumper.

In recent days, the same image had gone up around the streets of Damascus. Plastered on walls and electrical poles, it depicted a slender man in his forties, with a gaunt, boyish face, high cheekbones, and all-consuming eyes, staring straight at the camera with a fearless expression. The man, Mazen al-Hamada, is regarded as a martyr by the rebels who deposed Assad after thirteen scourging years of civil war. "Mazen is an icon of the revolution," one activist told me. "We will teach our children about him."

Hamada was not a fighter. He served the rebellion by proclaiming the bloody facts of Assad's treatment of his own people. His work as an activist had landed him in prison several times, including a final stint, starting in 2020, from which he did not emerge. After the rebels surged into the city, his body was discovered in the morgue of a military hospital, along with those of forty other victims of the regime. A coroner found that Hamada had died of "the shock of pain." In other words, he had been tortured to death.

During Assad's rule, official autopsies of prisoners routinely said that "the patient died when his heart stopped," eliding the specifics of torture. Hamada knew about these torments intimately, and during the war he travelled to Europe and the United States and gave searing testimony about Assad's dungeons. In his appearances, he recounted how he was hung from handcuffs hooked to metal bars and beaten; how his ribs were broken when a torturer jumped on his back; how his penis was placed in a clamp and squeezed until he feared that it would be severed; how guards repeatedly

sodomized him with a metal pole. As Hamada spoke, he sometimes wept openly; videos of the testimony are excruciating to watch. He noted that he had witnessed others die from similar treatment, and vowed to see his torturers brought to justice, if it was the last thing he did before he died.

Few other Syrians who made it out of the country dared to speak of their experiences; most feared that their relatives back home would also be arrested. Hamada, less cautious, spent six years telling the world what happened inside Assad's network of political prisons. Then, in 2020, he returned to Damascus, for reasons that his loved ones are still debating. Within hours of his arrival, he was detained, and vanished into the same prisons he had spoken of abroad.



*Hundreds of friends and supporters gathered for Hamada's memorial, in Damascus.*

During his memorial, his coffin was secured on the van and draped in the Syrian flag—not the one that hung from Assad's palace but an earlier version, with three red stars, that had been revived as an emblem of the revolution. The van pulled into the street, and the crowd followed, muttering lamentations. A few blocks away was a mosque, where handbills printed with the same image of Hamada's face hung alongside defaced posters of government officials. As men carried the coffin up the stairs to the mosque, the chanting grew louder: "Mazen, be at peace—we will continue the struggle." While a cleric recited the prescribed prayers for a martyr, new

mourners arrived, weeping and chanting and holding up photographs of their own lost relatives.

When the coffin was brought back into the street, the procession moved on toward the walled Old City, at the heart of Damascus. By now, mourners filled the street, and the mood was cathartic: people chanted and yelled, and a few fired shots into the air. Many held up phones and filmed as they walked. It was the first time in thirteen years that they had been able to celebrate a dissident without being arrested, or even fired on by snipers. Hamada's death, paradoxically, had provided some of his countrymen with a first breath of freedom.

At Al-Hijaz Square, the procession came to an end, and the van took Hamada's body out past the edge of town to the Najha cemetery, which sprawls across acres of rolling land near the Damascus airport. It was an inconvenient place for mourners to visit, but the city's main cemetery had long since been filled up. At the edge of Najha, the regime had sent earthmovers to excavate huge slits in the ground: unmarked mass graves, dug to accept Assad's victims.

The scale of Syria's bloodshed, and of the regime's repression, is unique among modern conflicts. The war is thought to have killed an appalling six hundred and twenty thousand people, from a population of twenty-two million. Fourteen million more were forced from their homes and fled to safety, either inside Syria or abroad. As many as a hundred and fifty thousand people disappeared, and presumably died at the hands of Assad's torturers and executioners. Most probably ended up in mass graves.

The families of the missing usually had no information about their loved ones. In the peculiar horror of the Syrian system of terror, it was widely believed that merely inquiring about detainees could worsen their mistreatment and even hasten their death. During the hours after Assad fled into exile, though, the guards at his prisons abandoned their posts, and inmates poured out. A few Syrians were reunited with their long-lost relatives. Most were not.

For more than a week, bereft people camped out on the grounds of Sednaya, a notorious prison on the outskirts of Damascus, and hunted for a rumored

underground “red prison.” Some dug holes, and even blasted through concrete, in a frantic search for relatives who might still be held in the darkness below. The red prison seemed like a myth born of desperate hope, and most likely it was. In the end, no underground chambers with men alive in them were found at Sednaya, or anywhere else in Syria.

Mazen al-Hamada’s relatives learned of his death in a more prosaic way: photographs from the military morgue circulated on social media. Eight days after the fall of Damascus, I visited his brother Fawzi’s family at their home, a simple but comfortable apartment furnished with brown sofas and warmed by an old-fashioned gas heater. Its only adornment was a framed picture of Mazen, the same one that had been on the handbills.



*“Well, it’s the Renaissance and I’m a man, ergo I’m a Renaissance man. But, yes, I mainly sell cheese.”*  
Cartoon by Will Santino

The Hamadas—Fawzi; his wife, Majida; and their adult son, Jad—were still dressed in black mourners’ clothes, but they were hospitable, offering small cups of bitter coffee and dates stuffed with walnuts. Fawzi, a thin man with glasses and stubble, had a veiled, inward manner and an almost inaudible voice. He spoke some English but preferred to let Jad, an open-faced young man with a tidy ponytail, interpret.

They told me that, when Jad had first looked at the photographs from the morgue, he saw a man with a yellowed face, frozen in a horrifying rictus,

and feared that it was his uncle. He passed his phone to Fawzi, who immediately recognized the face. The next day, they travelled to the morgue. It was Mazen, without question; there were two telltale freckles on his right cheek and a scar on one eyebrow. After they identified the body, a doctor told them, to their immense sadness, that Mazen had likely died no more than ten days before; he had still been alive when the rebels began their triumphant advance toward the capital.

As Jad spoke in schoolbook English, Fawzi listened and nodded or whispered corrections. Every now and then, he drew on a vape. Majida sat with an immovably serious expression; she told me later that it had been a long time since she was able to let down her guard, or to feel any kind of happiness. Jad sat close to his parents, putting his arm around them for comfort. Occasionally, he stroked their backs or shoulders, as if brushing away imaginary dust.

They told me that Mazen was not their only missing family member. In all, five close relatives, including a nephew and a brother-in-law, were believed dead. That week, they had learned that another of Fawzi's brothers, imprisoned years before, had died in 2015; a former cellmate of his had brought the news. No one knew where his body was, but the family believed the cellmate's account. Fawzi had been imprisoned himself, and he knew what happened to men on the inside.

Fawzi explained that he, too, had been a dissident, engaged in anti-government protests. But, as the country descended into civil war, he had made the opposite choice from his brother. While Mazen travelled abroad to draw attention to the rebels' cause, Fawzi and his family went into internal exile: they found a place to live in a nondescript neighborhood where nobody knew them and remained there for thirteen years, hoping to evade notice and stay alive. For Fawzi, the trip to identify his brother's body marked the end of a clandestine life. It was the first time he had left his neighborhood since the war began.

When I asked Fawzi how he remembered his brother, he thought for a moment and said, "Mazen had a beautiful soul." Brightening, as if recalling his brother's image, he added, "He also had a beautiful smile."

The two grew up in Deir ez-Zor, the largest city in northeastern Syria, a proud, ancient place on the banks of the Euphrates. There has been a settlement at Deir ez-Zor for at least eleven thousand years, and through the centuries the city has been fought over by a succession of armed invaders. In 1915, it was the last destination for Armenians forced into the desert by the Turks' genocidal campaign against them. Survivors credited the city's mayor and its citizens with providing sanctuary; helping people in need is both an Arab custom and a local tradition.

Mazen al-Hamada was born in 1977 into a large and influential clan. There was money to be made in the region—from cotton, wheat, and, more recently, oil—and his father had built a thriving business as a livestock trader, able to comfortably support seventeen children. “Mazen was the youngest, and he was spoiled by our father,” Fawzi said fondly. The family kept homing pigeons, which Mazen loved. As he got older, he was able to indulge a taste in motorcycles and well-tailored clothes.

The Hamada siblings went into middle-class professions, Fawzi told me: “teachers, doctors, and so forth.” Most were also anti-government activists, a family tradition that went back to the time of Hafez al-Assad, Bashar’s father. Hafez seized power in 1970, and built a dictatorship that favored his minority Shiite sect, the Alawites. He sustained his power through stringent control of the socialist Baath Party and its military and intelligence apparatuses, and by encouraging a cult of personality. In 1982, the Muslim Brotherhood staged an uprising in the city of Hama. Hafez responded with a merciless campaign that, within a few weeks, destroyed much of the city and killed at least forty thousand civilians.

Fawzi told me wryly that the Assad regime had repeatedly derailed his efforts to build a life. An early job as a lab technician was interrupted by five years of compulsory military service. He’d gone to college to study French, but was imprisoned for taking part in protests; when he was released, four years later, he resolved to do something more practical, so he became a medical researcher. With evident pride, he told me that he had participated in “the fight against AIDS,” as a blood specialist in a screening facility run by the Ministry of Health.

Throughout, Fawzi remained engaged in politics. He joined a reformist party, which eventually merged into a coalition called the National Democratic Rally. After the crushing attacks in Hama, the regime had maintained a state of emergency, which gave it cover to suppress civic freedoms in the name of security. The Rally called to end the emergency, and was swiftly punished; one of the coalition leaders spent eighteen years in solitary confinement. Still, the Hamadas retained hope. Fawzi said that Mazen “grew up listening to his older brothers talk about making Syria a free and democratic country.”

After high school, Mazen studied petroleum engineering, and eventually got a job at Schlumberger, a multinational company that Syria’s government had brought in to drill oil. The business was hugely profitable—at one point, petroleum accounted for a quarter of the government’s revenue—but there was labor unrest at the company, where the workers were trying to organize a union. Mazen took the side of the workers. Fawzi said that government agents threatened him, but he didn’t back down, and the union ultimately won most of its demands.

This was an unusual conflict in a country where dissent had been crushed, and it attracted attention in the international media. It also apparently attracted resentment from Syrian officials, but for the time being Mazen was not persecuted, and he lived comfortably. “Mazen’s income was good,” Fawzi said. “He was generous. He was a very social person and formed a lot of strong friendships. He liked to have a drink and throw parties.” Fawzi recalled the period as a kind of golden age for his brother. In 2000, though, Hafez al-Assad died. His son Bashar took power, and in time proved to be an even more vicious tyrant than his father.

Bashar was never intended to lead the country. The heir apparent was his older brother Bassel—a military commander and an accomplished horseman whom the regime’s loyalists sometimes referred to as the Golden Knight. Bashar was an ophthalmology student in London, a weak-chinned introvert who was widely seen as a bit insubstantial. But, in 1994, Bassel died in a high-speed car crash, and Bashar was summoned home to be groomed for power. When his father died, he was made the head of the Baath Party and the head of the armed forces. Though he was only thirty-four, six years too

young to be President, the parliament accommodatingly lowered the minimum age.

Bashar ran for office as the sole candidate and was elected to a seven-year term; in the next election, he won with an implausible ninety-eight per cent of the vote. He spoke of building a more equitable Syria, but not much really changed. The Assad clan and its friends remained in control of the security and intelligence agencies, as well as the most lucrative parts of the private sector.

The revolution began with an inexplicable overstep. In 2011, in the southern city of Daraa, a group of teen-age boys were caught painting anti-government graffiti on a wall, and, rather than simply reprimand them, secret police tortured them to death. The news inflamed an already restive populace. Protesters gathered in cities across the country, and Fawzi and Mazen got involved. “There was a soccer game under way in Deir ez-Zor, and our team tried to protest,” Fawzi said. The regime squelched the demonstration, but that only encouraged the local youth to take up the cause.

In the beginning, the rallies in Deir ez-Zor were small, with groups of forty or fifty gathering to shout “Freedom!” and “The Syrians are one!” The protests were held on Friday, the day of prayer, so that people could attend after services. “They lasted only thirty minutes, after which everyone would return home, in order to stay safe,” Fawzi said. But the brothers were working to expand the movement. Mazen recruited protesters, then filmed events; he posted the videos to an online news site that he’d helped create, and sent them on to international television channels.



*"Who am I going to gossip with about our couple friends?"*  
Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

As local demonstrators coördinated with allies in a nearby neighborhood, the crowds grew. Before long there were protests every day, and demonstrators were staying on the street till evening. Majida attended the rallies, and to her alarm saw that her daughters had sneaked there, too.

Fawzi recalled that the protests in Deir ez-Zor led to a huge event in the central square, in which some twenty thousand people assembled and a statue of Bassel al-Assad was knocked to the ground. Revolutionary slogans spread across the country; people gathered to chant “Get out, Bashar” and sing “Pay your blood for freedom.” The regime was threatened, and its response escalated rapidly: it sent security men to menace and detain protesters, and sometimes ordered snipers to shoot into the crowds. Fawzi was arrested, and by the time he was released the Army had taken over Deir ez-Zor.

Fearing that he would be assassinated, Fawzi fled to Damascus to live in hiding. His instinct proved correct: soon after he left, an Army tank rolled up to the family’s house, and officers emerged to ask where Fawzi was. Majida said that she didn’t know, and when security men returned later she told them the same thing. Eventually, to keep up the ruse, she filed for divorce, claiming that Fawzi had abandoned her.

Mazen was also arrested, twice, and though he was held for only a couple of weeks, it was clear that he had become a target. He followed Fawzi to Damascus, taking care not to let the regime track their interactions. They lived apart, with Mazen staying at the home of one of their sisters, and they avoided cell phones, which could be tapped or traced. They communicated only when they could meet face to face and make certain that they had not been followed.

The political uprising quickly turned into an armed insurrection. As the regime besieged cities where rebels had dug in, the brothers joined an underground relief effort for trapped civilians. In March, 2012, Mazen and two of his nephews were in a café, meeting a contact to organize a shipment of baby formula to Daraa, when regime agents burst in, handcuffed them, and forced them into an S.U.V. “I had no idea where we were going,” Mazen told my colleague Ben Taub in an interview a few years later. “The whole way, they were telling us, ‘We’re going to execute you.’ ”

They were taken to a detention center operated by Air Force intelligence at a sprawling airfield in Mezzeh, on the western outskirts of Damascus. Mazen managed to call Fawzi to get help paying a bribe. “He asked us to send fifty thousand Syrian pounds,” about nine hundred dollars at the time, “which we managed to get to him.” Later, Mazen paid two hundred thousand pounds to his interrogators, in the hope of better treatment.

Paying bribes to Assad’s henchmen was part of the ritual of repression. Relatives were sometimes able to free their loved ones, but often they failed, and had to live with the knowledge that they had helped enrich their tormentors. For Mazen’s family, the bribes were a partial success. He did not escape brutal torture, but he was eventually sent to recuperate at a military hospital in Damascus, and was then allowed to go to a civilian prison. After a few months, he was brought to court, where he gave what may have been his first testimony about his mistreatment: with the judge watching, he took off his shirt to show the evidence of cigarette burns, welts, and broken ribs. The judge, apparently moved, released him.

Mazen had spent some fifteen months in custody, but he was extraordinarily lucky. According to Fawzi, the two nephews who were arrested with him couldn’t work the system, so they were sent to Sednaya, which by then had

become a virtual death camp. The Association of Detainees and Missing Persons of Sednaya Prison later estimated that at least thirty thousand people had been executed there between the beginning of the war and 2018—an average of ten every day for nearly a decade. Mazen’s nephews were apparently among them.

The Hamadas, sure that Mazen would inevitably be picked up again, persuaded him to leave the country. He set off on a well-established smugglers’ route. He crossed the border into Turkey, took an inflatable boat across the Mediterranean to the Greek islands, then went on to the European mainland, where borders were porous enough to cross on foot. After several months of travel, he arrived in the Netherlands, where one of his sisters was living.

Mazen was safe in Europe, but the civil war had grown more inflamed. Regional powers were getting involved, and the rebel forces were increasingly divided between secular freedom fighters and Islamist combatants. *ISIS* had swept into the country in 2014, seizing the city of Raqqa and pronouncing it the capital of a new caliphate. The city became the headquarters of a campaign of death and abuse, which included public executions, videotaped decapitations of foreign hostages, and slave auctions of captive Yazidi girls and women. *ISIS* soon surrounded Deir ez-Zor, less than eighty miles away, and launched a siege that dragged on for more than three years. The U.N. carried out hundreds of aerial food drops, and nearly half the civilian population was able to flee, but hundreds died, and much of the city was destroyed.

Deir ez-Zor was also heavily bombed by Russian warplanes, which had been called in to help Assad’s troops. Russian planes also repeatedly struck around the rebel-held city of Aleppo, and, after a devastating air raid there in 2018, a deal was reached allowing rebels and their families to evacuate to a safe zone on the Turkish border. Afterward, the Assad regime reassumed control of most of the rest of Syria. By then, citizens had begun fleeing, in a vast exodus that eventually included three million migrants to Turkey and more than nine hundred thousand to Germany.

Perversely, the flow of refugees to the West helped turn public opinion against intervening in the war. It coincided with an upsurge of Islamist terror

attacks and a seemingly unstoppable flow of migrants from Afghanistan, Iraq, and parts of Africa. In places like Freiburg, where a group of predominantly Syrian immigrants participated in a gang rape that became a major news story, the influx fuelled security fears and anti-immigrant sentiment. In Europe and the U.S., far-right politicians fulminated that the West was under siege.

Still, as more refugees emerged and related their experience, it was becoming harder for even skeptical observers to deny the atrocities being carried out by Assad's regime. A year before Hamada fled to Europe, a former Syrian military officer had made the same journey, bringing with him fifty-three thousand digital images of dead people whom it had been his job to photograph in military hospitals in Damascus. The files provided evidence that some eleven thousand prisoners had been tortured to death or executed in the city's intelligence prisons—including the one in which Mazen had been held.

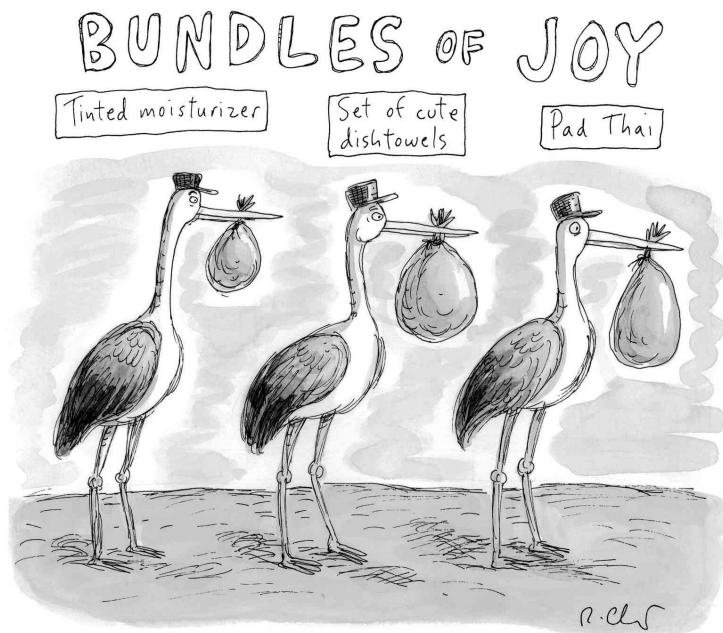
The officer remained anonymous, identifying himself only as Caesar, but experts quickly verified his photographs—documentary proof of systematic brutality. The images ultimately formed the basis for a presentation delivered in the U.S. Congress, the European Parliament, and the United Nations, put together by the Syrian Emergency Task Force, a U.S.-based agency that sought to raise awareness about the regime.

The S.E.T.F.'s director, a Syrian American named Mouaz Moustafa, met Mazen in 2015, on a trip to the Netherlands. "He had been in touch and told me he knew who Caesar was and that he could help identify some of the people in his photographs," Moustafa recalled, on a recent Zoom call from Washington, D.C.

Moustafa was cautious at first, but Mazen impressed him as sincere, and his information was detailed and credible. "He had survived this ordeal that no one should ever have to endure," Moustafa said. "It was scary." The two met with Stephen Rapp, who was then the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues, at a hotel near Amsterdam's Schiphol airport. In the meeting, Mazen explained that he had been treated for his injuries in the military hospitals where Caesar had taken photographs.

Mazen began working with the S.E.T.F. “He became like family, really,” Moustafa said. As the organization travelled with the evidentiary trove of Caesar’s photographs, Mazen gave it a human face. He was a charismatic presence: dapper, engaging, and ebullient when he wasn’t talking about torture. Moustafa organized meetings with a long list of policymakers. On just one morning in 2017, they met with Senators Marco Rubio, Richard Blumenthal, and John Boozman, as well as staffers on the Appropriations Committee. Natalie Larrison, the S.E.T.F.’s Arkansas-based director for humanitarian projects, recalled recently, “We spent days together in Congress, where he spoke to everyone, and he had everyone in tears. He was the most effective speaker we had on behalf of the Syrian experience.”

Mazen’s appearances were also effective in raising the profile of the S.E.T.F., and he agreed to an endless series of appearances. There were trips to Boston and Chicago, media interviews, and talks at universities, churches, and high schools. In Europe, he met with politicians and members of the European Parliament, relating over and over what he had endured. In 2017, Sara Afshar, a British filmmaker, released a documentary called “Syria’s Disappeared,” which brought Mazen’s story to audiences worldwide. In the film, he sits with Afshar in a kitchen and reenacts his torture, almost physically reliving the experience, until he begins to weep before the camera.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Larrison said that Mazen was still suffering the effects of years of torment. “He was fun and lively to be with, but there was a lot of up and down,” she told me. “He got really excited listening to Syrian revolutionary songs and recalling happy family moments, but also shared heartbreak things that were taking place in his home town.” She remembered a moment when Mazen heard that the farm where his family kept pigeons had been destroyed by bombing. “That *really* broke his heart,” she said.

In the Netherlands, the government gave Mazen asylum and found him an apartment. Sakir Khader, a young Palestinian Dutch photographer who befriended him, recalled that Mazen would make him tea, and they would go to the beach together. “He was traumatized, but he was always funny. He would say things in his Deir ez-Zor accent.” Khader laughed, remembering, “He’d say, ‘We’re going to go back and we’re going to *fuck* Bashar al-Assad.’”

Still, Mazen was increasingly unsettled. Between his trips to offer testimony, the Dutch state offered to pay him for community service, including gardening work. The arrangement proved unviable. Khader said, “It wasn’t the humiliation of it that bothered him—it was that he hadn’t recovered from what they had done to him in Syria. He was paranoid. He thought people were looking to harm him. He *couldn’t* work! His home was his safe place.” He went to a therapist, but it seemed to have little effect. “It was like he was still there in Syria—death was in his eyes,” Khader said. “His body was here, but his soul was not. It had gone long ago.”

One afternoon in Damascus, I visited one of Assad’s most notorious prisons: Branch 251 of the Syrian General Intelligence Directorate. The facility, known as Al-Khatib, sits incongruously at the edge of a community park in a predominantly Christian neighborhood. The park is surrounded by small apartment buildings and middle-class amenities: there is a tailor’s shop and a small café, and not far away is a florist, a dog-groomer, a snooker club, and a gym. To create a prison there, the regime had seized two apartment buildings, closed off the streets with iron gates, and then converted the park into an open-air garage and refuelling spot for vehicles. Residents of the other buildings were free to come and go, as long as they identified themselves to the perimeter guards.

On my visit, a handful of long-haired rebels were watching over the entrance. One led me down into the dark maw of an underground cellblock, which connected the two buildings. There was a tiny cell, its walls painted deep red and carved with graffiti, where prisoners who were to be executed were kept. Next to it was an identical cell, painted black. If you were put in the black cell, the guard said, you would never leave it alive. He pointed out blindfolds, handcuffs, and torture instruments that had been left lying around. There was a tool that seemed purpose-built for stabbing—about a foot long, with a curved handle and a steel blade filed into the shape of a talon. Not far away was a box of metal spikes.

Outside, several elderly men sat in the sunlight, having tea with the rebel guards. They lived in the neighborhood, they said, waving to nearby apartment buildings. I asked if they had ever been inside Al-Khatib, and they shook their heads. “Not until Assad left, the other day,” one said. Did they know what went on inside? They shook their heads again.

One of the men was a widower in his seventies, retired from running a chemical-dye business. He invited me for coffee in his living room, a pleasant space with framed family portraits and side tables set with embroidered doilies. He had got a good deal on the place, he explained: he had been able to buy a big apartment, with a balcony overlooking the park, for much less than it would have cost elsewhere. I noted that one of the living-room windows looked out at the upper floors of Al-Khatib, about twenty feet away. What was it like living next door to a place like that, I asked? He fell silent a moment, then said, “Sometimes we would hear screams.” He brayed strangely, imitating the noise. “It was not nice,” he said. “But otherwise our lives were normal.”

Officials in the U.S. and Europe seemed no less able to set aside the evidence of abuses. In 2012, President Barack Obama announced that if Assad used chemical weapons against his people it would represent a “red line” that would have “enormous consequences.” The next year, Assad used nerve gas in civilian areas of Damascus, and there was no retaliation. Instead, the U.S. government went on to negotiate several ceasefire deals with the regime and its Russian allies—accords that calmed the fighting but left Assad in power.

After each meeting with officials, Mazen hoped that someone would finally take decisive action against Assad. Congress eventually passed the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, which called for sanctions against those who aided the regime or its allies—but this did little to change the reality on the ground. When the U.S. finally deployed troops, it was to protect its own interests. Obama sent soldiers to fight alongside Kurdish rebels to destroy *ISIS* strongholds. Later, President Donald Trump assigned the military to protect oil fields.

Mazen found the enduring impunity of the regime increasingly difficult to comprehend. Stephen Rapp recalled bumping into him outside the White House, after yet another meeting. “I could see that he wasn’t happy,” he said. Larrison added, “Every time he told his story, it hurt him, but he didn’t hold back. He was worn out afterward, but there was also an anger growing in him because of the inaction and empty promises.”

At some point in 2018, Mazen began to succumb to a breakdown. Fawzi learned about it from their sister in the Netherlands. “She called us and said that Mazen was in bad shape, depressed, just staying in his room and smoking,” he recalled. “I spoke with him, and Mazen acknowledged his despair. I told him that the international community would take its time but in the end it would do something. I told him, ‘Take care of yourself. Go to therapy.’ He went twice and then he got worse—he said it wasn’t working. He asked for money. We sent him five thousand dollars so he could go back to the therapist. But he didn’t go.”

Mazen became increasingly bitter and antisocial. Friends say that he used drugs and behaved erratically, staying awake for days on end and growing alarmingly thin. In social-media posts and in conversation, he spoke furiously about Westerners and their allies the Kurds. When Khader expressed concern, Mazen sent him a chiding message: “Don’t bring up psychological issues with me. I’ll heal in my country.” One day in 2018, Khader recalled, “he told me to fuck off.” He had asked Mazen to participate in a documentary about the difficulties that refugees faced in the Netherlands. Mazen refused, saying, “Everyone wants to use me.” After that, Khader said, he called many times to repair the relationship, but Mazen remained angry.

Late that year, Mazen sent Khader another message, announcing that he was planning to return to Syria. He wanted to go home—to listen to prayers in the mosque and eat a meal with his family. Khader didn’t know what to do. “I let him say whatever he said, because I didn’t want to bother him, and he said he didn’t want anyone around him.”

Soon afterward, Khader went to Syria himself, to document the war as a photojournalist. After a few months, he travelled on to Iraq. In early 2020, before the two men could reconnect, Khader heard that Mazen had followed through on his pledge.

Mazen’s loved ones still struggle to understand why he went back to Syria, when he must have known that the regime would kill him. The stories that they recount differ in details, but they share a basic trajectory. Mazen lost his apartment in the Netherlands, and, after a rootless period, he went to stay with his nephew Ziad, who lived in Krefeld, a town across the German border. When he arrived, he was dishevelled and acting strangely; he said that he’d been robbed of his laptop and his money.

While he was in Germany, he visited the Syrian Embassy in Berlin—perhaps several times. On one visit, he secured an expedited passport. When he came home and showed it off, Ziad was so horrified that he and his wife secretly ran it through their washing machine, to make it impossible to use. Mazen was increasingly despondent. At times, he set out pictures of Obama and other Western leaders and argued with them. He talked obsessively about a guard who had tortured him, and one day he led Ziad into the bathroom to reveal a terrible consequence of his imprisonment: his genitals were mangled, leaving him unable to have children. “I have no future,” he said.



*"She says she's on her way, but she hasn't even left the house."*  
Cartoon by Lynn Hsu

Not long afterward, he disappeared and set off for Syria. He must have been given a new passport—which his family and friends cite as evidence that the Assad regime lured him to Damascus. “It was clear they wanted Mazen back,” Mouaz Moustafa said. Mazen’s supporters speak of times that he was seen with a woman who was known to work at the Embassy. Moustafa believes that he encountered a group of expats in Berlin who were linked to Assad’s intelligence apparatus, and that they promised him he could play a key part in ending the war. “Mazen had acquired some delusions of grandeur,” he said. “They used his delusions to convince him to go back to Damascus, and they told him, ‘They’ll roll out the red carpet for you.’ ”

Another Syrian exile in Germany told me that she, too, believed Assad’s agents had persuaded Mazen to make the trip, but she suggested that hubris was not his only motivation. When he told her of his plan, she recalled, she begged him not to go, but he said that he was worried about his family: the regime had threatened to arrest one of his sisters.

At the Berlin airport, according to an account posted online and then deleted, Mazen ran into an acquaintance and disclosed his plans. (The account noted that he was accompanied by the woman linked to the Syrian Embassy.) As word spread that Mazen was heading to Syria, alarmed phone calls went back and forth among his friends and relatives. Soon after his plane touched

down in Damascus, Ziad reached him on his cell phone. He recalls that Mazen seemed to have realized that he had made a mistake. “Pray for me, nephew,” he said, sounding frightened. “I’m waiting in the transit lounge, and then I’ll fly to Sudan.” Before the call ended, Ziad heard voices warning Mazen to watch what he said.

At the Damascus airport, Mazen made a few last frantic calls. He reached Natalie Larrison, of the S.E.T.F., but all she could make out was the word “Damascus” in Arabic, and then the connection cut off. Before dawn, according to Fawzi, Mazen called one of their sisters, asking her to bring him money at the airport—perhaps to pay a bribe and perhaps to buy a ticket for another flight. The sister felt that it was unsafe to travel at that hour, so she went at daybreak and asked after Mazen. By then, he had been arrested and taken to the Air Force-intelligence prison. No one saw him again until his body showed up in the military morgue, five years later.

One of the surreal legacies of the war is the juxtaposition of neighborhoods that were pulverized by fighting and others that were left unscathed. Regime strongholds—such as the Old City and the area of parks and ministries that sits below Assad’s hilltop palace—remain nearly pristine. The poorer, predominantly Sunni Muslim suburbs where the armed resistance against Assad took root are now largely reduced to collapsed concrete slabs, twisted rebar, and dust.

In Damascus, an accountant named Omar pointed out his apartment. It was in a comfortable residential building that, to one direction, faced a tree-lined park and streets set with cafés and restaurants. To the other, across a swath of scrubland dotted with auto-repair shops and small farms, was Jobar, a neighborhood of concrete apartment blocks. A mostly Sunni area, it was taken over by rebels early in the war and became the site of several exceptionally fierce battles, including some in which the regime deployed sarin gas. Now Jobar is a landscape of flattened buildings that evoke Dresden in the Second World War—or, perhaps, contemporary Gaza. During the fighting, bullets fired from the Jobar side occasionally hit Omar’s building. But his apartment wasn’t damaged, he explained; it was on the safe side.

When Fawzi picked a place to live in Damascus, he surveyed the city's neighborhoods carefully. He settled on Jaramana, a lower-middle-class area with a bustling shopping district flanked by rows of drab residential streets. Jaramana has residents from many sects, but the majority belong to the Druze faith, whose leaders had kept their community out of the protest movement and had thus been allowed to police themselves. As the war raged on, the neighborhood remained essentially untouched.

A year after Fawzi arrived, Majida and their children made their way to the capital, too. For about a year, they lived separately; only after they were sure that they were not under surveillance did they move in together. Once reunited, they paid the rent in cash and kept to themselves, careful to avoid any hint that they were associated with the rebellion. To disguise their family name, Fawzi adhered to the Arab custom of calling himself after his eldest son, becoming Abu Jad—"father of Jad." He dressed habitually in a blue jacket, which connoted a connection to Air Force intelligence. Jad said that his mother and two sisters went without hijabs, "free style," to enhance the impression that they were connected to the secular regime. "The neighbors didn't bother us, because they were afraid we would take them to prison." He added, with a laugh, that not even their downstairs neighbor, a military officer, suspected their real identity. Fawzi, listening in, smiled slyly and nodded.

When the family arrived in Jaramana, Jad was about eleven, and his sisters were a few years older. They quickly grasped the rules of their situation. "Our school friends didn't visit us—we knew not to bring anyone home," he said. "I understood that I couldn't have fights or call attention to myself." He often woke up at night to find his father smoking and whispering into a computer microphone, talking via a secure connection with old comrades. Sometimes Fawzi met with them in person, but he went furtively—"like a mouse," he said—keeping to side streets and travelling on foot, to avoid vehicle checkpoints.

They lived frugally, off the family's savings, and Majida helped make ends meet by tutoring students in Arabic. Sometimes they sang folk songs from Deir ez-Zor, with Jad accompanying them on the oud. To keep from being heard, they shut the door, drew curtains over the windows, and had what Jad called "a quiet party for our nearest and dearest."

Still, it pained Fawzi that his brother couldn't be with them. About a year after Mazen returned to Syria, a fellow-activist wrote on social media that he had died of torture at the Air Force-intelligence prison. Fawzi didn't want to believe the claim, and he was reassured when a former inmate posted a video a few months later claiming to have seen Mazen. The inmate said that he was being tortured to make him go on television and recant his accusations, but that he had refused. Soon, another released prisoner confirmed that Mazen was alive. He added that he was very courageous, but also mentally unbalanced because of the harshness of his treatment; along with the torture, his jailers were subjecting him to a starvation diet.

Though Mazen would not survive to describe his last imprisonment, other former inmates have emerged to tell of similar experiences. On the morning after Assad's escape from Damascus, in the underground dungeon of a fearsome prison known as the Palestine Branch, a twenty-seven-year-old farmer's son named Motasem Kattan awoke to shouts and the clattering of iron doors. Frightened by the tumult, he curled up in a corner of his cell, as guards had instructed him to do. When people opened his door and told him, "Assad's gone, you're free!" he refused to move. If the guards had seen him leave his corner, they would have beaten him severely.

Eventually, he was led out, shaking with fear and struggling to walk. A woman and an old man propped him between them and half carried him up the stairs. The woman, who had been searching for a loved one, wept when she saw how terrified Motasem was. His body was emaciated, and he had rashes and open wounds on his legs. She and the old man led Motasem outside the prison walls and onto the edge of a highway. They asked if he knew someone they could call, and he gave them his father's phone number. Motasem's father was astonished to get the call. His son had been in prison for fifteen months, and the family assumed that he was dead.

A week later, I visited Motasem at his family's home, a cinder-block structure on a dusty street in the suburb of Douma. He was still in disbelief, his eyes unnaturally wide and unblinking. His mother gave me a message in improvised sign language: she nodded to him, touched her heart, and then held out two fingers. She had another son who was dead and a brother who was still missing.



*Kattan's family listens as he recounts his detention.*

Despite Motasem's ordeal, he brought me back to the Palestine Branch. He wanted to walk its hallways again and, much as Mazen al-Hamada had, reveal the places where he had been brutalized. For an hour, he reenacted the process that had followed his arrest. There was the room where his name was written in a ledger, and the spot where he was forced to strip to his underpants and stand with his face against a dirty wall. There was the place where he was fingerprinted and given a number to replace his name. There was the cell in which he was held: a windowless, gray-painted room about twenty feet by fifty feet, with nothing in it but a tiny toilet cubicle in one corner. A hundred and forty other men were kept inside.

The prisoners were packed so tightly that they were forced to sit hunched up during the day and to sleep pressed together at night. They were given small amounts of water and bread, occasionally supplemented by a bit of bean soup or bones from chickens that the guards had eaten. The guards prohibited them from speaking. A camera was placed above the door, like a glass eye, and if an infraction was detected the prisoner was taken away for punishment—handcuffed and beaten, as Mazen had been, or forced into a rubber tire and lashed with a leather belt or a plastic hose. Motasem smiled to show that he was missing one of his front teeth. He said that he had lost it early, when one of his tormentors punched him in the mouth.

Motasem traversed the prison, reliving his debasement, even throwing himself on the filthy floor. Gesturing at the hole in the cell floor where the men had defecated, he explained that, because the prisoners could not speak, they had to ask to relieve themselves by writing on the wall, with pencils improvised from tinfoil. A designated cell leader approved who went and for how long. The same system applied to bathing: every three weeks, they were permitted a few minutes to clean themselves in the toilet cubicle, with a half litre of water. Once, he recalled, two inmates had begged for more drinking water, and the guards told them to drink from the latrine. The men had spent the next few days dying of cholera; Motasem held one of them in his arms as he died.

Upstairs, in the prison's administrative area, Motasem pointed out where he was compelled to sign confessions prepared for him—admitting that he had been a member of an armed rebel group, that he was a traitor, and that he had killed a government official. He was then taken into an office where a gray-haired officer politely read out the crimes that he had confessed to. When he came to the admission of killing an official, Motasem gently protested, saying he had not done that. The officer closed his file and said that he would be punished for lying. He called a guard, who took Motasem away to solitary confinement. On the way, a prisoner who acted as an orderly told him that people sent to that cell never got out. At that point, Motasem said, he gave up, and from then until his release he was only awaiting death.

Motasem's father, who had come with us and stood watching throughout the tour, spoke for the first time. "I didn't know," he said softly, tears streaming down his face.

When I visited the Mezzeh prison, where Mazen was held twice, the guards posted by Assad's regime had been replaced by a handful of rebels. They lounged in chairs near the entrance gate, basking in the winter sun. Around them, the ground was strewn with the detritus of the old regime: uniforms, bullet casings, boots, defaced Assad posters. On an airstrip, the hangars stood empty, but some still contained crates of live Russian munitions. Outside were the charred wrecks of helicopters that Israel, in its ongoing campaign to destroy Syria's military capability, had blasted in the past few days. Tanks and armored personnel carriers were parked haphazardly where

fleeing soldiers had deserted them. Stray cats followed us around, mewling from hunger.

The interior of the prison was like others I'd seen: rows of windowless cells, some with Quranic verses dabbed carefully on the walls with green soap. Outside the cellblocks were the guards' rooms, full of broken chairs, yellowing computers, and empty cigarette packs. A rebel with his face hidden by a balaclava showed me a gold-painted bust of Assad, which he kicked across the room, cursing viciously. In a cellblock for female detainees, he pointed out bras and women's clothing and some children's toys. "They even kept children here," he said in disgust. A shelf in a hallway held boxes of medicine. He picked one up and shoved it in front of my face. It was used to provide forced abortions, he said; the guards had habitually raped women who were held there. "They were pigs," he spat.

The guards seemed to have made no effort to hide their abuses. In Mezzeh and the other prisons I visited, there were troves of documents, fastidiously cataloguing the workings of the penal system. Papers with official seals were strewn around floors and left on desks. Some contained records of surveillance operations and transcripts of interrogations. Others bore the names of prisoners, the orders for their arrest, and the crimes that they were accused of committing. In the Palestine Branch, I came across a huge pile of photographs taken of prisoners after interrogation. For many, it was likely the last image of them before they died.

In mid-January, the Hamadas helped circulate a petition calling to protect the evidence that remains at the detention centers. "Their walls are like notebooks and witnesses, telling the stories of the suffering of our sons and daughters," they wrote. There is some precedent for a war-crimes inquiry. In 2019, two former Syrian military officers who had worked at Al-Khatib were arrested in Germany and tried for murdering dozens of detainees. One was sentenced to life in prison for crimes against humanity; the other received a shorter sentence for complicity.

Stephen Rapp, the former Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues, travelled to Damascus after Assad fled. He toured mass graves that he had previously seen only in satellite photos and visited prisons where the abuses he helped reveal were committed. He also met with members of the new

government, who just days before had been Islamist rebels. Rapp told me the officials had assured him that prosecuting members of the old regime was a top priority. “They emphasized to me their intention in setting up courts to seek justice for their victims, including Mazen, and that their trials would be a mix of Islamic Sharia and international law,” he said.

Syria’s new leader, Ahmed al-Sharaa, maintains that he wants to create an electoral democracy, one that respects all the country’s sects and ethnic groups. But many observers are concerned that Sharaa—a former member of the Islamic State and Al Qaeda—is merely trying to cultivate support from the West before asserting a more radical agenda, as the Taliban did after the U.S. evacuated Afghanistan. A senior diplomat who is active in the region told me that he worries Sharaa will be unable to “control his base.” He spoke of reports of revenge killings around the country, particularly against the Alawite community.

Still, Mazen’s supporters hope that his death will help bring about democracy. “The blood of my family and that shed by other Syrians has paid the price for our freedom,” Fawzi told me.

A few days after I visited the Hamadas’ home, they met me in Tishreen Park, a landscaped hillside of trees and lawns that merge into the foothills of the mountains around Damascus. On the nearest summit was Assad’s former palace, a hard-lined modernist block.

The Hamadas were bundled up against the cold, and looked wary. We strolled for a few minutes and then found a bench to sit on. A couple of men who had set up a brazier sold us paper cups of steaming tea.

With a wan smile, Fawzi told me that he had not been to Tishreen Park since before the war. This was the third time he had left Jaramana in thirteen years. The previous two had been to identify his brother’s body and to bury him, so this was the first excursion that did not have to do with death.

Majida spoke up to describe her daughters’ accomplishments. The younger one was living in Germany, where she worked as a dentist and helped women in a public health clinic. The elder daughter was in Beirut, studying

for a master's degree in democracy and international law. Soon, Majida said, she would leave Syria to visit them both.

As we spoke, Jad said he wanted me to know that his full name was Jad *Fawzi* al-Hamada, and that he was proud of his father. Fawzi had remained in Syria throughout the war, despite the dangers. "He decided to stay as long as revolutionary change was needed," Jad said, noting that his father's political party had offered to get him out of the country a year into the war but that he had declined. Fawzi added something, and Jad translated: "We will have freedom in Syria, or we will die here."

I asked Fawzi what he wanted to do with his newly restored freedom. "We will not be free until we have held Assad and his people to account for what they have done," he said. "After that, I will leave politics and all this hard stuff and have a free man's life, without headaches," he laughed. He quoted the Palestinian poet Mahmoud Darwish: "We love life whenever we can."

Majida said it was also important that, in the new Syria, girls and women be raised as "free persons, with a full knowledge of what democracy means." She grew expansive and said, "We miss the old times when the family would sing, with Jad playing the oud and the girls singing." Glancing fondly at his wife, Fawzi said, "Majida used to sing, too, and has a beautiful voice, especially when she sang the songs of Fairuz." Majida protested, "I haven't sung for a long time. But maybe I will again."

The sun sank over Assad's palace, and the evening chill began to reach us. Eventually, we stood to leave. As we walked, Majida looked past the edge of the park into the city, with its patchwork of dreadful wounds and small signs of recovery. She smiled a bit and said, "Today is the first time in years I have felt that our country is beautiful." ♦

By Annie Hylton  
By Paige Williams  
By Ruth Margalit  
By Sam Knight  
By Keith Gessen  
By Peter Hessler  
By Tess Owen  
By Alec MacGillis  
By Michael Holtz  
By Sam Knight  
By Thomas Mallon  
By Charles Bethea

## Popular Chronicles

# How the Capybara Won My Heart—and Almost Everyone Else's

It's not hard to understand why capys have a cultlike following on Instagram and TikTok. I fell for the giant rodent decades ago.

By [Gary Shteyngart](#)



*If you have been following the beast on your socials, you might know that capybaras get hiccups, that they carry large oranges and yuzu on their heads, that they have a dubious meme coin and their own anthem. Illustration by Ryan Haskins; Source photographs from Getty*

A little while back, I met a capybara, the world's largest rodent, for a coffee-and-carrot date at a café in Tokyo. This has become a ritual when I visit the city. I sat on a couch next to Pisuke, who stared ahead with the two eyes perched atop his enormous head connected to his coconut-shaped body, generating what seemed like friendliness and calm across the room, which was filled with his equally substantial brother Kohaku and about ten human admirers from around the world. I stroked his straw-like fur and the pinkish skin beneath, thick as sailcloth. His ears looked like morel mushrooms, and sometimes they would twitch, to the delight of my fellow human visitors. I scratched under his chin, and he half closed his eyes and lifted up his head to give me better access to this source of pleasure.

I sipped my coffee and then passed him a carrot stick. He did not grab the carrot with his mouth the way, say, a dog would but turned slowly and delicately toward me and chomped down on it with his long, discolored rodent teeth, his tiny, almost human tongue flicking between his massive jowls. I picked up one of his paws—smooth-furred, unlike the rest of him—and marvelled at his seemingly slapdash assembly. The human tongue, the powerful buckteeth that never stopped growing, the giant muscular haunches and posterior, and these dark-colored paws, partly webbed because the capybara is a semiaquatic creature. “How is this animal even real?” a friend asked me after I showed her a selfie of me and Pisuke, whose weight looked to be fast approaching my own. (A capybara can weigh up to two hundred and twenty pounds, though most hover closer to a hundred and forty.)

The unreality of the capybara is partly responsible for its cultlike following. The past years have seen the rise of capybara TikTok and Instagram. If you have been following the beast on your socials, you might know that capybaras get hiccups; that they carry large oranges and yuzu on their heads; that they allow birds to eat the schmutz out of their fur, which brings them almost orgiastic levels of delight; that they try to help injured corgis escape from their protective cones; that they cuddle with monkeys and lick baby kangaroos; that a group of them adopted a cat named Oyen into their social group at a Japanese zoo. You might have heard the catchy anthem of the capybara, which consists mostly of “ca-py-ba-ra” sung in sultry and tropical tones, along with some Russian lyrics too ridiculous to print (the song was written by a random guy from Moscow). You might have heard of \$TUPI, a dubious meme coin launched to celebrate the birth of a particularly cute San Antonio Zoo capy. (The zoo denies any association with the coin.) And, if you’re like me, you might have journeyed to one of the capybara hot spots around the world, including Japan, where capybaras can be found in cafés and *onsen*, or hot-spring baths, which, unlike cafés, are a perfect place for the creature to enjoy immersion in water. The country even has a capybara hotel for closer communion with the animals.

On my previous trip to Japan, I brought my son to the Tokyo café—he was nine years old at the time and is now eleven, and trades capybara swag with a friend at his school—but we found out that getting a thirty-minute date with a capy was, in the words of one aficionado, “harder than getting Taylor Swift tickets,” and required logging on to a Web site at the right time and

hitting the Purchase button before the competition could. My son was allowed a brief pet of one of the rodents and then we had to leave. On my most recent visit to the café, the room held people from several continents, some of whom had come to Tokyo just to hang out with the two animals. A woman from Atlanta talked about the capybara yoga that was now being offered in her city. A man from Montreal was enthusing about the capybaras found in his home town's bio-dome. Young couples were forming throuples with the ear-flicking Kohaku. "I think I could live my life as one," a man declared, of the capybara. Someone else added, "I think we all could."

I had started my day hungover and melancholy after a long night of Tokyo highballs and a morning dose of middle-aged ennui, but after my half hour with Pisuke was over I felt immersed in tantric levels of well-being. ("They regulate you down," my shrink told me a few weeks later, as we watched a video that featured superimposed capybaras sashaying down a fashion runway.) Time flowed differently, and my vision felt soft and the world around me pure and unaggressive. After I left the café, I bought a peanut-butter sandwich and a jelly sandwich, and I mashed the two together and sat on a commuter bench and ate both sandwiches at once and never had I tasted anything so sweet and good, and every passing salaryman and woman was my brother and sister, and the world's biggest city was just an Amazon riverbank, and we were all living our lives as giant rodents that never meant anybody any harm. I wanted to cry soulfully to commemorate the moment, but contentment this complete affirmed itself.

I fell in love with capybaras at least two decades before the recent craze. Around 2001, I had sold my first book and was dating a woman after half a decade of loneliness that had followed a breakup with my college girlfriend and the rejection of said first book by both an agent and the Iowa writing school. There was a newfound happiness, maybe even a swagger, to my life as my novel neared publication and my arms found someone to embrace at night. My then girlfriend and I lived in Fort Greene, Brooklyn, and we would visit the Prospect Park Zoo, where we quickly became enamored with the resident capybara. Of course, I was taken with his ridiculous shape and size, but I was also projecting my past loneliness onto him, the many years I had spent in the cage of unreciprocated love. Finally, I thought, here was a being with a body as ridiculous as my own, and a sweetness that made me nostalgic for a past self.

The nascent Internet of the age had told us that the capybara was a social creature—as many rodents are—and that having a single capy, without access to other animals, much less to his own kind, was unusual. (I don’t know why the zoo had only one.) It was sad yet unsurprising when the animal I so loved passed away—perhaps, I thought, from heartbreak. Of course, it is quite possible that he simply died of old age, but, as I said, there is something about the capybara that invites projection. Having endured years of apartness myself, I wondered if the animal had been unable to survive without an outpouring of tactile love.



*"The Lululemon again today, Madam?"*  
Cartoon by Sophia Glock

Our relationship with these creatures is somewhat suspect. “Thank you for changing my life,” a cartoon woman in an Instagram meme says to a capybara, to which the animal replies, “I’m literally a giant rodent.” Is this what the deceased zoo specimen, or Pisuke or Kohaku, stuck in a small Tokyo room without a body of water to swim in, might say to us if they could speak with their funny tongues? “I’ve changed your life,” each of them might have added. “But what good has it done me?”

The only oversized rodent in New York City at the moment is in the Staten Island Zoo. I took my son to see it at the close of 2023, and here, too, the capybara was all alone in her enclosure, although the zoo did have two capybaras at one point. The capybara was very shy and barely came out to

meet us. Meanwhile, two other female capybaras, named Cheesecake and Pumpkin, who feature on an Instagram account called Dark Wings Wildlife, had become one of my obsessions. For around thirty-five dollars, you can get the six-month-old Cheesecake or the two-year-old Pumpkin to munch on a piece of edible paper containing any message you like. (I ate some of the paper myself, to test its safety.) Requests flow in from all over the world, including a French “Capy birthday *mon cœur!*” and German parents wishing their son good luck on his driver’s exam. I reached out to the account’s owner, Marina Somma, who invited me to visit Cheesecake and Pumpkin.

Dark Wings Wildlife is a six-and-a-half-acre property on the eastern coast of Florida which, in addition to the two capybaras, is home to an African pied crow named Trixie, three goats, two dogs, a cat, an old chicken, and a blind goose. Many Americans, including me, dream of having pet capybaras, but few can truly accommodate them. Somma has a degree in animal psychology and has worked in zoos. She has installed a small pool for her capybaras, and there are plenty of other animals for them to play with, including the two boisterous dogs, and acres of grass for them to feast upon. The Florida climate is similar to that of the capybaras’ homelands—they are found in every country in South America except Chile, usually in places where dense forests and grasslands meet water sources, such as rivers and swamps. Capybaras have suffered from frostbite in more northern locales. Two capys now housed at a sanctuary in Indiana called the Pipsqueakery had to have their toes removed after being left in the snow at their former home.

Somma and her husband, Vinny, picked me up at the Daytona Beach airport in their storm-battered Tesla—Hurricane Milton had ravaged Florida about a month before my visit—and we rolled past a typical Floridian Panda Express landscape with the occasional head-turning concerns, such as Gospel Garden Landscape and Nursery, and Rehab Sports Bar. Somma and Vinny, both in their thirties, met when they were high-school students living in the area, though Vinny originally hails from Staten Island. We drove up to their tidy little farm, which consists of a main house, where Cheesecake and the dogs and cat live—its living room is centered around an enormous television that plays football coverage at most hours—and a barn, where Pumpkin lives in a stall with the goats, the chicken, and the blind goose. There is also a surprisingly large and intricate aviary for the highly

intelligent pied crow, who is friends with Pumpkin and the dogs, with whom she sometimes stages impromptu races, or “zoomies,” the animals running along the length of the aviary’s screen.

“One of the biggest misconceptions is that they’re so chill,” Somma said, of capybaras. She told me that the capybara is a prey animal in its native habitat, and that, unlike dogs or other common animals that people keep as pets, it has prey reactions, especially when cornered. “They’ll get panicky and freak out,” she said, adding that “some are well socialized and do well.” In Tokyo, Pisuke and Kohaku spend the bulk of their days with human strangers who pet them and ply them with a never-ending supply of carrots. Pumpkin and Cheesecake are rarely subject to human visitors, and I could sense their innate distrust of me as soon as I approached, even though I do not resemble their traditional enemies, which include the jaguar, the anaconda, and the alligator-like caiman. Of course, humans often hunt the capybara for its meat and skin. The Catholic Church in Venezuela bent the rules for the semiaquatic animal, allowing it to be eaten during Lent. Capybaras, as prey animals, instinctively situate themselves in groups along lakes and riverbanks—the water, in which they can be submerged for up to five minutes, serves as a means of escape from land animals, and the land can provide refuge from the nefarious caiman.

Inside the stall, Pumpkin, the two-year-old—capybaras can live for about twelve years with proper human care, and for about ten years in the wild—eyed me warily, even as I lowered myself to her level to appear nonthreatening. “They’re very suspicious of new things,” Somma told me. “Which is a good way to behave if you don’t want to be eaten.” Pumpkin sleeps in a makeshift bed that is composed of a trough, a dog bed, and an old Tempur-Pedic mattress. As capybaras enjoy pooping in water, there is a large bucket for her; despite my infatuation with all things capybara, I could not quite stomach its smelly greenish contents.

Cheesecake, like most teen-agers, likes to sleep a lot—Somma compared her to a cat in this regard—and she can often be found beneath a blanket in her comfortable glass-and-steel enclosure in the main house, impersonating a ghost. Often, I forgot she was there until the blanket stirred and assumed the barrel shape of the capybara. When roused from her slumber, she enjoyed playing with Stevie, a Shetland sheepdog, and barking (one of capys’ many

vocalizations) at the robot vacuum. Capybaras are known to be gregarious, and social media certainly plays up their affable qualities, but within this menagerie it was Stevie who served as the social glue.

Capys, who are often suspicious of interlopers like me, can also be unfriendly with members of their own species who are not part of their family group. The relationship between Cheesecake and Pumpkin, who are not related, has been complex, with the younger animal following the older one around. During the worst encounters, Pumpkin will try to nibble on Cheesecake's butt. "In the wild, there's rarely a mixing of different capybara groups," Somma said. Since the house is Cheesecake's domain and the outdoors is Pumpkin's, the large porch serves as a meeting place, with Stevie the Sheltie, in her instinctual herder's role, acting as chaperon. I witnessed one such scene, in which the two capybaras regarded each other warily at first, then commenced friendly sniffing. When Pumpkin moved away, however, Cheesecake couldn't help but trail behind. "Don't follow her, Cheese!" Vinny warned the younger animal. "She'll get annoyed." And soon enough Pumpkin scampered off the porch and ran toward her home in the stall. Later, I watched videos of further progress between the two rodents, with Cheesecake and Pumpkin spending semi-unsupervised mornings together, eating grass just a few feet apart—what parents of toddlers call "parallel play."

Somma believes a capybara has the intelligence of a dog, "not a border collie but a very standard dog." Pumpkin can get up on her hind legs, her little black semiaquatic paws pressed to her chest, to get a treat, and is able to spin around on command. Although, unlike Cheesecake, she almost never barks, she talks in wild torrents with a combination of gentle squeaks and chittering noises. There are hundreds of thousands of Cheesecake and Pumpkin fans on Instagram and TikTok, and Somma hopes that people who love them will be inspired to protect capybaras. Dark Wings Wildlife is incorporated as a 501(c)3, and Somma wants to grow slowly and introduce more animals that can fulfill educational roles, including some otters and a full aviary of non-releasable vultures. She imagines that one day the space could open as a glamping retreat for animal-lovers. "Florida is kind of a wild place," she told me, of the state's licensing regime. "You can have a capybara under a pet license." Aside from the time they spend on animal upkeep, which is partly subsidized by the money from the edible Capygrams

(these can bring in a hundred and forty dollars a day), Somma and Vinny work remotely for a company that runs various Web sites.

I had spent four hours with the two capybaras, and the feeling of contentment I'd experienced in Tokyo settled over my shoulders as if I had spent the whole day listening to Headspace or drinking chilled red wine on a summer porch. I was happily asleep in my hotel room by 7 p.m. The depth of my surrender felt like the wonderful knockout anesthesia administered before a colonoscopy. I had so internalized my new capy friends that I might have chittered in my sleep.

The next day, Somma and I fed all the animals in the early-morning light, including the blind goose and the chicken, who looked like an old disgruntled Eastern European couple in their stall. "Hello, Ma'am, how are you?" Somma said to each creature, in her light Southern accent. (Except for the goose, she keeps only female animals.) In addition to copious amounts of grass, the capybaras are fed green beans, squash, sweet potato, carrots, and kale, and are given additional Vitamin C to prevent scurvy. They love eating corn on the cob, a suitable exercise for their ever-growing teeth. I sat down on the cold grass—the temperature had turned unseasonably chilly, to the capys' discomfort—and fed Pumpkin grass pellets. I scratched her neck and she looked at me with the placid goofiness that has inspired so much love of capybaras on social media. Somma compared that look to the James Franco expressions of his "Pineapple Express" era.

When a car passed along a distant country road, Pumpkin flared her nostrils, always on alert for a predator. To allay her fears of being cornered, I squatted and then moved toward her slowly. Her flightiness brought to mind the childhood bullying I endured from friends and family, and my constant need to find an exit in case the people around me got overzealous and wanted to kick me or throw a punch. It dawned on me that the capybara represented a duality I knew all too well: a desperately friendly creature always afraid of being attacked. Is this why people love the capybara? Do we all feel trapped in a world that encourages us to be hyper-social yet rewards us with nothing but endless existential anxiety?

I asked Somma why she thought people like me were so interested in capybaras. "They're such sweet animals," she said. "You can sit there and

have a connection with them that is not tactile.” As she spoke, Stevie the Sheltie was jumping all over me, trying to get me to love her and perhaps give her a grass pellet, but Pumpkin just peacefully registered me with her side eye, and that was all I needed.

When I returned home from Florida, I took my son to see “Flow,” a new animated fantasy-adventure film from the Latvian director Gints Zilbalodis, which is set in a drowned post-apocalyptic world. The protagonist, a black cat, journeys through this often scary landscape with newfound companions, including a Labrador retriever, a ring-tailed lemur, a secretary bird, and, of course, a capybara. Everyone in the audience laughed when the capybara first appeared onscreen, even the little kid behind us who had cried earlier, scared of some of the calamities befalling the feline hero. Just seeing that familiar barrel shape put people at ease. I was astonished by how well the writers and director had portrayed the capybara: in the film, the animal mostly sleeps, eats grass, and gets along with other animals. When scared, it retreats. An unlikely hero, but a perfect one for our times.

I had seen capybaras on my phone, in the movie theatre, and in a Japanese café and a Florida home. But it was not enough. I needed to go to the source of my obsession. I needed to book a passage to South America.

Two things stood out from my daily online immersion in Capy World. First, there was a Brazilian capybara influencer named Luciano Mochinski who had befriended a gaggle of capybaras living in the southern city of Curitiba. Second, there was a slow-motion social-and-environmental drama playing out in the high-end Buenos Aires suburb of Nordelta which pitted wealthy homeowners against the working-class rodent, who, for some of its fans, had become a kind of capy Che Guevara. Both phenomena urgently required my investigation.

I landed in Buenos Aires in early December, which is early summer in the Southern Hemisphere. I started out by paying a visit to the city’s Ecoparque, on the edge of the Palermo neighborhood, where YouTube had promised me a large collection of capybaras. I walked up and down the park, followed by a peacock who kept making aggressive noises. “Shut up,” I told it. “Seriously.” In capybara lore, two of the most farcical enemies of the rodent are the pelican and peacock, both of which try to bite it, to minimal effect.

(The capybara is too large to be eaten by them.) Finally, I stumbled on an English-speaking human family by a tapir exhibit and asked them if they knew where I could find my spirit animal.

“We’re looking for it, too!” the family’s matriarch said.

It turned out they were from Vancouver. I have found that capybaras and Canadians, two of the world’s gentlest creatures, are generally simpatico. I asked the family members what drew them to the capybara. “It’s fascinating and so docile,” a middle-aged man said.

“I like oranges,” a red-headed girl said, in reference to the citrus that capybaras bathe with in Japanese *onsen*.

“There’s a giraffe here,” a boy said consolingly, when I complained about the park’s lack of giant rodents.

I showed them a photo of Cheesecake sitting imperiously on Somma’s living-room couch, the capybara’s keeper almost dwarfed by her charge. “Now, don’t get any ideas,” the mother said to the red-headed girl.

Finally, in a mixture of English and Spanish, we confronted some park workers, who told us, in reference to the capybara, or *carpincho*, as it is called in Spanish, “*No más.*” We were instead directed to the Patagonian mara, a rabbitlike animal that hopped around the Ecoparque at will. We left, dejected.

The next day, I took an Uber up to the gated community of Nordelta. We drove north, past what looked like *villas miseria*, the shantytowns that have historically earned much Peronist attention, and a naval college, before checkpoints appeared, along with many advertisements for Aperol spritzes. Historically, capybaras lived in the swamps near Nordelta, but the development of what has been called a kind of Miami in Argentina disrupted their habitat. The development also eliminated many of the capybaras’ natural predators, however, and an increasing number of the rodents have recently reëmerged to eat the plentiful manicured grass and leave their waste product all over the expensive properties.

The resulting conflicts have got violent, especially when small dogs are involved. A resident had sent me a gruesome image of a mangled dog that had needed stitches after a purported capybara encounter, one of several that had taken place since the pandemic between the indigenous *carkinchos* and the colonialist French poodles. “Attack of the Giant Rodents or Class War?” the *Guardian* asked in a headline.

I had arranged to meet the Argentinean friend of an Italian friend of mine, who lived in one of the gated compounds and had promised to show me around. I’d arrived early, getting past the layers of security by visiting a local restaurant. (My driver had to present his license for inspection.) At the restaurant, the sun shone through an octagonal skylight onto the sushi station as I perused a very expensive menu. Women wore white tees and pink shorts; men clipped their sunglasses onto the “V”s of their V-necks. When I looked out the window, I saw them—a whole family of capybaras on the banks of a nearby man-made lake. I swallowed my two Milanese cutlets as fast as my esophagus allowed and rushed into the warm sunlight.



*“Next get-together, let’s change it up and first talk about great meals we’ve had and then the great shows we’ve been watching.”*  
Cartoon by Peter Kuper

I counted ten babies scurrying around, about typical for capybara family planning, several males, including the alpha male—he is chosen in part because of his size, and also the size of the brown scent gland atop his nose—and a female, with a much smaller scent gland. Like some other

mammals, capybaras organize themselves according to a “harem” system, in which the dominant male gets to impregnate the females, who then practice what’s called alloparenting, providing milk and care to babies that may not be their own. Female capys generally stay in the area where they were born, but young males often leave to strike out on their own, becoming, in zoological terminology, “floaters.”

The family enjoyed the grass and the water, the babies grazing under Mom’s watchful side gaze while the dad did his laps. A teen-age capybara—about Cheesecake’s age—took his siblings for a stroll, and they played tag for a while, then sat around a tree, exhausted. Town houses gleamed in the distance, along with a new construction labelled “Swiss Medical”; a man attacked a playground with a leaf blower while traffic passed incessantly. The babies went for a swim as their mom observed them. They emerged glistening brown, and followed their mother’s white flank along the shore. I watched them for hours.

Many residents of Nordelta view capys the same way New Yorkers view rats, but some of the construction workers who are building the settlement’s endless villas and the women who provide housekeeping gathered around the lake to watch the *carpinchos* with knowing smiles. A young man I had met for dinner at a steak house in Buenos Aires told me that his housekeeper, who came from an impoverished neighborhood south of the city, had kept a capybara in her home for years when she was young. The capybara was truly earning its bona fides as an animal celebrated by the working class, a symbol of resistance.

The resident I’d arranged to meet was named Marcos. Middle-aged and a relatively new arrival to Nordelta, Marcos drove me past many checkpoints, giving me an overview of the situation. Marcos is from a northern province where *carpinchos* are omnipresent, and he likes the animal in that setting, if not in this one. “People are not happy,” he told me, of the attitude in Nordelta toward the capys. “They make everything dirty. They swim in your pool. They are nice, but the little dogs like to bark and the capybara gets scared and reacts. The little dogs get very hurt.” So that was it, I thought. Not naked aggression but a miscommunication between an overly expressive creature and one that, despite its friendliness, is an anxious prey animal.

“There is no more room for the grasslands,” Marcos said, pointing out developments. “All these places were for capybaras two years ago, so now they go to our houses.” We visited a local golf course, one of the rodents’ favorite haunts (they keep the grass short). “There are usually a lot more capybaras,” Marcos said. “I wonder what Nordelta is doing. Maybe they took them somewhere.” He told me that one resident had put up an electric fence that would shock the capybaras, and it became a national scandal. He showed me a little slice of remaining wetland behind barbed wire, and told me that the capybaras in his home province live well and without any conflicts. I asked him about a sign that read “*Carpincho*.” Apparently, one of the gated communities has been named after the creature that its residents want gone.

Having seen what human-rodent conflict looked like in Buenos Aires, I headed to the city that has become something of a mecca for capybara-lovers: Curitiba, Brazil.

Curitiba is a tidy, charming place known by transportation nerds for its pioneering bus system (passengers enter futuristic black tubes before getting on buses that speed along in dedicated lanes). If Buenos Aires has turned its back on its *carkinchos*, Curitiba cannot get enough. At the Oscar Niemeyer Museum gift shop, instead of picking up souvenirs celebrating the famous architect, I bought my family many pairs of capybara socks and considered having a giant macrame capybara shipped home. (When I got back to New York, my son eagerly scrolled through all the capybara photographs I had taken in South America and placed his new loot next to his capybara slippers.) The gift shop at the city’s beloved botanical gardens also had a capy section, from which I sourced capybara notebooks, bookmarks, and pins. A young girl ran up to her parents begging them to buy all the stuffed capybaras on display.



*"I think we all know why we're here—except maybe Wilcox."*  
Cartoon by Nick Downes

When I arrived, the city was being deluged by rain so strong that my oversized hotel umbrella soon proved useless. I Ubered over to Barigui Park, one of the largest green spaces in Curitiba and home to the most capybaras of any park in the city—about seventy, I was told—and found it completely sodden, some of the paths and roadways submerged. Barigui serves as a kind of sponge for Curitiba, with the frothy Barigui River running through the park and rainwater descending from the surrounding hills. I was told two versions of how the capybaras ended up here. In the first, a mayor placed them in the park to keep the grass trimmed (alongside some sheep, now gone). In the second, they swam down the Barigui River and made the park their home. I prefer the second version, which gives the capybaras more agency.

My sneakers drenched, I decided to honor my rodent friends by forging ahead through this aquascape. At last, I found them—a family of about sixteen, grazing like brown sheep on the banks of the flooded river. The sound of dogs barking floated over from some of the mansions in the distance, but these animals were not deterred from their grassy lunch. Water-logged joggers ran through the group at high speeds, but the capybaras, despite their prey instincts, barely moved to let them through, completely habituated as they were to humans. Trucks full of Curitibanos often stopped

on the half-flooded nearby road to take photos of the family; unlike in Nordelta, the locals here were proud of their rodent mascot. I glanced around this pastoral scene, recognizing from my Instagram feed each of the residential skyscrapers flanking the park. I have seen so many videos from the capybara influencer Luciano Mochinski of the animals jumping into the nearby pond that I knew this particular skyline better than I knew Manhattan's.

After a change of socks, I met Fernanda Wendt, a young veterinarian who has studied under one of the world's greatest capybara experts at the local Federal University of Paraná. We convened in a café specializing in capybara-shaped *pastéis*. I bit into the fried hindquarters of my animal pastry as it oozed chocolate and condensed milk. Wendt cares for many animals, including guinea pigs. (Cheesecake and Pumpkin, in Florida, are treated using a veterinary protocol designed for guinea pigs, a close relative of capybaras.) Like Somma, Wendt wants to complicate perceptions that the capybara has a docile nature. In some capybara videos I have seen, the males fight—they rise on their hind legs and look like they're both slapping and kissing one another. "When the males reach puberty," Wendt explained, "they get kicked out by the dominant male. The wandering males then get attacked. They fight and scratch with their nails." She continued, "The dominant male has a very pronounced scent gland over his nose. He releases pheromones from the scent gland, which he rubs against things like trees, leaving a sticky white trail."

Wendt continued, "The capybara is a very hard animal to take care of from a veterinary perspective. It's hard to do daily management in a small enclosure, because often they will die from stress." When veterinarians and zoologists do work with wild capybaras, they frequently have to shoot a tranquilizing dart into them first.

I showed Wendt videos of Luciano Mochinski hugging and petting capybaras, and she was mildly horrified. She told me that ticks carrying Brazilian spotted fever are sometimes found on or near capybaras. The disease has a low survival rate for humans. "Rodents are the most biodiverse mammals in the world," Wendt told me, highlighting the capybara's adaptability as one reason it is not endangered. She tried to steer me toward other local species, such as the paca, which is also a fairly large rodent, but I

was not interested. “The tapir is more interesting and threatened than the capybara,” she assured me. “They spread seeds around. They are the gardeners of the forest.”

“Yes,” I said, noncommittally, biting into my capybara *pastel*.

Luciano Mochinski picked me up the next morning in a little car embellished with the insignia of the local telecom company, a giant ladder strapped to its roof. He installs Internet, TV, and telephone services, and a lot of his spare time is spent befriending capybaras. Like almost everyone I met in Curitiba, Mochinski, who is fifty, has ancestral connections to Poland. His bearded, ruddy face was every bit as joyous in person as it was on my phone. “The mayor doesn’t like me petting them,” he told me through a translator, echoing Wendt’s worry about disease. In fact, Curitiba’s mayor commented on Mochinski’s social-media feed, telling him to stop playing with capybaras, which got Mochinski thirty thousand new followers; his wife, who works for city hall, was not amused.

Mochinski, who grew up on a farm that bred rabbits, chickens, and pigs, is a natural with animals. In the park, he walked up to a capybara colored red by the sun—a male, judging by the size of its prominent scent gland—said, in a mixture of English and Portuguese, “My *comarada* capybara,” and began tapping the capy’s shoulder and scratching its neck. The animal turned to look at him, calmly but with feeling, the way one turns to listen to a friend at a bar. As the rodent lifted its head in pleasure, Mochinski pulled down its lower lip to expose a blade of grass stuck in its teeth. The neck scratching continued, the capybara lifting its head high enough that only its nose was visible. It was hard to remember that, though we were in a city, this was still a wild animal. “You, you,” Mochinski said, inviting me to join in the petting. Life-threatening ticks be damned, I circled around to pet the creature, but it now felt cornered by having humans on two sides (or maybe it was unhappy with my pheromones) and scooted off. “No like you!” Mochinski said, laughing.

He pointed out two capybaras that were knocking their teeth together, one of them the dominant male of the group. Soon they were on their hind legs, and a minor fight broke out for a few seconds, before the non-alpha waddled away in haste. I had spotted incel capybaras wandering around other sections

of the park all by their lonesome. There used to be a caiman in the park, according to Mochinski, but it killed a dog and was moved to the city's zoo. Sometimes "druggies" came to attack capybaras with a gun or a bow and arrow. The rodents have two artificial islands in the middle of the lake, where they go at night for safety. But they are friends with most of the animals in the park, and sometimes, according to Mochinski, you can see geese or vultures riding on their backs.

Mochinski is now a part of this capybara family, who, he says, recognize him by his smell, and is on a petting basis with four of the creatures. He pointed out a young pale-looking capybara and told me it was sick; another had a large red cut across its hindquarters, either from an encounter with a branch or from a fight. "This one needs to go the dentist," the concerned Mochinski said. A light rain began to fall, but the capybaras paid it no heed. Mochinski told me that he often rushes to see the creatures as soon as he finishes work. When he retires from his telecom job, he wants to open a capybara-based advertising business.

I have found that people who love capybaras want to extend their friendship to humans as well. One night in Curitiba, I went out with my translator, a documentary filmmaker, and the filmmaker's "gonzo lawyer." We stayed up late into the night eating and drinking at a Japanese *izakaya* and becoming immediate friends. "To the capybara!" we toasted, as round after round of banana cachaça cocktails and frothy *chopes* were deposited at our table and the edamame flowed. We had met that day, but some species of animal and human are just meant for companionship. When we were introduced, a part of me wondered, "Will they eat me?" And then I answered, "No, they are in the arts." "Will they pet me?" I asked myself. "Yes," I answered, "if I am as charming as a capybara." And a few hours later our friendship was complete.

I returned to Buenos Aires for a spell and revisited the Ecoparque. A drawing of capybaras is featured on one of the food stands in the park, so I went to the information office and demanded satisfaction. "*¿Dónde están los carpinchos?*" I cried. The woman at the office threw up her hands and unleashed a torrent of Spanish. I sat in the middle of the park, listening to tourists asking after the capybara in several languages. Eventually, I made my way to the endangered tapir, which Wendt, back in Curitiba, had

recommended as my next love. I remembered meeting the actor and writer Molly Ringwald at a party over the summer, and being told by her that the animal killed by the apes at the start of “2001: A Space Odyssey” was a capybara. That made perfect sense to me, but a zoologist who happened to be on hand intervened and told us it was a tapir. With its giant nose shaking in the wind, the victimized Argentinian tapir shuffled about his enclosure diagonally, like an old man trying to cross Broadway and Eighty-sixth Street in one go. Fine, I thought. There is room for you in my heart as well. ♦

By Shayla Love  
By Jordan Salama  
By Katy Waldman  
By Daniel Immerwahr  
By Joshua Rothman  
By Arthur Krystal  
By Anna Russell  
By Anna Russell  
By Emily Witt  
By M. R. O'Connor  
By Daniel A. Gross  
By John McPhee

# **Shouts & Murmurs**

- Production Notes on Amazon's Melania Trump Documentary

By [Paul Rudnick](#)

Amazon has agreed to pay \$40 million to license a Melania Trump documentary, as Jeff Bezos makes overtures to Trump.

—*Rolling Stone*.

Memo from Jeff to all “Melania” personnel:

- Show “human side” of the First Lady, using body doubles and voice-over.
- Remove thought bubbles of gold bars in scenes with her husband.
- Speed up footage of her thinking.
- Emphasize scenes of her speaking with children, but please edit out the one in which a little girl asks, “Where can I meet a rich, obese man twice my age?” and Melania answers, “Upscale restaurants and saunas.”
- Melania told Fox that the doc will show her “unpacking, moving, and redecorating.” Eliminate scene of her shrieking at a housekeeper, “The box marked ‘new body parts, etc.’ goes in the second-floor linen closet!”
- Use clip of her smiling, but crop out Putin and Chernobyl.
- Emphasize her kindness by filming testimonials from employees, but first advise them not to mouth “Help me!” at the camera.
- Re-create Melania’s rise from impoverished childhood to supermodel success using stop-motion animation with Hummel figurines, and by Photoshopping her head onto a Cindy Crawford *Vogue* cover.
- Celebrate lasting marital romance with images of other devoted couples.
- Overdub any spoken references to Stormy Daniels with the phrase “storefront spaniels.”
- Add Mike Johnson dressed as a frolicking elf to any scenes featuring Christmas décor.

- To support claims that Melania speaks eight languages, add subtitles in these languages, along with emojis of smiley faces wearing various international hats and weird facial hair.
- Demonstrate Melania's affection for Ivanka by substituting Ivanka's face for a Dior cape.
- Show Melania leading a White House tour, but edit out her saying, "And this is another room."
- Feature Melania's many close friendships by hiring an actress to say the line "We'll stay up all night talking about being a stepmom, gardening, and renaming Greenland the Hermès Outlet."
- Showcase her visiting hospitals by adding a C.G.I. sign that reads "*HOSPITAL*" to the doors of her lawyers' offices.
- Highlight Melania's many dignified appearances at global summits and state banquets with Lego re-creations. ♦

By Jiji Lee  
 By Alex Baia  
 By Sean McGowan  
 By Meghana Indurti  
 By Julie Sharbutt  
 By Zoe Pearl  
 By Dennard Dayle  
 By Jay Katsir  
 By Talib Babb  
 By Charlie Dektar  
 By Liana Finck  
 By Antonia Hitchens

# Fiction

- [Remembering Jules Feiffer](#)
- [“A Visit from the Chief”](#)



*Jules Feiffer, December 9, 1996*

By Paul Rogers  
By Jenny Kroik  
By Ben McGrath  
By Françoise Mouly  
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# A Visit from the Chief

By [Samanta Schweblin](#)



*Illustration by Daria Mussienko*

Lidia often went to the third floor of the Graziano Institute and sat down on the wooden bench there, right across from her mother's room. If she arrived after lunch had been distributed, most of the old people would be asleep, and then she could sit and read in silence for a long time with her back to the sun. Sometimes she dozed off, too. She almost never went in to see her mother, who in any case no longer recognized her. But Lidia thought it was important to spend some time at the home every week, just to keep an eye on things. If she stayed long enough, a nurse would come by and Lidia could say hello, ask about any changes in her mother's medications, and let the nurse know when she'd be back next.

Lidia had got married and divorced, and, in between, she'd had a daughter who had used her very first paycheck to leave Buenos Aires and move to another continent. When Lidia realized that her daughter wasn't coming back, she bought a new apartment that she wasn't entirely sure about and took out a mortgage, which would insure that she fulfilled the vital responsibility of working until the last day of her life. Because, she thought,

without something like this, how do people cling to their lives and keep going? She wished that she knew people who were in the same situation as her so that she could ask them how they coped, but she wasn't close enough to anyone to ask such a question.

In addition to her mother, Lidia had a job. Three hours in the morning, two in the afternoon. She went into the office on Tuesdays and worked from home the rest of the week. She had moved everything from her daughter's room to the new apartment and set it up just the way it had been in the old place, always ready for a possible visit that was ever more unlikely. In the meantime, she worked at her daughter's desk, the only one in the apartment. She would move the two pink, quilted picture frames, the pencil holder, and the little ceramic box of lipsticks. If her daughter ever did come home, Lidia would be able to put everything back in the two minutes it would take the elevator to reach the fourth floor. She liked to think that, every day, her daughter lent her that corner of the apartment, the sole place where she seemed capable of concentrating.

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

Lidia would sit there at her computer and answer customer e-mails as they came in. There were automatic replies for almost everything—all they needed was a small dose of personalization—and she had learned to think her own thoughts while she copied, edited, and sent. She wondered what it was all about—that is, what this whole business of living a life was even for. Was there something that one was supposed to understand at some point? Something that one was meant to see or do? She wasn't expecting any fantastic revelations. But if, after nearly sixty years of watching this dance which was still twirling before her eyes, there had been no sign that told her, "This is why you're here," "This is what must be understood," then was she really heading in the correct direction?

So she went to the third floor of the Graziano Institute, sat on the wooden bench, set her purse to her right and her coat to her left, and read, because isn't that what people do when they've grown tired of waiting?

There she was, comfortable on her bench with her back to the sun and a book in her hand, when she saw an old woman coming down the hall toward

her, heading for the elevator. The woman walked past, shuffling her skinny legs with determination. She wore one of the institute's gowns tied at both sides and a pair of white sandals. The old woman stopped after a few steps, then turned back toward Lidia.

"Do you have any change?" she asked. "I need to take the train right away."

Lidia stood and checked her pockets. She knew she didn't have any change; she just wanted to show that she understood the old woman's problem and her intentions were good. The nurses were sure to come for the woman soon. Lidia smiled at her while she searched, and, in the performance, she was surprised to find three coins in her pocket. She pulled the money out to see how much it was, but, when she opened her hand, the old woman snatched the coins away.

"I'll pay you back," she said as she walked off down the hall.

Lidia watched the woman wait for the elevator, get on, and press a button. The doors closed, and the wall display showed the elevator's descent to the ground floor, where it stopped. She wondered how serious what had just happened might be, and considered notifying the nurses, though they were never easy to catch. She stood wavering in the middle of the hallway until she heard her mother moan and peeked timidly into the room to check on her.

"Mom," she said.

From the threshold, she watched her mother sleeping: the way she relaxed her jaw reminded Lidia of the way her daughter used to sleep. Maybe Lidia herself did the same thing, but it was impossible to know, because there was no one to see her asleep. The remains of her mother's lunch were piled on a tall tray table, which someone had rolled several feet away from her bed. Unlike the other patients', her mother's food was now served on plastic dishes, because she had started smashing things on the floor. Lydia's mother was prone to fits of boiling rage. Serving the food on plastic and moving it away as soon as the meal was over saved time on cleaning and gave the rest of the patients a little peace and quiet. Maybe it was the memory of the last such scene that Lidia had witnessed, but suddenly she felt terribly tired and

decided it would be best to come back the next day. She returned to the hallway and gently closed her mother's door.

It was raining outside. Lidia covered her hair with a kerchief and tucked her bag in her armpit to keep its contents dry. She wanted to get to her apartment and take off her shoes and pants. Though she hardly ever had any real appetite these days, she remembered that she had some curry left over from the night before. She went down to the train station and saw the old woman on the platform, waiting distractedly on a bench. The hospital gown she wore covered her body in front, but opened at the sides to reveal her thin white legs. Three young men were leering at her and laughing. Lidia went over and sat down beside the woman, blocking the men's view. By then, the train was roaring into the station.

"I can take you back," Lidia offered, hoping the old woman would recognize her. Fearing that the woman couldn't hear well, she said it a second time, louder.

"Very kind of you," the old woman said as she stood up, "but I need to get home."

The train stopped, its doors opened, and the woman stepped onto a car. It was Lidia's train, too, so she followed. She thought about calling the institute. She could wait with the woman at the next station until someone came to get her. If the old woman refused, though, Lidia wouldn't know what to do to make her stay.

On the train, other passengers stared at them. There was a woman who seemed about to offer help or ask what was wrong, so Lidia nodded at her as if to say, "It is what it is, we must be patient," and the woman appeared to understand and didn't look their way again. Lidia almost wished that she'd tried a little harder.

Lidia was struck that no one moved to give their seat to the old woman. Perhaps it was because she held so tightly to the handrail, seeming to obstinately ignore her own fragility, or maybe it was just that her attention was on what was happening outside. At each stop, the train braked and the old woman's head tilted from side to side as she looked for the station name

and peered at the map of the train line. She seemed to be struggling to figure out where she was.

Twice, Lidia asked the old woman if this was her stop, and both times the old woman said no, it was the next one. When they reached Lidia's stop, she was unnerved to see the old woman also preparing to get off the train.

Lidia tried to walk beside the woman and start some kind of conversation, but the woman was desperately slow, and when they were halfway up the stairs Lidia simply sped up and went out to the street, leaving her behind. Although the rain had lessened a little, she paused under a shop awning. She felt responsible, and her inability to free herself from other people's problems filled her with exasperation. The old woman was taking the last step so laboriously that Lidia had no choice but to go back to her and ask what she planned to do next.

"I'm going home," the old woman said. "I already told you!"

"But where is your house?"

The woman sucked in air as though summoning all her patience and drew herself up straighter, then glanced to either side while exhaling all the air she'd taken in, until her body returned to its initial curve. It was such a cartoonish gesture that Lidia felt her own brusqueness, sensed the tedium she was inflicting on the old woman with her questions instead of doing something useful to help her.

"Do you like white tea?" Lidia asked. "If you want some, I live just around the corner."

Once in the apartment, Lidia helped the old woman take off her sandals, gave her a towel so that she could dry her shoulders and chest, and lent her a light cardigan to wear over the hospital gown. Lidia would make the tea first and then call the institute. No one could accuse her of anything other than trying to help, and, if the old woman told them where the train money had come from, Lidia would just deny it. She sat the woman down at the dining table in the living room and went to the kitchen. When she returned, carrying a tray with the tea and some cookies, she found the old woman

watching the blank TV screen. Lidia switched it on, and they drank the tea in silence. For months now, it had been impossible for Lidia to do that kind of thing with her own mother.

They watched a news story about the noisiest cities in Latin America, then an interview with two Ukrainian soldiers. When the reporter asked the soldiers how long they thought the war would last, the old woman said, “See how handsome Joel looks?” And, for the first time, she smiled.

After two minutes of watching the weather forecast, Lidia went to the kitchen to call the institute.

“Graziano,” a voice answered.

“I think I found a patient of yours,” Lidia said.

“Do you mean a person who should be here?” There was no surprise in the voice on the phone. “One moment, please.”

She was transferred twice before she spoke with a doctor who described a “presumed runaway” and asked if that was the patient who was with her. Lidia peered into the living room to get another look at the old woman. The description was neither accurate nor fair, but she knew it was this old woman, so she said yes.

Back in the living room, she sat down at the table beside the woman and explained that she had called the institute. She tried to get a sense of whether the old woman understood what she was saying, but her face held no clues.

“The problem,” Lidia told her, “is that they can’t come to get you.”

The institute’s insurance required that patients be moved only by ambulance, and at the moment none were available.

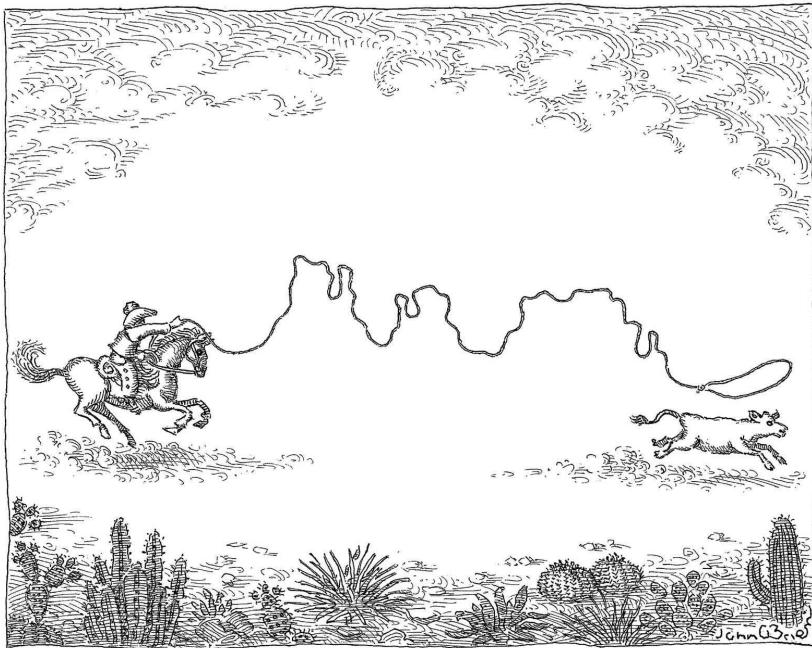
“They said to call tomorrow morning to coördinate the pickup,” Lidia explained. She realized how annoyed she herself was with this news, but she tried not to let it show. “Do you understand? You’ll have to spend the night here. I hope that won’t be a problem.”

“What about Joel?”

Lidia shook her head, wondering what she would feed the woman.

“He’s always late, but he always comes,” the old woman said.

What if the woman followed a strict diet and she gave her something that was off limits? Lidia didn’t know what her mother’s diet was, or if she even followed one. And where would this woman sleep? On the sofa? In her daughter’s room? Would she actually sleep? Or would she spend the whole night wandering around? Should Lidia help her bathe or get undressed? She thought that maybe she should lock the apartment door and keep the key in her room. She regretted bringing the woman home with her. The leftover curry wouldn’t be enough for both of them. Lidia went to the refrigerator to see what she could cook, and then the doorbell startled her.



*Cartoon by John O'Brien*

“It’s Joel,” the old woman called.

Lidia went to the intercom and lifted the receiver.

“Yes?” she said.

She could hear the sound of people on the street.

“I’m sorry to bother you,” a male voice said. “But is it possible my mother is there with you?”

How could this be? Had someone followed them? Had the institute called him and given him her address?

“It’s my sandal.” The old woman’s voice reached her from the dining table, though Lidia couldn’t see her. “The left one.”

Lidia looked at the sandals she had taken off the old woman and placed by the door. Without putting down the receiver, she picked up the left one. It had a plastic button the size of a watch battery, and, on the inside of the strap, there was a message: “If you find my mother, please press the locator :-).”

She buzzed the building door open, then smoothed her hair in front of the mirror where she hung her keys. She was tired, and angry, and nervous, all at the same time. Would she now need enough food for three people? Worst-case scenario, she’d have to order delivery. And just how old would this man be? She opened the door and looked out into the hallway, where she could hear the man climbing the stairs.

“He doesn’t take elevators,” the old woman said.

Lidia had an urge to close the door. She could still lock it and not reopen it—that was entirely within her rights. But the old woman had come over to the door. With cold hands, she weakly pushed Lidia aside, and now she was out in the hallway.

“Joel!”

Lidia saw the man walk up and let himself be hugged. He was slender and tall, more than a head taller than the old woman. His skin had a slightly orangish hue, like that of people she sometimes saw coming out of tanning salons. The old woman waved the man inside, but he politely turned to Lidia first, waiting for her permission.

“Of course, come in,” she found herself obliged to say. “Please.”

And now the man was inside.

He must have been about fifteen years younger than Lidia. Not young, but there was a distinct spring in his movements. He looked curiously down the hallway, toward the bedrooms, and then back at his mother with a smile.

“What happened, Mom? How is it possible that people still give you money?”

“You just have to know how to ask for it,” the old woman said.

Lidia gave silent thanks that she said no more than that. She asked the man if he wanted some tea, and he accepted. While she was making it, she could hear them talking and laughing in the other room. She was using more white tea today than in the whole previous month. Did she really have to feed him dinner, too? Was it still her responsibility to take care of the old woman, or could she simply leave her in this man’s custody? She considered calling the institute again, but realized that the man would hear her talking.

They drank the tea as he asked Lidia some questions. Where she’d found his mother, if she lived alone in the apartment, if she had any kids. But as soon as Lidia started to answer he seemed to lose interest. He was much more enthusiastic about talking than listening. He discussed his own life by asking himself questions and then immediately answering them.

He told her that he owned a gym behind the mall, and then asked himself, But was the gym really his, or was he just an employee? It was a hundred per cent his. And it wasn’t the muscles or the exercise that he liked; it was confronting his limitations every day and overcoming them. Was that something he could teach other people? Of course it was, that was why he owned a gym. Sometimes the people who came to the gym couldn’t even stand up straight. People who were young but had already given up. People who were divorced, tired, in debt, ill fed, disappointed with their own choices. Had he made good choices? He didn’t know—who was he to say? —but he did know that he could help others, and it was knowledge that demanded a commitment.

He moved more than necessary as he talked. He seemed to be aware of every part of his body, of the T-shirt tight on his chest and arms but loose in the abdominal area, of his straight spine, his white teeth, his hair, which was meticulously messy on top but carefully buzzed at the edge of his forehead and the nape of his neck.

The old woman asked to go to the bathroom but declined Lidia's offer of assistance, so Lidia just pointed her to the second door down the hall. Then she interrupted the man to tell him that she had called the institute.

"Did you give them your address?" he asked. "Or your phone number? Did they ask for it?"

"Not exactly." She told him that they'd asked her to take care of the woman and said they would pick her up the next morning.

"She runs away all the time," he said. "I think they figure she'll just get lost for good one of these days." Then he stood. "I'm going to check on my mother," he said.

She liked that he said "my mother" instead of "Mom." It felt more respectful, and she knew how hard it was to maintain that respect for senile people. She put the empty mugs on the tray and carried everything into the kitchen. When she came back, the living room was empty. She glanced down the hall and saw the closed bathroom door. The light in the last bedroom, her daughter's room, was on.

The man was lying on the bed with his arms behind his head and his eyes closed. He hadn't taken off his sneakers. His feet were crossed on top of the flowered bedspread, and he was moving them rhythmically, humming something to himself. Lidia cleared her throat, and he opened just one eye first, as though spying on her, and then smiled and sat up, swinging his legs down from the bed.

"I'm so sorry," he said, though he didn't look embarrassed. "My mother is still in the bathroom."

There was the sound of a flush, and the bathroom door opened. Lidia wanted the man to get off her daughter's bed, but, since he didn't move, she decided to remain standing in the doorway. The old woman approached and walked right past her into the room.

"Joel?"

"I'm here, Mom," he said. He didn't get up but reached out his arms to her, offering a hug.

The old woman went over to him, took hold of his head, and kissed his forehead. She sat down beside him and rested her temple on his shoulder. Lidia didn't want them in her daughter's bedroom, but there was something touching about that love, which seemed so real.

"Again, I'm sorry," he said. "Really. Do you know why I apologize twice?"

"Because you never sound like you mean it," the old woman said.

He held her against his body, cradling her.

"I hope everything is O.K. with your daughter," he said.

"Oh, yes, she's just travelling. She could come back at any time."

The man ran a finger over the wooden headboard.

"Long trip," he said, looking at the dust on his finger.

Lidia was still in the threshold of the room; she needed to sit down, but was resolved to remain on her feet.

"Want me to tell you what I think?" he asked, wiping his finger on his pants.  
"I know people, see? It's what I do."

He stared at her until she averted her eyes.

"I think you're scared. You want to know how you're scared?" He raised a hand, the palm open toward the floor. "You are this leaf. The wind blows it

this way and that.” His hand moved fluidly from side to side, suspended above her daughter’s daisy-shaped rug. “See how that little leaf lets itself be carried along? You know why the leaf lets the wind do what it wants?”

“Maybe the wind is life?” Lidia was uncomfortable with how sarcastic she sounded.

His hand hung motionless in the air. It wore two thick rings and had a small cross tattooed on the second knuckle of the index finger.

“I’m asking you, will the little leaf dare to hear the truth?”

She thought about what she would do if the man became violent. Should she call the police? She remembered that she had a magnet with emergency phone numbers stuck to her refrigerator; she could recall the color and the font, but she was nervous now, and could not think of the numbers themselves.

“I’m going to tell you,” the man said. “I’m going to tell you the truth.”

The old woman had fallen asleep, and he laid her gently down on the mattress. She grunted and settled in, and he got up, lifted her legs onto the bed, and covered them with the other end of the bedspread.

“It lets itself be carried along because it’s afraid of being broken. Of not being flexible enough, understand?” he asked.

The man took a step toward Lidia, and she let go of the doorway and stepped backward. Again, he put his hand out between the two of them.

“Young leaves can bend like this.” He closed and opened his fingers over his palm, showing her just how attentive one could be to such a movement. “Dry leaves . . . well, they are more prone to breaking, I’ll give you that.”

She thought about the locator chip attached to the sandal strap, about the doctor’s description of the old woman, about how her own mother, before hurling dishes to the floor, would suddenly open her eyes and mouth wide, as though the crash had reached her a few seconds early, or she were desperately anticipating it.

“But you are much stronger than you think.” He looked her up and down, studying her body part by part, and nodded, as if confirming his assessment. “And I’m here to prove that to you.”

The man took another step toward her, and she made a huge effort not to shrink away. He came very close to her without leaving the bedroom, and he smelled like the plastic of new things. She could feel her heart pounding fast, but the events in the bedroom were unfolding so slowly that she was able to pay real attention to them all, to contemplate and meditate on the details. What was happening was strange, but she was more surprised by the calm with which she was confronting it.

“You’re going to go to the front door, and you’ll open the bag I left on the floor there,” he said. “And what is the little leaf going to find in the nice man’s bag? A present. Get it and bring it to me.”

He didn’t wait for her to reply, but turned his back to Lidia and started examining her daughter’s bookshelves, his tattooed index finger caressing the spines of the books that caught his eye. Lidia walked away. If she stopped for a second in the kitchen, she could look at the magnet on the fridge; she’d have to try hard to remember the number for the police until she got a chance to dial it. She saw the bag on the floor, picked it up, and carried it to the kitchen, where she memorized the number. Now, where was her phone?

“So? Did you find the present?” the man asked from the bedroom, barely raising his voice.

She set the bag on the counter and unzipped it. She realized then what she had to do. She would simply leave the apartment. If the elevator took too long, he would catch her immediately on the stairs, and if that happened she would scream. Would the neighbors come out? How long would it take them? Lidia opened the bag. She saw the tip of a metal barrel and knew it was a gun before she took it out.

“Radio silence,” the man’s voice said. “The wind carries the leaf this way and that. . . . Bring in your spoils, let’s see!”

She had to move carefully as she took the gun from the bag, because she was shaking and didn't want any accidents. She'd seen enough movies to know that this was the moment when she needed to brandish the gun and threaten the man. All she had to do was immobilize him with a bullet to the leg and then run out of the apartment and start banging on doors in the hallway. But she knew she wouldn't do it.

She returned to the bedroom with the weight of the gun in her two hands. The old woman was still sleeping, and Lidia wondered if she might be dead. The woman had turned or been turned toward the wall, and her chest was as still as the rest of the room. But where had the man gone? The sound of the toilet flush told her that the bathroom door was now open. The man came into the bedroom, buttoning his jeans, and glanced quickly at his mother.

"Come on into the living room," he said, and snatched the gun away without an ounce of caution as he passed her.

He walked off; Lidia followed.

"Have a seat, please. Make yourself at home," he said.

He pointed her toward the armchair and sat down on the sofa at the end closest to her. The TV was muted and still tuned to the news.

"I know you don't like me, and I know you think I'm a liar," he said. "But I really do own a gym, I do love my mother, my mother does get lost again and again, and I do help people improve. Because I like to do it, period." He waved the gun carelessly as he spoke. "It's like a hobby, you know?"

He was staring at her, so she nodded.

"And sometimes, when I need money, I look for a way to fill my wallet, like everyone else. Is that stealing? No, stealing means taking money from people without giving anything in return, and I, as you must have realized, have a lot to give. What do we have to learn here? Well, that the two things are not mutually exclusive. Do you have money in the house?"

She nodded.

“Can you give me an idea of how much, more or less?”

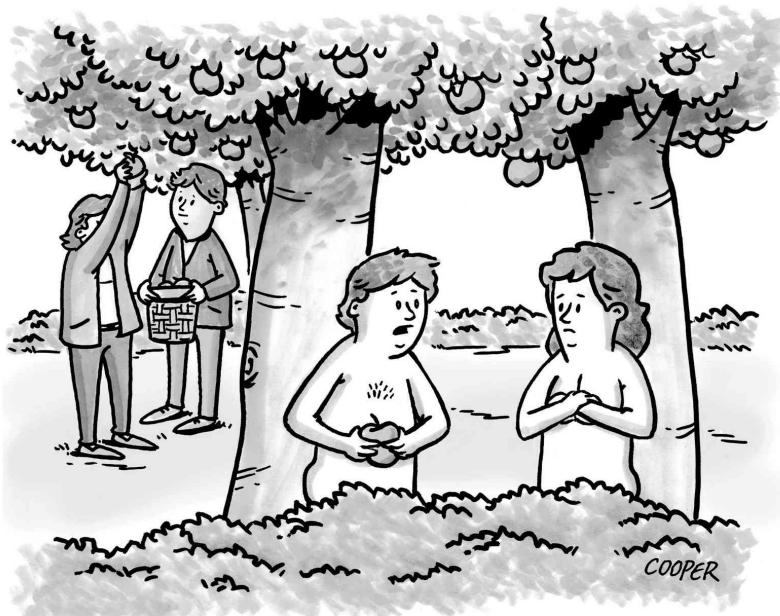
“I have six hundred dollars in the dresser in my room.”

He stared at her, waiting.

“And some jewelry, in the same drawer.”

“You’ll also give me your credit card.”

She nodded and started to get up, but he stopped her by gently resting his hand on her knee.



*“Well, this is what I thought the sign meant by ‘authentic apple-picking experience.’ ”*  
Cartoon by Nathan Cooper

“Wait, not yet.”

On TV, the interview with the two Ukrainian soldiers was replaying. The man’s hand was still on her knee. He gave it a few pats, and she wondered if he was planning to rape her. When she was young, she’d occasionally thought that such a thing could happen to her, but it had been years since the idea had crossed her mind.

“Sorry,” he said, and took his hand away.

The man stared at the Ukrainian soldiers for a moment, attentive to the mouths of those mute men talking over each other. She breathed, his distraction a sudden respite, but she took in so much air that she had to sit up straighter. Her spine elongated, her lungs inflated, and, even so, the air kept coming in. When she exhaled, she also let out a sincere sigh, and with the sigh her eyes filled with tears. She wiped them away with the back of her hand.

“Don’t worry so much,” the man said, his eyes still on the TV. “We’ll only stay the one night. I don’t like to wake my mother up once she falls asleep. You should get some rest, too. You’ll see, tomorrow you’ll have the most normal kind of day.”

He turned toward Lidia and patted the sofa cushion beside him. She didn’t move. He kissed the gun and winked at her, then patted the sofa again, so she got up from the armchair and sat beside him, but as far away as she could.

“Perfect,” he said with a nod. “I see you’re starting to understand how I like things.”

He stretched out the length of the sofa with his feet up and his head in her lap. She jerked her hands away, taking care not to touch him. It was a heavy, hot head, and seeing that face upside down, from above, was like looking at the underbelly of a giant worm. His eyes were below his mouth, and they were gazing up at her. His eyelashes were too long. His mouth seemed far away, damp and small, as though misplaced.

“Could you scratch my head?” he asked. “It helps me sleep.” He crossed his hands over his stomach, the gun between them, and closed his eyes. “Scratch, please.” He tapped his fingertips on the gun barrel. “Scratch.”

Lidia brought a hand to his curly hair and carefully sank her fingers in, moving them slowly over his skull. She tried to do it without thinking, like when she cut open a whole chicken and had to break the two joints between the foot and the thigh; just as with the chicken, she tried to breathe as little as possible with this man. The less she smelled, the less she felt what she was doing. She was sure she would remember that face for the rest of her

life. She would have been able to describe it to the police without hesitation, in full detail, except that he knew where she lived. Lidia thought about her daughter, about what would happen if her daughter were to call right now. Lidia would have no way to communicate that she was in danger. It had never occurred to her that they might need to agree on a signal, a code word like “salty” or “darling,” to let the other know that something was wrong. How could they have lived together all those years without a code word?

“Before I take your money and give you back your phone, I want to do something for you. Is there anything you need?” He waited without opening his eyes.

Lidia thought about her mother. By that time, she would have eaten dinner, and a nurse would have tucked her in and turned the TV to the documentary channel, which was the one that put her mother to sleep the fastest.

“We have all the time in the world. Tell me how I can help you.”

If the man killed her that night, Lidia thought in alarm, the news might take days to reach the institute.

“Speak,” he said.

And, when the news finally did reach her mother, would she understand? Would it be enough to tell her once, or would she forget right away? Would it hurt her again each time it was explained?

“Speak! I’m telling you.”

She had to say something; the man had opened his eyes, and his voice had hardened. And her daughter—how long would it take for news of Lidia’s death to reach her ears? How would they find her?

The man jolted upright and looked at Lidia, furious now for the first time. She wanted to speak—she had to speak. He stood up, pointed the gun at her head, and removed the safety. It was such a stunning moment that she had trouble reacting.

“You old bitch, tell me how I can fucking help you.”

She wanted to open her mouth, anything would do, but she didn't know what to say. The man kicked the coffee table, and it fell over and broke in two, sending magazines flying. She closed her eyes. In the darkness, she heard him approach, and she dreaded the new-plastic smell. She inhaled, and there it was, stronger than ever. She felt the cold barrel slowly come to rest against her temple. She thought about where the bullet would exit if it went in, and she realized that she couldn't answer, that she wasn't thinking straight.

"Nothing?" he shouted. "There's nothing I can help you with? You think I'm some kind of dumbass?"

He kicked something else, but she was too terrified to open her eyes and see what it was. She heard a slight click and then a bang. Had he fired? She tried to detect whether she felt any pain, whether the bang could have been a bullet that had gone into her head. Was she dead? Was this how she was going to die? She wanted to open her eyes, but the terror still kept them closed. There had been a bang, though. A noise, and then nothing. She opened her eyes.

"Do you think I'm a piece of shit? You think I can't do anything for an old bag like you? What the fuck have I been saying ever since I walked into this shitty apartment, huh? What the fuck do I do for a living?"

"The lamp," Lidia said. Her eyes turned to the lamp that hung over the dining table to show him what she was talking about. "Can you fix it?"

He turned around, slowly dropping the hand holding the gun, and went over to the table. He seemed to be studying the lamp, but suddenly he leaned toward the sideboard, stretching oddly over the porcelain knickknacks there, and with one swipe knocked them all to the floor. He kicked a chair over, stomped on it, broke its wooden backrest, yanked out a piece of wood, and, brandishing the jagged end, came menacingly toward her.

"What kind of fucking asshole do you think I am?" he screamed.

It was the strangest thing—she didn't feel scared anymore. There had been a bang, right? So was she even alive?

“You know what the problem with people is?” He had the wooden stake in one hand and the gun in the other and was threatening her with both. “They all go around asking for things. You’d think the gym was the fucking customer-service line straight to the Chief himself. ‘I want tighter glutes,’ ‘I need to lose weight,’ ‘I have to walk ten thousand steps a day.’ I want, I need, I have to. But what about me? I’m the fucking specialist! You think I didn’t train for this? You think I don’t try every goddam fucking thing I recommend? Open that fucking mouth, damn it! Do you or do you not believe that?”

“Joel?”

The old woman had got up and was clutching the hallway doorframe.

“When he gets mad, he curses,” she said, “but he’s not really like that.”

Lidia took the chance to stand up. He started shouting again as soon as he saw her on her feet.

“A fucking lamp? That’s what you need?”

“Joel,” the old woman said.

“Tell me your shitty problem! Open your fucking mouth!”

“My daughter,” Lidia said. Her voice shook like crêpe paper. “When she was a baby . . .”

“What? What is it?”

He took a quick step toward her and pushed her back down.

“Tell me, goddammit!”

“I don’t know!” Sitting on the sofa again made her feel desperate. Would she never be able to stand up?

The man tossed the wooden stake aside and leaned over her; he was huge. He took her by the shoulders and shook her violently.

“Open that fucking mouth!” He pushed her back against the sofa cushions and grabbed her jaw.

“I hated her.”

“I can’t understand you.” He was so close he seemed about to kiss her.

“I hated her so much as a baby.” Lidia had trouble talking with his fingers pressing her cheeks into her teeth so that she couldn’t close her mouth.

She tried to speak anyway. He squeezed harder.

“I had to learn to love her,” she said. “Now I love her so much—too much, even. It was a trap.”

He brought his lips to her ear and whispered, “It’s not my little fingers that are hurting you.”

He squeezed harder, and she tasted blood between her teeth.

“What hurts?” he asked

She had the urge to scream, but it was impossible.

“Her resentment,” Lidia said, and he released her.

She felt her mouth numb with pain and, at the same time, loosened. “My daughter’s resentment is like—”

He raised a hand to silence her.

“It’s done,” he said.

She closed her mouth, and he walked a few steps away. Neither of them spoke.

Then he set the gun down on the table. He pressed the fingertips of one hand against those of the other and then pulled them apart, as though stretching out invisible gum. Maybe he was going to say something, but finally he just

gestured, opening his hands with the palms down, apparently an appeal for calm. He lay on the floor, bent his knees, and started doing sit-ups. He did sets of five different exercises and then lay belly up for a while, his arms and legs splayed, as his agitated body gradually relaxed.

Once he had composed himself, he got up and went over to his mother, who was admiring him absently, and smoothed a curl of tangled hair on the right side of her head. He took her by the shoulders and seemed to want to sit her down somewhere, but, in the disaster he had sown, only the sofa was free. He patiently led the old woman over to sit at the end opposite Lidia. He looked around for the light switch, turned it off, and walked back toward them. He started to sit between them, but then he lay down instead, this time with his head on his mother's lap and his feet on Lidia's. The old woman sank her fingers into his hair to scratch his head as she settled in with a sigh. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall, scratching all the while.

Lidia sat for a long time staring at the now darkened apartment, feeling the weight of the man's legs on hers. If she got up, she would wake him. The gun was on the table, and the stake—where was the stake? She forced herself to take a few breaths, counting to seven on the inhale and nine on the exhale, trying to relax her body. She dropped her shoulders, concentrated on the feeling of the soles of her feet against the floor. She didn't need to relax—she needed to confirm that she was still alive. She knew that the exercise was working once she realized where the bullet could have exited. She had the urge to touch her head, to corroborate, but she didn't dare. Instead, she leaned it against the wall like the old woman, rested her arms on either side of her body, avoiding the man's legs, and closed her eyes. For a good while, it was so quiet in the apartment that she could hear the traffic on the avenue below.

"Know what I did before I had the gym?" he asked.

She opened her eyes. His were still closed. The desperation rushed back in.

"Close your eyes," he ordered.

She did.

“I’m asking you a question.”

“Sorry, I’m distracted. I think—”

“I asked if you knew what I did before I had the gym.”

She made an effort to think, because maybe she did know, maybe he had mentioned it at some point.

“Do you or don’t you know? Is it that hard?”

“What did you do?”

“I hung on the sides of buildings to clean windows.”

Lidia heard him sigh deeply, as though nostalgic. He cleared his throat, and she thought, Here comes the window-washer story.

But he said, “You know, one night, when I was seven years old, my father told me about how, when he was my age, he’d taken a cat that lived in his tenement, carried it up to the fifth floor, held it out a window, and dropped it. He told me that the cat survived, but it could only walk with its front legs. You know why I’m telling you this?”

It took her a few seconds to comprehend that she was supposed to answer.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“Because of what my father said next, something he explained to me. You want to know what he said?”

“What did he say?”



*"Just like last time, it's unprecedented."*  
Cartoon by Shannon Wheeler

“That from then on the cat would lie in the doorways of apartments, but wouldn’t go inside. And that if it lay in a doorway it meant that someone from that place was going to die. Then sooner or later, in two days or in a year, someone died, and everyone would be watching to see which doorway the cat went to sleep in next.”

“The cat knew who was going to die?”

“How could it know? No. It was my dad who moved the cat. He said that it was easy to know whose turn it was. That it wasn’t a sixth sense or anything —it just took paying real attention.”

“What if someone died suddenly, in an accident?”

“That did happen, but people figured that the cat indicated death sentences that were ordained from on high, and accidents were something else, not the work of the Chief himself. But I asked my dad that same question. And I asked if he believed in ghosts, in dead people who come back, in living people who go around dead—well, all that stuff. And you know what he said?”

“What did he say?”

“That he did. My father! He said of course he believed, and that was why we had to deal with them. Can you imagine? And you know what the funniest thing is? You know what it is? I’m asking you.”

“Sorry, right. What’s the funniest thing?”

“That he himself disappeared. Like a ghost, get it? And there I was one day, twenty years later, hanging from a platform and cleaning windows at the Imperial Hotel, and then I saw something amazing. I stopped cleaning and looked inside, using my hands like visors. It was a deluxe room, queen bed, desk, reading chair, lamps everywhere. And who was in there unbuttoning his shirt? It was me, myself, and I.”

“What do you mean, it was you?”

“It was me, thirty years older. But, I’m telling you, I was so stunned at first that I didn’t realize it was my dad. It was a shock, like seeing someone you’ve known your whole life and at the same time you’re acutely aware that you don’t know him at all. It was like coming face to face with the Chief himself. So, he unbuttons the last button and looks at me. But he looks at me without any surprise, and walks toward me, and now he’s so close that if the window was open I could touch him. I could grab hold of him if the ropes suddenly came loose from the beam. He was so close he could have saved me. But he drew the curtains. He closed them.”

For a few seconds, the man said nothing more. Lidia opened her eyes. The lights from the building across the way had gone out, and everything was darker now.

“Understand?”

“Yes,” she said.

“What do you understand?”

She was really thinking about it. There was something she couldn’t quite grasp yet. Maybe all she needed was a little more time.

“Give me a minute, please.”

“Of course,” he said.

And the two of them sat there in silence. She went back over the story, but soon she was thinking again about her mother and daughter, and then she felt so tired that she couldn’t resolve anything in particular about them, either. She wondered whether she was actually capable of falling asleep in a situation like this one, and a second later she had done it.

When Lidia woke up, the man wasn’t there. The daylight hurt her eyes for a moment, and her body felt stiff. She had to move slowly. At the other end of the sofa, the old woman was sleeping with her head lolling to one side.

There were noises coming from the kitchen, and the smell of coffee. The ceramic and porcelain shards on the floor had been swept against the wall. The broken chair had been picked up and placed in the hallway. She looked around for the gun but didn’t see it. The defective lamp was now illuminated. It was the first time in many years that she’d seen it turned on. Its plastic shade had a soft and satiny translucence, and its light shone onto a dish towel spread on the table, along with jam jars, the butter dish, the milk, and the little mug without a handle which she used as a sugar bowl. The man came in with three plates that he set on the table.

“Eggs,” he said.

He looked rested and refreshed. The old woman shifted at her end of the sofa, opened her eyes, and glanced around, disoriented.

“Do you have any money?” she asked Lidia. “I need to take the train right away.”

It was unclear whether she was asking for real or joking.

“Eggs, Mom.”

He went over and helped his mother up. The old woman seemed annoyed as she chastised him.

“You think I don’t know how to find my own way home? Huh?”

They walked together to the table, where he slid out a chair for her and pushed one of the plates toward her.

“All set,” he said, handing his mother some silverware.

The old woman took a bite. He was still standing beside her, and he poured her some coffee. Only then did he turn toward Lidia.

“Please,” he said. “Come on, there’s enough for everyone.”

Lidia stood up. Despite her numbness, there was something unexpectedly buoyant in her movements. In the lamplight, the apartment didn’t seem entirely familiar; it felt warmer and cozier than usual. The man sat down across from his mother and started to eat. He had set Lidia’s plate at the head of the table. She knew that she couldn’t eat a bite, but she went over and sat down anyway. She rubbed her face with the palms of her hands. The man poured her some coffee, and she drank it as she watched mother and son finish their breakfast.

“I took the money from the dresser and the jewelry and the credit card. I left your phone on your daughter’s nightstand. Is there anything else I can do for you?”

Lidia slowly shook her head.

After slinging his bag over his shoulder and helping his mother with her sandals, he turned to her.

“It’s a shame it has to be this way,” he said. “But, even if you need me, don’t try to find me. The best thing for someone like you is to never hear from me again.”

She nodded. He nodded, too, in farewell. He offered his arm to his mother, who took it, and without another word they walked to the front door. Lidia waited until she heard it click shut and then sat picturing it for a long time—white, closed, and motionless—as though trying to remember it. When she was convinced that they were really gone, she slowly leaned over to confirm it.

Finally, she let out a long sigh.

She looked around, searching the floor and the walls for a hole, a mark. Because there had been a bang, that possibility still existed, even though none of the neighbors had had the decency to come check on her. And, if she didn't find the hole, did that mean that she was dead?

Then she noticed the eggs, still there in front of her. She picked up a fork and took a bite, and then another, and another. She had finished the plate before she grasped just how hungry she was. So hungry she wondered if there was anything else in the fridge that she could eat, and she was surprised to realize that, without even thinking about it, she was on her feet again. ♦

*(Translated, from the Spanish, by Megan McDowell.)*

*This is drawn from “[Good and Evil and Other Stories.](#)”*

By Kanak Kapur  
By Sheila Heti  
By Han Ong  
By Larry Levis  
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## The Critics

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# What We Learn About Our World by Imagining Its End

Some fear we'll be buried in brimstone; others expect to be extinguished by A.I. But is there comfort to be found in our apocalyptic visions?

By [Arthur Krystal](#)



*Depictions of the end times have crowded the human imagination, from the works of John of Patmos to the lyrics of Tom Lehrer. Illustration by Tim Enthoven*

It's a mite soon to start grieving, but scientists now project that life on Earth will probably end in about a billion years. A Monday in February, 1,000,002,025, would be my guess. On that inhospitable day, give or take a few million years, the sun will become so hot that the oceans will boil, Earth's oxygen will disappear, and photosynthesis will cease, as will all living things. We should be so lucky. There's a pretty fair chance that life could be wiped out well before then—say, in early June, 2034, or on a cloudy Sunday in November, 3633. Then again, who knows?

Plenty of people do, as it turns out, and, if you want to know who they are, Dorian Lynskey's "[Everything Must Go: The Stories We Tell About the End of the World](#)" (Pantheon) is a good place to start. Lynskey, a British journalist and podcaster, has assembled biological, geological, archeological,

literary, and cinematic permutations of existential finales, leaving no stone unturned, be it meteor, comet, or asteroid. If a book, a song, a story, a film, a headline, a title, or a study has “world” and “end” in it, Lynskey has unearthed it. Just about everyone who’s had anything to say about the world’s demise, from John of Patmos to Doris of Lessing, seems to warrant a mention.

## The Best Books of 2024

*Discover the year’s essential reads in fiction and nonfiction.*



Lynskey’s own multilayered narrative pays respects, in its opening pages, to [Saul Bellow](#), Norman Cohn, Richard Hofstadter, and [Susan Sontag](#). Further along, the comedian [Marc Maron](#) shares a berth with the critic Frank Kermode. [Jean Baudrillard](#) also makes an appearance, which seems like shaving white truffles onto a perfectly good omelette. Popular culture nuzzles literary culture in these pages because the end of the world obviously casts a pall on all culture.

Self-styled polymaths, buckle up. Lynskey fearlessly juxtaposes Skeeter Davis’s song “The End of the World” (about heartbreak) with [Mary Shelley](#)’s “The Last Man” and the 1971 film “The Omega Man.” Karel Čapek’s sentient robots are here. So is the made-for-TV movie “The Day

After,” which emptied movie theatres and restaurants on the evening of November 20, 1983, when something like a hundred million Americans decided to watch the world blow itself up. A recap of the Y2K scare, which now seems quaintly innocent, reminds us of simpler tech times, and, naturally, every science-fiction doomsday story is trotted out, including Philip Wylie and Edwin Balmer’s 1933 novel “[When Worlds Collide](#),” which contains the sardonic yet sprightly lines “It is a new intoxication—annihilation. It multiplies every emotion.” Am I wrong to think that this could be a lyric in a Tom Lehrer song? And there it is on page 159, Lehrer’s 1959 nuclear-war anthem, “We Will All Go Together When We Go.” (“There will be no more misery / When the world is our rotisserie.”) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God. The End, however, clearly needed fleshing out.

Apparently, we’ve been thinking about wholesale termination at least since about 1800 B.C., the date ascribed to the myth of Atrahasis, a Mesopotamian creation story that predates Biblical writings by several hundred years and features a world-cleansing flood. In Zoroastrian scripture, a comet called Gochihr collides with the Earth and wreaks havoc, as comets will. Hebrew prophets, in turn, began transforming pagan cycles of birth, death, and renewal into a rectilinear history. They kept the flood but lost the comet and installed a monolithic God who thundered and roared against his land, threatening to pass judgment on all mankind and to put the wicked to the sword.

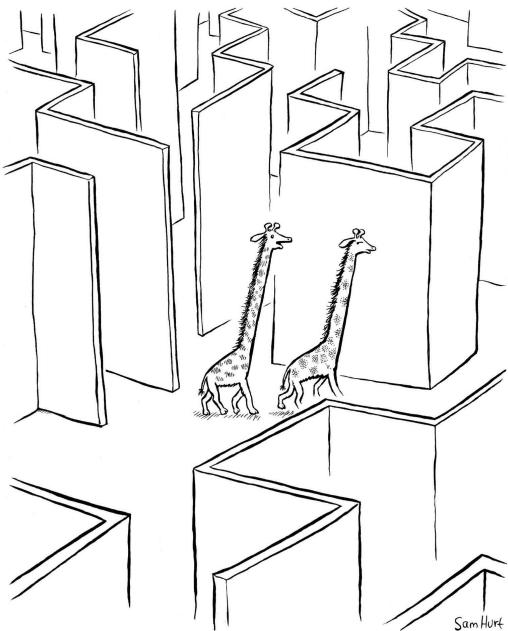
None of these stories, strictly speaking, were apocalyptic in the sense that we use the word today. “Apocalypse,” from the Greek *apokálypsis*, originally meant “an unveiling” or “an uncovering”; it connoted revelation, not destruction. Only in the mid-nineteenth century did the English word become synonymous with the idea of time coming to a full stop, signalling both punishment and redemption. Scholars now generally agree that the Book of Daniel, written around the period of the Maccabean Revolt, in 167 B.C., was the first text to sound real apocalyptic notes.

Daniel was meant to offer hope to Jews of the second century B.C., who were persecuted by the Greek tyrant Antiochus IV. Both corrective and cautionary, the book’s apocalyptic language and fierce imagery heralded a “Son of Man” who would one day defeat Israel’s enemies and establish

God's sovereignty over the earth. The world doesn't end, exactly, but injustice and oppression are eliminated. Daniel, of course, provided the backdrop for an itinerant preacher who would die, return, and promise to return again, offering the world redemption. And no one did more to chart his post-earthly life than John of Patmos.

John, the self-named author of the “Apokálypsis of Jesus Christ,” seems to have been a high-strung Aramaic-speaking Jewish convert from Judea, who had been banished to the Aegean island of Patmos in about 95 A.D. by the Roman emperor Domitian. Drawing inspiration from Hebrew texts and whatever shrooms grew on the island, John ramped up Daniel’s visions to include angels with feet of fire, the Whore of Babylon, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, and a hundred and forty-four thousand virgins (or *parthenoi*), most likely male.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, Revelation only gradually entered the canon. What troubled the early Church fathers wasn’t just its enigmatic language (“a woman clothed with the sun, and the moon under her feet”) and cockamamie numerology; certain passages evidently had an Old Testament feel to them. Yes, the [Book of Revelation](#) was too Jewish. Some of the fathers didn’t care for John’s vision of Jesus sitting on a throne in Jerusalem. Given his parentage, they preferred that he reign in Heaven rather than on earth.



*"I don't know what they're researching, but their budget is out of control!"*  
Cartoon by Sam Hurt

In time, the Book of Revelation became the cornerstone of apocalyptic thinking. Kermode's "[The Sense of an Ending](#)"—perhaps the most incisive commentary on Revelation's appeal—found that it "showed, and continues to show, a vitality and resource that suggest its consonance with our more naïve requirements of fiction." In other words, it's a hell of a story. Not the one about Jesus' life and death, but the one about his Second Coming, featuring the world's best foils: the red dragon, i.e., Satan, and the beast from the sea, whom theologians later interpreted as the Antichrist. Good and evil clash at Armageddon, ushering in a Messianic age lasting a thousand years, at which point Satan reappears, this time with Gog and Magog in tow, leading to a thrilling and satisfying dénouement: "Now I saw heaven opened, and behold, a white horse. And He who sat on him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He judges and makes war. His eyes were like a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns. He had a name written that no one knew except Himself."

In the first centuries A.D., John's depiction of the Last Days wasn't just a story; it was an infallible prophecy, which, as Norman Cohn noted, in his intricately argued "[The Pursuit of the Millennium](#)," was felt to be perpetually "on the point of fulfilment." Most people lived in houses and walked on streets that Jesus would have recognized, and they cleaved to the

Apocalypse partly because life on earth was no picnic. Commoners could look forward to a paltry thirty-five or forty years of a hardscrabble existence, without the benefit of medicine, dentistry, or a decent sewage system. People slept on floors or straw pallets, flicking aside mice and fleas. Diarrhea was prevalent, and pneumonia and serious infections were often a death sentence.

The Apocalypse was a way out, a temporal doorway to God and Heaven. The clergy could expect the fulfillment of prophecy, and the poor and the oppressed could look forward to absolution and better living quarters. A paradisiacal future that is tantalizingly close begs for an outstretched arm, and Revelation became integral not only to the Christ story but to those who believed in him. For them, Jesus was part of the life cycle both before *and* after death—so much so that Augustine of Hippo, the most levelheaded of saints, worried that anticipation of the Apocalypse was “carnal” because it felt too much like a worldly concern.

Although not intended to be part of history, the Apocalypse helped shape it. Millenarian prophets associated it with empire, persecution, and decadence, often fomenting social unrest and rebellion. Apocalyptic thinking fuelled the Crusades, stoked the English Civil Wars, and gave rise to seventeenth-century religious movements like the Fifth Monarchists. But it was in America, Jonathan Kirsch writes, that “the Book of Revelation would reach its richest, strangest, and most enduring expression,” one prophesied by a certain Italian explorer. “God made me the messenger of the new heaven and the new earth of which he spoke in the Apocalypse of St. John,” Christopher Columbus wrote, in 1500, “and he showed me the spot where to find it.”

Columbus was an adherent of the twelfth-century Italian monk Joachim of Fiore, whose chronological template of God’s plan for humankind progressed in three stages of spiritual development. His ideas impressed both Dante and Hegel, but not Martin Luther, who was suspicious of the original work. “My spirit cannot accommodate itself to this book,” Luther wrote, in 1522, noting that “Christ is neither taught in it nor recognized.” Despite his misgivings, though, Revelation appealed to those who condemned the Papacy and couldn’t wait for the millennium to begin.

The first Puritans to settle in America brought the word of Revelation with them and identified the New World, or, more specifically, New England, with the New Jerusalem. The sentiment was voiced in seventeenth-century pulpits, and no doubt induced the American minister Michael Wigglesworth to write the colonies' first best-seller, the 1662 epic poem "The Day of Doom: Or, A Poetical Description of the Great and Last Judgment." More than a century later, Thomas Jefferson wasn't having it. "The ravings of a Maniac," he said of Revelation, "no more worthy, nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams." But Jefferson, a coastal élitist, was in the minority. Prophetic belief, as the historian Paul Boyer put it, "has been a continuing motif in American thought."

Prophecy, of course, is all about time—knowing the future, and letting others in on it. The Calvinist priest and poet John Mason evidently assigned a date in 1694 as the start of the true millennium. (If so, he died a few days into it.) Both Isaac Newton, the inventor of calculus, and John Napier, the inventor of logarithms, took a stab at it, and, for reasons of public safety, I should note that Newton posited 2060 as the probable arrival of the Apocalypse. According to Jonathan Edwards, the arch-demon's reign had begun in 1606 and would end around 1866. Perhaps impatient with Edwards's timeline, the New York preacher William Miller, whose success at prophecy can be inferred from what is known in the Millerite movement as the Great Disappointment, predicted that the Second Coming would occur on October 22, 1844. And let's not forget the chicken in Leeds, England, which, in 1806, laid an egg inscribed with the words "Christ is coming." Much to the amazement of the local populace, the eggs kept popping out—until it was discovered that the owner was writing the words and reinserting the eggs into the hapless hen's cloaca.

Being wrong puts off neither prophets nor their followers. The term "cognitive dissonance," coined by the psychologist Leon Festinger in the nineteen-fifties, described an imbalance between conviction and information. He had been studying a cult led by Dorothy Martin, a Chicago housewife who promised that, in December of 1954, an alien spaceship would arrive, followed by a great flood. When both events failed to materialize, the cult's members were convinced that their own prophesies had stopped them from happening.

“The time is at hand,” John tells us—once at the start of the “Apocalypse” and once toward the end. But it wasn’t, and the delay led to the first apostasies and, after a while, to the seemingly endless stories about the end times. Lynskey, whose range is impressively ecumenical, tells us that secular eschatology properly began in the early nineteenth century with the publication of [Lord Byron](#)’s poem “Darkness.” Fair enough. What earlier poet would have envisioned the earth as “seasonless, herbless, treeless, manless, lifeless— / A lump of death”? The poem, triggered by the famous sunless summer of 1816, when Europe was shrouded by ash from an eruption of the Indonesian volcano Mt. Tambora, offers a line that belongs in any zombie apocalypse: “The meagre by the meagre were devour’d.”

God may have started to disappear from nineteenth-century literature, but there was no slacking off in apocalyptic thinking. Although nobody at the time really believed that nature was going to snuff us out, writers could still dream. Jean-Baptiste Cousin de Grainville’s novel “Le Dernier Homme” (1805) relied on sudden infertility (“one of the oldest ideas in apocalyptic fiction,” Lynskey observes), and Mary Shelley’s novel “[The Last Man](#)” (1826) made use of a global plague. Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Conversation of Eiros and Charmion”(1839) is the oddest end-of-the-world story by way of a comet, if you don’t count Gochihr. And Richard Jefferies’s “After London; Or, Wild England” (1885) doesn’t specify the source of the catastrophe but lets us know that very few Victorians survived it.

Early filmmakers felt a similar pull toward a planetary flameout. The prolific Danish director August Blom ended the world in a 1916 silent, and Abel Gance’s 1931 “End of the World,” based on Camille Flammarion’s 1894 novel “Omega: The Last Days of the World,” considered the effects of a streaking, albeit blundering, comet—a trope later reimagined in such films as “Deep Impact,” “Armageddon,” and “Don’t Look Up.” A less ambitious writer might have been wary of conflating the actual and the fanciful, but Lynskey, whose real subject is the human imagination, deftly interweaves nature’s destructive power with art, literature, and religion.

In America, generally speaking, Christian fundamentalism steadily gained influence, peaking in the latter part of the twentieth century, when televangelists like Billy Graham, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker spread the good word in living rooms everywhere.

Prophecy-oriented publishers and bookstores flourished in the nineteen-seventies, a decade in which, as one historian wrote, “watching, waiting, and working for the millennium . . . has become, even more than baseball, America’s favorite pastime.” Two years after Muammar Qaddafi’s 1969 coup, in Libya, [Ronald Reagan](#) described it as “a sign that the day of Armageddon isn’t far off. . . . Everything’s falling into place. It won’t be long now.” Long enough, however, for [Jerry Falwell](#), the head of the Moral Majority, to inform his followers in 1999 that the Second Coming would occur within ten years. The Antichrist, he added, “if he’s going to be the counterfeit of Christ, he has to be Jewish. The only thing we know is he must be male and Jewish.” You can’t miss him.

This vogue of divination was attributable in large part to the extraordinary success of Hal Lindsey’s “[The Late Great Planet Earth](#),” which became the best-selling nonfiction book of the nineteen-seventies. Lindsey’s next books, including “[The 1980’s: Countdown to Armageddon](#)” and “[The Rapture](#),” drew on the teachings of John Nelson Darby, an Anglo-Irish dispensationalist, who, in the eighteen-thirties, conceived the notion that God would whisk the righteous up to Heaven right before the Tribulation—a period of lawlessness, sinfulness, suffering, and the machinations of the Antichrist. Darby gave it its nifty name, the Rapture, thus adding an exciting new wrinkle to the Apocalypse. Less fervent Protestant denominations demurred, but the Rapture helped fill evangelical churches while creating a mainstream end-of-times industry. Between 1995 and 2007, Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins produced the sixteen-novel “[Left Behind](#)” series, which sold more than eighty million copies, and today there seem to be more Bible-driven books about the end of the world than there are virgins in Heaven.

For many of the books’ readers, it’s just a question of time. According to a 2022 report by the Pew Research Center, fourteen per cent of all Christians in the U.S. “believe that Jesus will definitely or probably return in their lifetime.” That fourteen per cent represents some thirty million Americans who right now are planning to spend a thousand years in a Messianic kingdom on earth or else speed directly to Heaven. It may be closed-minded to ask, but how much do the rising oceans matter to them? If the Second Coming is on the earthly horizon, might not your concern for the horizon’s health be somewhat limited?

“Extreme weather” is the foremost contender for presenting us with a “material crisis on a global scale,” the World Economic Forum’s 2024 “Global Risks Report” stipulated. Scorching heat could render large parts of the planet uninhabitable, even as coastal cities are submerged beneath rising seas. Melting permafrost could release vast amounts of methane and accelerate global warming, causing the collapse of the Gulf Stream and other boundary currents and further destabilizing the earth’s ecosystems. But, just when we thought it was unsafe to go into the water, along come other scientific authorities who claim that the sharks are farther offshore than we think. Last year, Hannah Ritchie, a senior researcher in the Programme on Global Development, at Oxford, gave us “Not the End of the World,” whose subtitle assures us that “We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet.” What’s a poor climate ignoramus supposed to think?

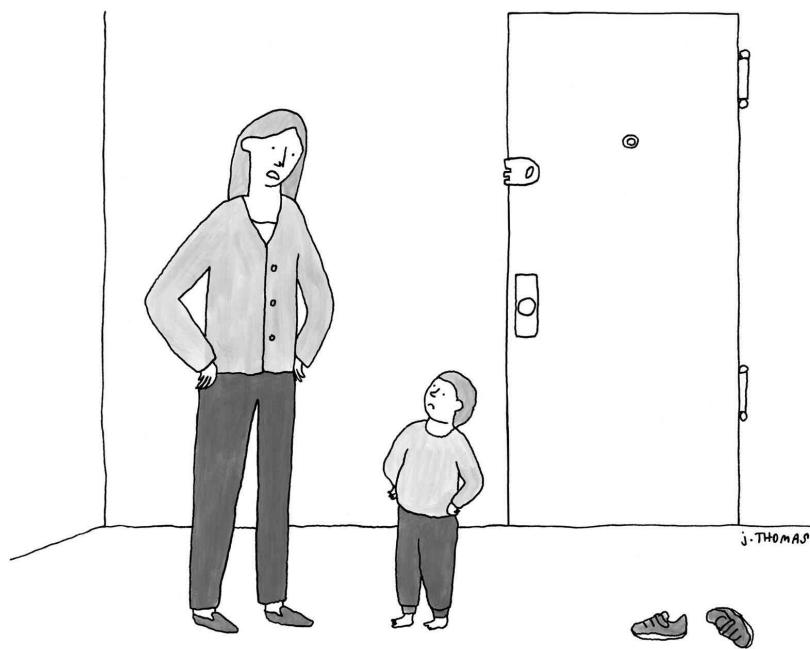
It does seem obvious, though, that we’re moving too slowly to stop climate change. This slowness, I once believed, was due to the slowness of the change. Sultry summer days aside, we’re just not sweating enough. But no, things are actually worse than we think, David Wallace-Wells says resoundingly in [The Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming](#) (2019). “The slowness of climate change is a fairy tale,” he writes, “perhaps as pernicious as the one that says it isn’t happening at all.”

And there’s plenty more to worry about. Russia and America have approximately ten thousand nuclear weapons between them, and at least twice—in 1962 and 1983—human error almost launched a nuclear attack. When the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* introduced the iconic Doomsday Clock on its June, 1947, cover—designed by the artist Marty Langsdorf, the wife of a Manhattan Project physicist—the clock was set at 11:53 P.M. Last year, all we had left were ninety seconds. It’s not hard to understand why. Fusion has taken its place alongside fission, Putin has succeeded Stalin, and Iran may soon develop its own bomb. God figures less than ever in precincts of apocalyptic thinking. We can take care of our own destruction, thank you very much.

Perhaps even with assistance from our digital helpmeets. The philosopher Toby Ord, a senior researcher at Oxford, believes that we face an existential threat from “unaligned artificial intelligence”—that is, A.I. whose values no longer coincide with ours. One fine morning, some incarnation of A.I. might

decide, for reasons of its own, to change things up, much as Skynet did in the “Terminator” movies. Ice caps may continue to melt while coral reefs bleach in the hot oceans, but it’s the descendants of Karel Čapek’s Czech robots that may do us in.

Lynskey allots space to all sorts of apocalypses, but, for the most part, “Everything Must Go” is doom without the gloom. His accounts of natural disasters are leavened not only by the imaginary disasters in his purview but also by his obvious enjoyment of them. If, on occasion, the prose is slightly purple—artists “dipped their pens in the foaming ink of revelation”—the book’s own stock of revelations never runs short. Did you know that [Stanley Kubrick](#) was so convinced of imminent nuclear war when filming “Dr. Strangelove” that he made plans to move to Australia? Or that the Pentagon took issue with Stanley Kramer’s film “On the Beach,” because the brass maintained that only five hundred million people would die in a nuclear war and not, as the film suggests, basically everyone? Or that J. G. Ballard, deservedly famous for his dystopian fiction, raised the idea “that the human spirit might be somehow transfigured by an apocalyptic nuclear war, even at the cost of millions of deaths”?



*“Don’t make me count to three, or else I’ll have to come up with what happens after three.”*  
Cartoon by Julia Thomas

It’s only because Lynskey’s book is so thoroughly researched that one notices peculiar omissions. Why, for example, does Joni Mitchell’s “Big

Yellow Taxi” rate inclusion but not Bryan Walsh’s sobering “[End Times: A Brief Guide to the End of the World](#)” or [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)’s Pulitzer Prize-winning “[Sixth Extinction](#)”? Such absences don’t detract from Lynskey’s achievement—they’re just head-scratchers. On the plus side, a section titled “Climate,” which tips its hat to [Rachel Carson](#), [Bill McKibben](#), Jonathan Schell, and [Jonathan Franzen](#), is, in its way, an implicit tribute to this magazine’s informed recognition that what threatens the environment threatens us. Indeed, in a survey of people around the world between the ages of sixteen and twenty-five, fifty-six per cent agreed that “humanity is doomed.”

Endings are invitations to ruminate, but not every ending has to be apocalyptic. Sara Teasdale’s lovely poem “There Will Come Soft Rains” concludes, “Not one would mind, neither bird nor tree / If mankind perished utterly; / And Spring herself, when she woke at dawn, / Would scarcely know that we were gone.” Which points to another problem with the Apocalypse: it leaves no room for melancholy. Instead, it speaks to our need for order and for a narrative that circumvents simple chronology. The Christmas story gets even better when you know that Christ will return. It’s certainly better than any man-made apocalypse, since a secular one is the end of us, while the original lets us go on.

That’s the thing about the Apocalypse: for all its nuttiness, its fire and brimstone, and the agonies of the Tribulation, it offers both closure and continuation. We get to live our happily ever after, and with Jesus. But then what? Christianity rubber-stamps the Apocalypse without considering what continuation really means. True, some people get tossed into a fiery lake, but what about the saved? Perhaps it’s best not to know. The truth is, a world that endures forever actually makes less sense than one that doesn’t. And the same goes for us. We can imagine existing a thousand years, maybe even ten thousand—but a million? Surely Heaven will present us with a few longueurs.

Scriptural literalists may welcome Christ’s charging down from Heaven as the last step in the plan that God set in motion, His purpose for creation finally achieved, but for the less millennially inclined this is an ending that effectively diminishes whatever came before it. If the Apocalypse is a fact, then all other facts follow obediently toward its realization, making human

agency and history itself beside the point. This is what the theologian Martin Buber found so objectionable. “Everything here is predetermined, all human decisions are only sham struggles,” he wrote. “The future does not come to pass; the future is already present.”

Buber especially disliked what he termed “faith in doom,” which inhibits us from living authentically and in harmony with God. But what Buber considered ruinous is what many fundamentalist Christians, knowingly or not, continue to prize: the idea that history is already written and that a state of permanent imminence not only exists in the future but also overlaps with our harsh or meaningless present. For them, prophecy, even when it falls short, is always preferable to uncertainty. For the rest of us, though, certainty is unavailable, and we’re left to ponder which perilous force—nuclear, climatic, or biological—will get us first.

Augustine connected our anxiety about the Last Days to a fear of death. I’m not so sure. Not to get too existential about it, but existence itself may be the source of such anxiety. It isn’t just that we find ourselves asking what it’s all about (“Is that all there is?,” as Peggy Lee used to sing); it’s the deep-rooted suspicion that, whatever “it” is, it amounts to nothing. Kierkegaard famously made the leap into faith because he had come to the conclusion that he had little choice. It was either faith or nothing: “I stick my finger into existence—it smells of nothing. Where am I? Who am I? How came I here? . . . And if I am to be compelled to take part in it, where is the director?” We know where the director is, and his movie is about both the Christmas story and the Apocalypse.

If an ending must come, let it be from the stars. The universe gave us birth; let it give us death as well. But it will take time. The sun provides heat and light, the moon keeps the tides in check, and the planets revolve nicely around a star that’s neither too small nor too large, and just the right temperature. It almost makes you think that someone had a hand in it.

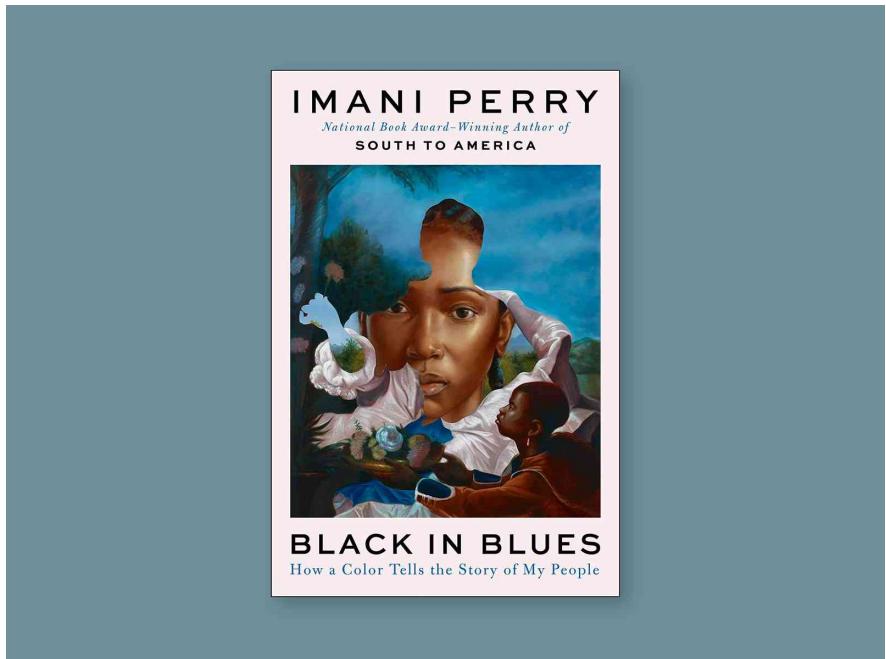
And wouldn’t you know it: the signs are lining up again. After nearly two and a half millennia, the Jews are back in Israel and messianic messengers stalk the halls of power in both Iran and the Knesset. Autocrats rule nations whose war chests are brimming with nukes and the missiles to deliver them. Wouldn’t it be a hoot if the Hebrew prophets were right and Judgment Day

is at hand? Should it come, however, there had better be a convincing explanation for all the misery and suffering that human beings have always inflicted on one another. Christ on a horse does not atone for the gas chambers.

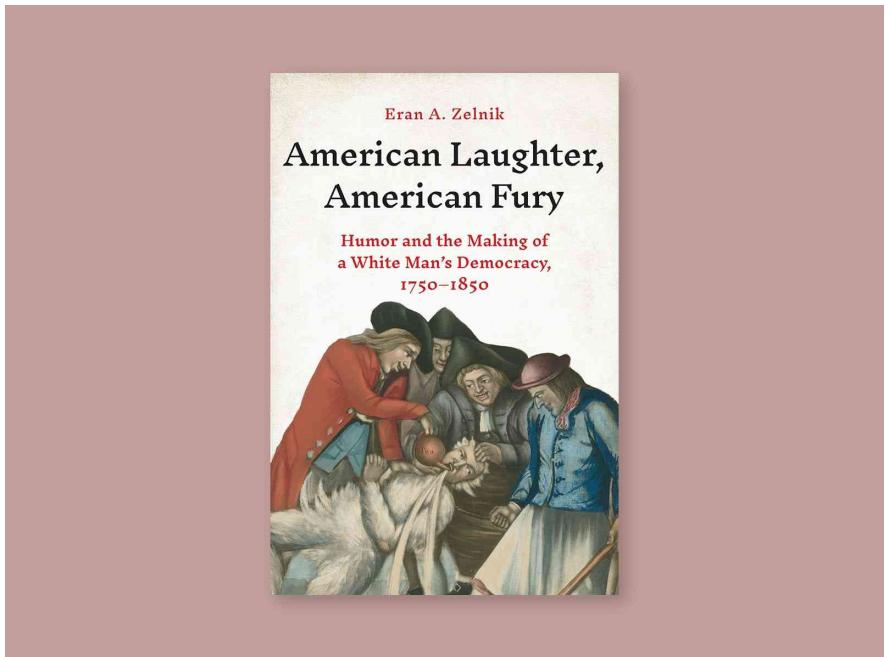
In the meantime, in between time, we exist in a kind of cosmic game of checks and balances that works amazingly well, as long as we avoid destroying ourselves or being struck by an Earth-seeking asteroid. And while we wait let's keep in mind that the Earth is an infinitesimal dot on the skein of existence. Perhaps a hundred billion stars exist in our galaxy alone—and who knows how many planets? Moreover, there are as many as two trillion galaxies in just the observable universe. Do I need to spell it out? The end of the world is small potatoes.

Having to come to terms with this eventuality is the price we pay for being able to imagine it in the first place. And because we can, Lynskey's darker forebodings become, in their own compendious way, almost heartening. So many dire prophecies, so many pronouncements of doom from clerics and secularists alike, so many tributaries flowing toward extinction—yet here we are. And here we remain until we or the universe decides otherwise. ♦

By Louis Menand  
By Katy Waldman  
By Daniel Immerwahr  
By Thomas Mallon  
By Ian Buruma  
By Fergus McIntosh  
By Joshua Rothman  
By Anna Russell  
By Jennifer Wilson  
By Daniel A. Gross  
By Richard Brody



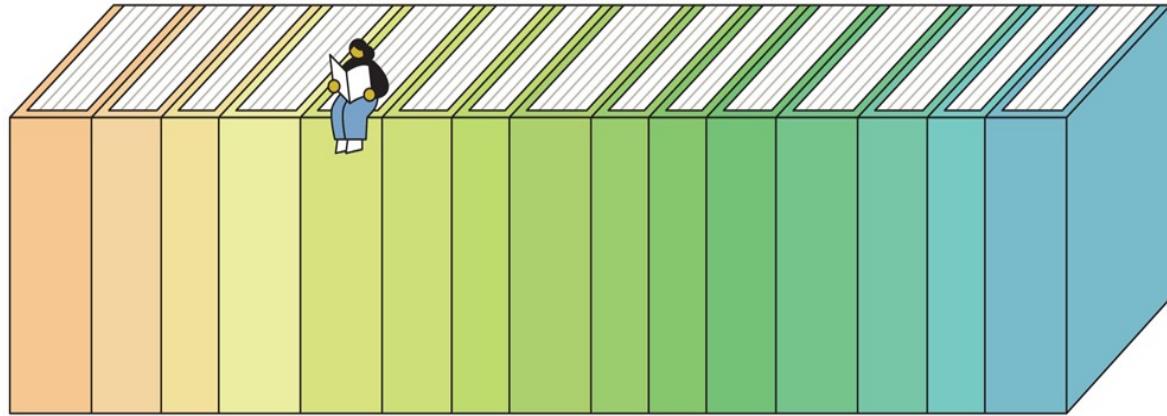
**Black in Blues**, by *Imani Perry* (Ecco). This cultural history of the color blue, and how it threads through Black lives and “the peculiar institution of slavery,” opens with the indigo trade in the sixteenth century. The dye’s production by enslaved individuals was, Perry writes, “an early and clear example of a global desire to harness blue beauty into personal possession.” Touching on a range of historical, artistic, musical, and literary references—from the color’s significance in Yoruba cosmology to the blue candles used in hoodoo rituals to the “tremor” of the “blue note”—Perry illuminates how the color has been variously associated with mourning, spiritual strength, and forces of freedom and oppression.



**American Laughter, American Fury**, by *Eran A. Zelnik* (Johns Hopkins). This sobering history tracks how humor, with “its double-edged nature,” was deployed on this side of the Atlantic between 1750 and 1850 to tear down old hierarchies and build up new ones, in the process helping the young United States become a democracy reserved for the benefit of white men. With examples including rebellious colonists’ proud adoption of “Yankee Doodle” as their anthem—the song was initially sung by British troops, to make fun of supposedly unsophisticated locals—and the emergence of blackface minstrelsy, Zelnik shows how white settlers used playfulness and humor to position themselves as the rightful owners of the land, to the exclusion not only of foppish Brits but also of Indigenous and Black Americans.

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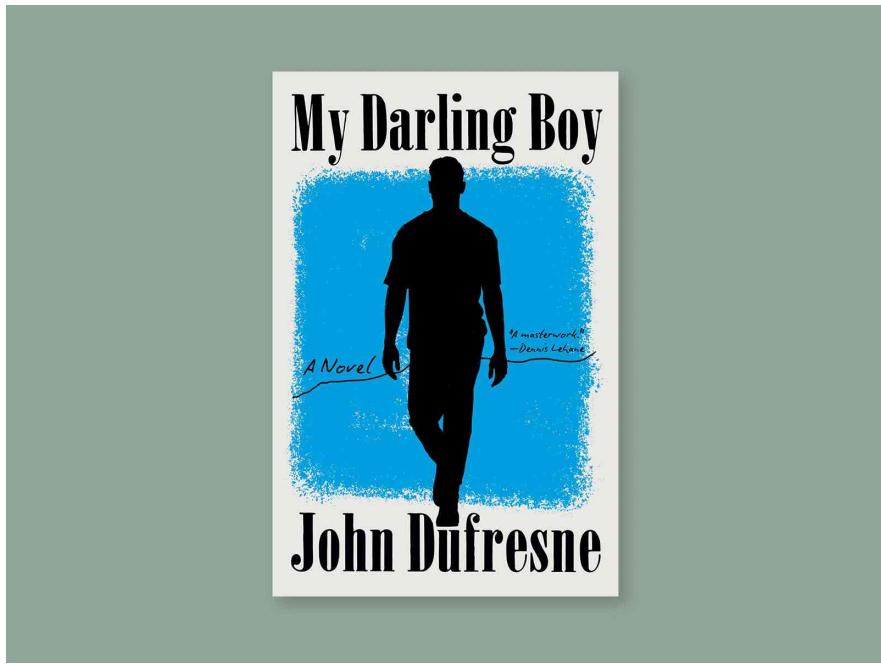
## What We're Reading



*Illustration by Rose Wong*

*Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.*

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**My Darling Boy**, by John Dufresne (Norton). In this novel, a sensitive portrait of parenthood, a divorced, retired newspaperman named Olney, now working part time at a miniature-golf course in Florida, embarks on a quest to save his son from opioid addiction. Along the way, he encounters a host

of Florida-gothic figures, both comic and tragic, including a reverend with a cable-access show and blind octogenarian twins. His relationships with these peculiar characters contribute to the novel's emotional power, even as the devoted Olney finds little respite or reason for hope: "He thinks of all the people who have come and gone in his life, and how once they start going, they don't stop."



**Too Soon**, by Betty Shamieh (*Avid Reader*). This début comic novel, by an accomplished playwright, stitches together the lives of three generations of Palestinian women as they search for personal freedom. Spanning six decades and told from alternating points of view, the story follows Zoya, who flees a besieged Jaffa for the U.S. in the nineteen-forties; her daughter, Naya, and her experience as the child of refugees in the seventies; and Naya's irreverent daughter Arabella, who, in Palestine in the twenty-tens, endeavors to direct a gender-reversed production of "Hamlet." As Shamieh balances her characters' painful family history and their boisterously funny voices, the women navigate between the "push to be modern, radical, and free" and the "pull to find comfort in a community and identity" born of tradition.

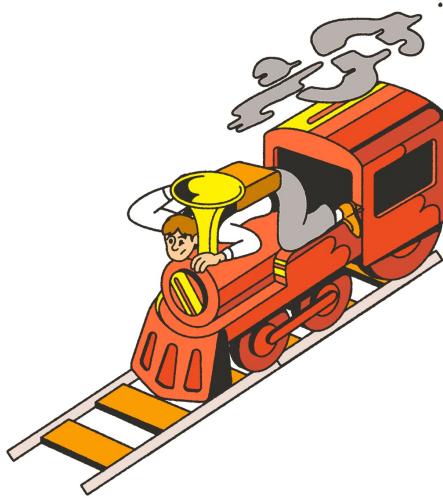
By Ian Buruma  
By Ian Crouch  
By Louis Menand  
By The New Yorker  
By Daniel Immerwahr

## Books

# The Insidious Charms of the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic

You're passionate. Purpose-driven. Dreaming big, working hard, making it happen. And now they've got you where they want you.

By [Anna Wiener](#)



*The entrepreneurial ethic encourages employees to lay their own tracks—but to where? Illustration by Jimmy Simpson*

No literary form captures the pathologies of contemporary American work quite like the humble—honored, grateful, blessed—LinkedIn post. In the right light, the social network for professionals is a lavish psychoanalytic corpus, bursting with naked ambition, inspiration, desperation, status-seeking, spiritual yearning, brownnosing, name-dropping, corporate shilling, and self-promotion. Novels have been written about less, but no one is on LinkedIn for the prose. Recently, I visited the site after years of being away. A college classmate and talented artist was posting about the balancing act of being an “effective solopreneur”; a former business contact was sharing his professional journey, with the moral “don’t be afraid to change direction”; a person identifying as “ex-Meta” encouraged hopeful Meta interviewees to “show real connection to the mission and motivation”; a

director at a multinational brewing company that was hiring wrote, “Our mandate is to dream, challenge, question and provoke.”

When did people start talking like this? LinkedIn’s style of sanitized professional chatter—to say nothing of the robust cottage industry that exists to support it, from branding strategists and career coaches to software programs designed to generate shareable, safe-for-work content—is of a piece with mantras like “do what you love,” “follow your passion,” “bring your whole self to work,” and “make a life, not just a living.” (The linguistic trend extends beyond the domain of yoga classes and L.E.D. signage in co-working spaces; a recent *Times* article described [Luigi Mangione](#), the twenty-six-year-old accused of murdering the C.E.O. of UnitedHealthcare, as possessing “an entrepreneurial spirit” in college, because he resold Christmas lights.) This discourse around work can seem like a distinctly modern phenomenon. But a new book, “[Make Your Own Job: How the Entrepreneurial Work Ethic Exhausted America](#)” (Harvard), by Erik Baker, argues that the imperative to imbue work with personal significance is part of a long-standing national preoccupation with entrepreneurialism.

## **The Best Books of 2024**

*Discover the year’s essential reads in fiction and nonfiction.*



Baker is a lecturer in the history of science at Harvard, an associate editor of *The Drift*, and a freelance writer for various publications ([including this one](#)). He sees his book as a corrective to “conventional histories of midcentury American culture,” which he believes overemphasize bureaucracy and conformism. As a study in intellectual history, “Make Your Own Job” is less concerned with the chronological development of American entrepreneurship than with the idea of it—the ways in which “ordinary people have thought about their working lives” and how entrepreneurialism has become a value unto itself. Baker aims to track the anxieties and desires of a society undergoing epochal transitions and the evolution of what he calls “the entrepreneurial work ethic”: an orientation that is highly individualistic and competitive, and that operates on the level of personality. It is present in the pervasive compulsion to work harder, longer hours and to feel adrift or even “devoid of purpose” when there isn’t enough work—or the “right” work—to do.

The entrepreneurial work ethic, Baker writes, meets a “fundamental ideological need” by addressing a central tension of American capitalism: most people need to work to earn a living, but well-paid, stable, and fulfilling jobs are hard to find. In times of intensifying economic inequality, when many of the jobs on offer are precarious, underpaid, and spiritually deadening, the prospect of becoming your own boss holds a lot of appeal. Entrepreneurialism is “tenacious,” Baker maintains, in part because it has the power to “metabolize discontent with the present order of work.” It suggests the possibility of liberation or relief—an exit, or a workaround. The ethic, he also notes, tends to be popular during periods of acute unemployment. The result is too many people working much too hard because there’s just not enough work.

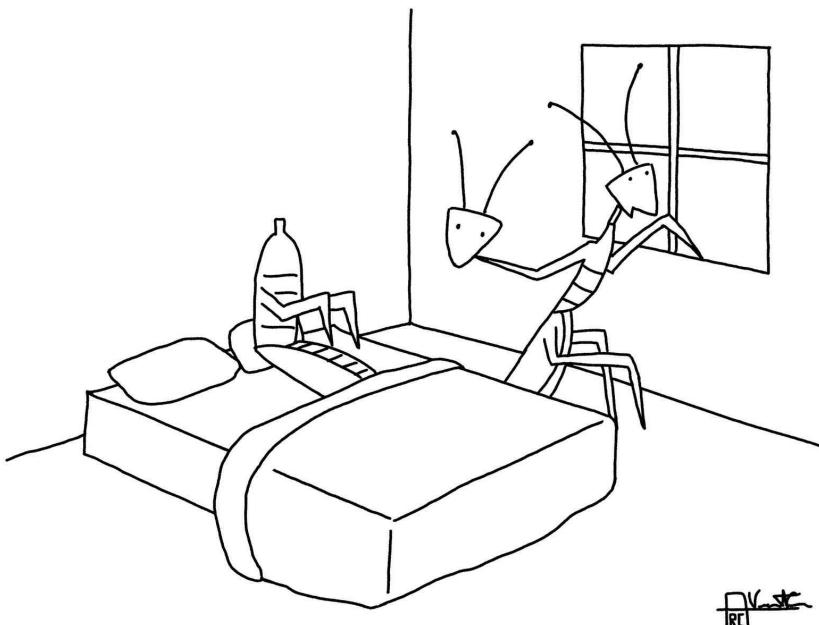
Before the entrepreneurial work ethic became widespread, in Baker’s account, what predominated was the “industrious work ethic,” in which labor of any kind was considered a moral good, and framed in terms of stoicism and duty. The industrious work ethic applied to workers in mills and on Henry Ford-style assembly lines, and echoes of it could be seen in middle-class “organization men,” who were loyal to their employers, and received loyalty in return. Workers submitted to a company, whether I.B.M. or General Motors, and slotted themselves into bureaucratic structures that discouraged risktaking and did not reward individualism. This orientation

toward work was buffered, in part, by strong labor unions and a relatively sturdy social safety net.

If the industrious work ethic advanced a certain kind of “static moralism,” Baker writes, the entrepreneurial work ethic was “a dynamic philosophy of *personal* development.” The notion that one’s unique personality could be transmuted into prosperity and opportunity had broad appeal at a time of economic instability and cultural transformation. Baker identifies a number of practices and traditions from the first half of the twentieth century as embodying entrepreneurialism, from New Thought, an influential spiritual movement that championed the transcendence of the mind over material reality, to direct-selling networks. (“Now you are in business for yourself,” Avon told its salespeople.) But the industrious work ethic prevailed well past the mid-century mark, with many workers accepting mental or physical drudgery in return for security and predictability; it was not until the later decades of the century that the entrepreneurial work ethic came into full force. Though entrepreneurial capitalism might have been a bit onerous in its implicit mandate to both generate opportunities and fulfill them, it was also presented as a more creative, even kinder alternative to the industrial capitalism that preceded it.

The idea of a workplace in which entrepreneurialism could be exhibited at every level was entrenched by self-help writers and what Baker calls “management intellectuals”—consultants, corporate executives, business journalists, and other predecessors of today’s *TED*-talk thought leaders. One of the most prominent of these was Peter Drucker, an Austrian-born American writer, consultant, and professor. His breakthrough book was “[Concept of the Corporation](#)” (1946), a sort of ethnography and appraisal of General Motors. In his view, the personal satisfaction of employees was essential to a company’s bottom line. Large organizations, run properly, could instill a sense of purpose and dignity even among rank-and-file workers—which would, in turn, maximize productivity and profits. Drucker was especially taken with the ideal of the entrepreneurial manager: an inspiring, creative, personable leader who cultivated loyal, productive, and enterprising employees. In an environment where American democracy was seen as inextricable from American capitalism, the entrepreneur could be a heroic figure. In 1949, Drucker wrote a column for *Fortune* in which he claimed that entrepreneurialism was a matter of “national interest.” He

believed that corporations fulfilled a crucial political function: entrepreneurial managers could foster a sense of citizenship and national responsibility in their subordinates. Entrepreneurship, it would follow, was practically patriotic, a bulwark against authoritarian and totalitarian ways.



"My husband is home. Quick, put this on."  
Cartoon by Amanda Chung and Vincent Coca

By the eighties, Drucker had become one of the most prominent management intellectuals in the U.S. That decade brought corporate restructuring, deepened inequality, and waves of consultants and career "business gurus." Among them was Tom Peters, an ex-McKinsey consultant who emerged as a public figure with the 1982 mega-best-seller "[In Search of Excellence](#)." Peters and his co-author, Robert Waterman, took stock of the previous decade's flailing economy, identified companies that had survived inflation, high interest rates, global competition, and corporate bloat—3M, Johnson & Johnson, Frito-Lay—and explained to readers how American industry might learn from such success stories and recover. The book highlighted the importance of "corporate culture," a workplace identity that could enable employees to feel a sense of agency, ownership, and purpose in their day-to-day work. As a management book, "[In Search of Excellence](#)" ostensibly spoke to the executive class—but, as its success implies, it also struck a nerve with readers more likely to toil for a dysfunctional company than to run one.

In 1997, Peters published an essay in *Fast Company* titled “[The Brand Called You](#),” in which he coined the phrase “personal branding.” “We are CEOs of our own companies: Me Inc.,” he wrote. “To be in business today, our most important job is to be head marketer for the brand called You.” The marketing campaign for Me Inc. had to be relentless. “Your network of friends, colleagues, clients, and customers is the most important marketing vehicle you’ve got,” he wrote, encouraging readers to “nurture your network.” There was no room, in this vision, for employees who did their jobs but didn’t blow their bosses’ minds. The same year, another article in *Fast Company*—“Free Agent Nation,” by Daniel H. Pink, a former speechwriter for Vice-President [Al Gore](#)—celebrated the rising number of freelance workers as a new movement. No matter that many were casualties of downsizings, facing a leaner corporate world: Pink preached freedom, modernity, and “a beautiful synchronicity between who you are and what you do.”

Drucker, Peters, and Pink were among the many prophets of today’s hustle-and-grind economy, public thinkers whose arguments reflected a broader national turn toward individualism and privatization. Some of Baker’s examples of this shift are more convincing than others: even Henry Ford is described as exhibiting entrepreneurialism in a transitional state. (Ford was interested in New Thought; given his violent anti-unionism, it is perhaps no surprise that a philosophy centered on forceful individualism would appeal.) “Make Your Own Job” does avail itself to conceptual expansiveness. Reading Baker, you sense that the entrepreneurial work ethic, once named, can apply to any number of things: conversations about poverty or homelessness, mandates to “manage up,” the meritocracy myth, children’s entertainment. At times, in Baker’s book, the idea becomes vaporously all-encompassing. Still, viewed more narrowly, it can be helpfully diagnostic.

Silicon Valley may well represent the apotheosis of the entrepreneurial work ethic, particularly in its development of the so-called platform economy, which both relies on and perpetuates widespread precarity. Entrepreneurialism is at the core of the tech industry’s founding myths, reaffirmed in its workplace rhetoric and unqualified belief in meritocracy. Anyone who has worked at a contemporary startup will be familiar with what Drucker enthusiastically described as the “managerial attitude”: the employee whose self-conception is “as a partner in the enterprise,” in

Baker's words, and who is fully committed to the enterprise, regardless of pay or position. Bosses, it would seem, have wanted this sort of employee for a century; [Silicon Valley](#) has been good at producing them.

At the same time, the industry is leery of the entrepreneurial workers on whom it relies. Better to fetishize the founders. In recent decades, the tech sector has produced a string of high-profile bosses so devoid of charm as to be beguiling. Many of them will be in direct contact with the White House in coming years; several had front-row seats to [Trump's Inauguration](#). (A postwar "intimacy" that Baker describes between "ideas about work and management and ideas about American political culture" seems almost chaste by comparison.) That corporate leaders would want to protect their own interests is not surprising, but there is more at play. Far from being just a band of small-government libertarians, tech executives see an opportunity to shape the world in their image.

Entrepreneurialism, Baker writes, is cyclical, and benefits from "ritual amnesia." The perpetuation of the entrepreneurial work ethic depends on proponents "denouncing the quality of the work that capitalism has given us to date and in the next breath asking for more." But what, if anything, could come after it? In the final pages of his book, Baker suggests a few notional antidotes: organized labor, mutual aid, "all those places where the poor and precarious organize to give themselves a foretaste of utopia." Elsewhere, there are other ideas. Last fall, Paul Graham, a founder of Y Combinator and a sort of management intellectual for the startup set, published a short blog post titled "Founder Mode," in which he discussed a style of leadership that is intensely micromanaging and, in his view, more effective than the common practice of trust and delegation. The alternative, Graham writes, is to "hire professional fakers and let them drive the company into the ground." Gone is the figure of the inspirational, motivational, democratic boss. Farewell to rizz. In this paradigm, the ideal worker is less like a corporate ally or a trusted collaborator and more like a subject of an authoritarian regime. (At the bottom of the post, Graham thanked its early readers: a handful of venture capitalists and tech C.E.O.s, including [Elon Musk](#).)

The cultural, social, political, and technological shifts in this century could be epochal: manufacturing may or may not return to the United States; A.I. may or may not facilitate job loss on a vast scale—or, as some insist, an

idyllic state of abundance. New kinds of work will demand a new narrative, but for now it's layoff season. In November, LinkedIn—a founder of which, Reid Hoffman, is the co-author of "The Startup of You"—laid off a couple of hundred employees. Over the holidays, the platform was abuzz with bad news, delivered by the grudging C.E.O.s of Me Inc. "Customer teams and infrastructure have always been my passion," one newly laid-off worker posted. "I've always seen myself as more coach than boss," another wrote. "Excited to see where this next adventure takes you," someone commented on a post from a colleague announcing her departure. ("Start a personal blog and begin developing a public reputation and public portfolio of work that's not tied to your employer," Hoffman advised in "The Startup of You.") On LinkedIn, people can get inspired, get connected, and get ahead; they can also participate in the therapeutic culture of our time. Yet beneath the jostling and the camaraderie is the reality that work has become purely transactional. Each worker is in a company of one. ♦

By Daniel Immerwahr  
By Cal Newport  
By Fergus McIntosh  
By Joshua Rothman  
By Joshua Rothman  
By Arthur Krystal  
By Katy Waldman  
By Jennifer Wilson  
By Joshua Rothman  
By Louis Menand  
By Clare Malone  
By Anthony Gottlieb

## Musical Events

# L.A.'s New-Music Bastion

Monday Evening Concerts has showcased living composers for eight decades.

By [Alex Ross](#)



*Chaya Czernowin's pieces, including the new "Poetica," suggest the beauty and terror of natural processes unfolding, with human chaos blended in. Illustration by Tom Haugomat*

The first edition of Monday Evening Concerts, the world's longest-running new-music series, took place on April 23, 1939, in a house on Micheltorena Street, in Silver Lake, Los Angeles. The hosts were Peter Yates, a functionary at the California Department of Employment, and his wife, the pianist Frances Mullen. The couple had commissioned the modernist architect R. M. Schindler to build an enclosed, cantilevered performance space atop their bungalow home. Nineteen people showed up for the first concert, at which Mullen played works by Béla Bartók. Two months later, *Evenings on the Roof*, as the series was initially called, presented a tribute to Charles Ives. Word had spread sufficiently that the mighty émigré conductor Otto Klemperer turned up, raving about Ives's originality. Soon, Schoenberg and Stravinsky, modernist giants in exile, were attending programs of their own music. The teen-age Susan Sontag, avid for novelty, became a regular. The series eventually moved to larger venues and changed its name to Monday Evening Concerts. Hundreds of scores were featured—most very

new, some very old. On one occasion, Aldous Huxley lectured on the lurid life of the Renaissance visionary Carlo Gesualdo. The history of M.E.C. is rich enough that it inspired a book, Dorothy Lamb Crawford's "Evenings On and Off the Roof," published in 1995.

Although M.E.C. has had its ups and downs over the decades, it is now in an ascendant phase. Since 2015, the series has been under the direction of the percussionist Jonathan Hepfer, a forty-one-year-old Buffalo native with a flair for arresting programming. One of Hepfer's signature offerings, in 2017, paired the medieval mystic Hildegard of Bingen with the modern Italian maverick Pierluigi Billone. Another juxtaposed Guillaume de Machaut's *Messe de Nostre Dame*, a fourteenth-century monument of sacred music, with Michael Pisaro's "asleep, desert, choir, agnes," a partly electronic evocation of the New Mexico deserts and of the paintings that Agnes Martin made within them. Furthermore, Hepfer has managed to bring in startlingly young and diverse audiences; M.E.C. events resemble Arts District gallery openings more than they do academic concerts. In 1939, Yates asked a friend, "Has anyone anywhere ever done anything like this?" The question is still hanging in the air.

For mid-January, M.E.C. had scheduled a pair of concerts featuring major new works by Sarah Hennies and Chaya Czernowin. These were postponed on account of the Los Angeles wildfires, which struck the musical world as violently as they did the remainder of the city's life. Several members of the L.A. Phil lost their homes. Lawrence Schoenberg, one of the composer's sons, lost the entire holdings of Belmont Music, a publishing operation devoted to his father. Dozens of freelance musicians were made homeless by the fires. I decided to write about M.E.C. anyway, because it represents something essential about L.A.'s perennially undervalued artistic identity. On January 15th, I went to San Diego to see the master percussionist Steven Schick and his ensemble, red fish blue fish, play Czernowin's "Poetica," the new piece that they had planned to bring to L.A. The work proved to have uncanny resonances with the catastrophe that overtook Pacific Palisades and Altadena on January 7th.

The long-standing curse of the new-music concert is a tendency toward miscellany. A bunch of pieces in disparate styles are thrown together, leaving the audience to pick and choose favorites. Hepfer, a former punk-

rock drummer who fell in love with John Cage’s music at the age of seventeen, searches out connections, even when the works in question lie centuries and continents apart. He has a keen sense for the myriad entanglements of Los Angeles cultural history. The fact that M.E.C. came to life in a space designed by a pioneer of residential modernism, with a bevy of artists and writers looking on, is a model for his thinking.

Consider an M.E.C. concert that took place in November at 2220 Arts + Archives, a multipurpose venue in Filipinotown. The evening began with a screening of the silent film “Rabbit’s Moon”—a gentle Surrealist fable, begun in 1950 and finished in 1971, by the late avant-garde provocateur Kenneth Anger, featuring a Pierrot looking for love in a nocturnal wood. Anger released the film with a pop-song soundtrack. For the screening, Hepfer and his collaborators, including the pianist Vicki Ray, substituted a live performance of two works by John Cage: “In a Landscape,” from 1948, and “But what about the noise of crumpling paper . . . ,” from 1985. Divergent aspects of Cage’s language—hypnotically simple harmony in the first, percussive murmuring in the other—complemented the film’s rapt aura. Anger and Cage, although vastly different in temperament, both emerged from the L.A. bohemia of the early and mid-twentieth century.

After intermission came Hennies’s “Motor Tapes,” which can be heard as a radical extension of the Cagean dialectic of tone and noise. Hennies, like Hepfer, is a former rock drummer who made a turn toward the avant-garde; she is also a trans woman who often explores queer identity in her scores. The title “Motor Tapes” refers to a neuroscientific concept of the brain as a network of perpetually unspooling tapes. Early on, the piece is spare and a bit forbidding, with relentless repetitions of solitary figures. Later, it assumes a spacious, dreamlike atmosphere: lush guitar arpeggios, free-roaming instrumental cadenzas, chiming open-fifth intervals. At the end, rich, ambiguous, detuned chords are interspersed with silences. It is a world as surpassingly tranquil as it is commandingly strange.

Hepfer also hands over programs to creative performers who expound their own visions. In September, the brilliant bass-baritone Davóne Tines presented a version of his show and album “*ROBESON*,” a meditation on the life and music of Paul Robeson. Tines has the vocal power to approximate Robeson’s majestic lower tones, but this hard-to-classify project, which

Tines created with the director Zack Winokur, is most potent when the singer abandons bass regions and reaches into his eerily piercing falsetto register. One extraordinary sequence begins with the pianist John Bitoy playing Ravel’s “Le Gibet,” out of which the spiritual “I’ll Fly Away” somehow unfurls. The hallucinogenic intensity of this number and several others evokes Robeson’s political and psychological crises, which culminated in a suicide attempt in Moscow in 1961. Whether or not Robeson had been drugged by the C.I.A. at the time, as his son believed, he had entered a zone of extreme danger, and Tines vividly conjures its inner contours.

Sometimes I think that Czernowin is our greatest living composer. Certainly, her work routinely inspires astonishment, bewilderment, and awe—reliable indicators of greatness in action. She was born to Holocaust survivors in Israel in 1957 and has taught at Harvard since 2009. Her first opera, “Pnima,” deals with the incommunicability of trauma; her second, “Infinite Now,” summons the terror of war. But Czernowin does not write Expressionist music—subjective impressions of crisis and disaster. Rather, her pieces suggest the beauty and terror of natural processes unfolding, with human chaos blended in.

“Poetica,” which Schick and red fish blue fish played at the Conrad Prebys Music Center, on the campus of the University of California, San Diego, is the first part of an instrumental-vocal triptych titled “*vena*,” after the Latin word for “vein.” The performers manipulate five batteries of drums, including timpani, snares, congas, bongos, tom-toms, and bass drums. They are also asked to vocalize, breathing into microphones and uttering nonverbal syllables. On a prerecorded track, you hear an octet of lower strings along with an array of found sounds—not only nature noises, such as rustling leaves, chattering cicadas, and drumming rain, but also anti-government protests that Czernowin witnessed in Paris and Tel Aviv. She said in an interview, “These recordings bring an external dimension to the piece and give the impression that the ensemble is trying to survive from the burning of the world.”

For long stretches, “Poetica” is very quiet. At times, you hear only the scraping of a mallet on the surface of a drum. (“Mimic the sound of writing,” the score instructs.) There are swells of noise, but they do not

approach the engulfing pandemonium of “Infinite Now.” At moments, the recorded strings grope toward a recognizable tonality, with trembling triads superimposed. Nothing stays fixed, though: tones slide, decay, trail off. As often with Czernowin’s music, I felt as though I were on unfamiliar, unstable terrain, yet each sonic flicker seemed to land exactly where it had to. I thought of Andrei Tarkovsky’s film “Stalker,” in which a trio of seekers move across a landscape at once ruinous, mysterious, and sublime.

Afterward, I felt that I had approached “Poetica” in the wrong way. At first, I’d been tracking its structure, identifying its constituent elements. But the score is really about fostering a space of contemplation. This isn’t a hermetic kind of meditation, one in which outer havoc is kept at bay. I began listening in the right way when, toward the end, a recording of a downpour made me think of the thousands of L.A. homes that might have been saved had it rained over Christmas. I remained in the grip of that fantasy, bordering on prayer, until a ritualistic pinging of crotales brought the music to a close. ♦

By Sarah Larson  
By Michael Schulman  
By Richard Brody  
By Michael Schulman  
By Ariel Levy  
By Richard Brody  
By Charles Bethea  
By Emily Witt  
By Michael Schulman

On Television

# Tom Brady, Armchair Quarterback

In his new gig, the former player turned “N.F.L. on Fox” commentator is back to work, but is he any good?

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)



*Brady's early broadcasts as a game analyst were slightly baffling. Illustration by Paul Windle*

A few months ago, when Tom Brady was beginning his career as an N.F.L. commentator for Fox Sports, a commercial aired. It begins with Brady, his face all angles, sitting at a desk in a nondescript room, looking at videos on two big monitors in front of him, laptops to his right and left, and a big TV affixed to a wall. Why he needs so much stimulation all at once isn't totally clear, but it's got something to do with extreme efficiency. Retired or not, the world's greatest quarterback does not have the luxury to indulge in sequential action—one thing at a time is for slowpokes and losers.

On the TV, pundits are yelling about the hubris of his career change. “I just don’t get it,” one of them says. “Tom Brady, the broadcaster? Guy’s got everything in the world. Why do it? Tommy, why?” Thus challenged, Brady is subjected to younger versions of himself—the University of Michigan everyman, the New England Patriots hero, the little kid dressed in the uniform of his favorite team, the San Francisco 49ers—reminding him of all

his effort heretofore and teasing him about the temptations of post-career laxity. “Why don’t you lay on a beach getting fat on piña coladas?” one of the Toms says. God forbid! Slim, chiselled Tom wakes from his stupor, newly determined to prove his haters wrong. “*TOM BRADY IS BACK TO WORK*,” the tagline reads.

It’s true, he’s back—not that he’d gone anywhere so far away—busily laboring, making money, and not so subtly surgerizing his image. He signed a ten-year contract with Fox worth three hundred and seventy-five million dollars—quite the pile to offer somebody who’s never done the job, but a name like Brady’s is priceless. His early broadcasts were slightly baffling. Alongside his announcing-booth mate Kevin Burkhardt—a truly talented play-by-play commentator—Brady would fall silent during crucial passages of a game. When he piped up, it was often in a monotone second tenor with off-kilter bursts of odd rhythm. Describing the Dallas Cowboys quarterback Dak Prescott, he sounded like he might be rehearsing some slam poetry: “I think he’s gonna be dealin’ . . . with this type of pressure . . . we talked about this, with some of these young . . . offensive linemen.”

Last summer, before he started the Fox gig, he subjected himself to a very modern sort of self-serving abasement: the celebrity roast. The roast is a chance for a big shot like Brady to show himself to be a good sport—and, in enduring the burn wounds of a public round of insults, to grow a personality.

The roast plan backfired on Brady. He’d been through a recent divorce from his wife of thirteen years, the Brazilian supermodel Gisele Bündchen. The tabloid details of the split—Bündchen and her new martial-artist paramour knock dreamboat quarterback down a few pegs and ruin his rep—provided too much material to the sharklike comics trawling for chum.

In 2018, Brady—on the back end of his tenure with the Patriots, the franchise where, alongside his coach, Bill Belichick, he made his name—had another televisual adventure. He was the star of a show called “Tom vs. Time,” which was streamed on the ill-fated Facebook Watch. Here, he was portrayed as a devoted father, a health-and-fitness addict, a gladiator raging against the ravages of professional athletics. Viewers watched him smooch his kids and train on the beach and reveal his all-consuming pickiness about what goes into his body. In one episode, Brady described his relationship

with football as if it were one part romantic, one part therapeutic. “In front of seventy thousand people, I can really be who I am,” he said. “If I want to scream at somebody, I can scream at somebody. . . . It allows me to be who I am in a very authentic way.”

All these public contortions—family man, easygoing regular guy, competitor marked with a touch of psychosis—make clear a problem that Brady epitomizes but didn’t invent: what kind of person is a quarterback supposed to be? Football’s rarefied place in American cultural life makes the quarterback—all you need for the symbolic role I’m talking about is an arm and a smile—a kind of ambassador from a Norman Rockwell world. This is a real, red-blooded man, who takes responsibility and accepts challenges and treats others with a constant grace.

Brady wasn’t a high draft pick out of college; nobody expected much of him. By emerging from that inauspicious start to assume a Superman’s cape, he helped perpetuate the quarterback’s creation myth: that this kind of success isn’t about rote athleticism or mere intelligence or genetic inheritance. Instead, winning is the outgrowth and the evidence of hard work, high character, and a pure heart.

This persona is apparent in the career of one of Brady’s chief on-field rivals, Peyton Manning. Manning is from good Southern football stock—his father, Archie, was a quarterback for the New Orleans Saints, his brother Eli was the scrappy, courageous leader of the New York Giants, and his nephew Arch will soon be drafted into the N.F.L.—but his excellence seemed well earned. His game was full of minute adjustments and quick decisions; he was famous for how encyclopedically he could master any playbook you threw at him. Nowadays, he owns a production company whose main product is “Manningcast,” an ESPN2 show that Peyton hosts with Eli. As they watch football games and chat, Peyton comes across as a great hang, an enlightened good old boy. He doesn’t seem driven by demons or a need to dominate anyone. It’s easy to understand why his teammates all seemed to like him so much.

Brady, though, has a fishier personality and a cooler eye. His closest likeness isn’t to other quarterbacks but to the basketball superstar Kobe Bryant, who, five years ago, died in a helicopter crash at a woefully early age. Like Bryant

—who turned his gym-rat nature into a tall-tale mythos like that of Paul Bunyan—Brady likes to talk about his work ethic, about how desperately he needs to win and how far he’s willing to go to fill the void. Brady, in his own telling, holds on to small slights and inflates them just enough to fuel himself to victory. “I was always kind of motivated by people that say, ‘You can’t do it,’ ” he once told his fellow ex-player Michael Strahan on “Good Morning America.” All he needs is a snippet of smack talk, the hint of an insult, or even a cross look to make him mad enough to reach the end zone. If the classic quarterback, embodied by Manning, accomplished his exploits through the force of good will, Brady—a progenitor and a product of today’s so-called hustle culture—needs grist for irritation to reach his true heights.

That’s the message behind the commercial. Through the power of broadcasting, Brady will once again obliterate his enemies—external doubters or past selves—and make them watch his coronation. All their nattering only gives him “bulletin-board material,” as the saying goes. Here, unfortunately, is some more: Brady’s not so great at his new gig. But every once in a while he will show off his sharpness. At one point during the recent playoff game between the Detroit Lions and the Washington Commanders, for example, he pointed out quickly that the Commanders had twelve players on the field, instead of the allowed eleven. “Oh, no, what are they doin’?” he groaned. More often, though, he settles for stock phrases and leaves us to imagine what he thinks of the players. His allergy to strong opinions might have something to do with an obvious conflict of interest: he’s also a part owner of an N.F.L. team, the Las Vegas Raiders. All that multitasking has its downsides.

Among Brady’s TV rivals are two former Dallas Cowboys quarterbacks: Tony Romo—who commentates jocularly on CBS and made a splash, early on, by predicting plays with uncanny accuracy before they happened—and the nineties poster boy Troy Aikman, on ESPN, who likes to play the crusty elder and get outraged at quarterbacks’ goofy mistakes. Maybe Brady needs Romo or Aikman to drop a stray negative comment that might apply to him. He’ll hit the gym, rage out, make ’em pay, and prove them—and me—wrong. ♦

By Katy Waldman  
By Sheila Heti  
By Daniel A. Gross  
By Oren Peleg  
By Doreen St. Félix

**By Susan Morrison**  
**By Navied Mahdavian**  
**By Naomi Fry**  
**By Susan B. Glasser**  
**By Daniel Immerwahr**  
**By Antonia Hitchens**  
**By Louisa Thomas**

## The Theatre

# Sanaz Toossi’s “English” Comes to Broadway

The Pulitzer Prize-winning play, set in an E.S.L. classroom in Iran, examines the internal displacements of learning a language.

By [Helen Shaw](#)



*The downtown production moves uptown with its delicate humor intact. Illustration by Kati Szilágyi*

Sanaz Toossi began writing “English,” her Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, now at the Roundabout’s Todd Haimes Theatre, as her graduate-school thesis. The play, a portrait of an English-language class in Iran, was, she has said, her furious reaction to the “Muslim ban”—as Donald Trump’s executive order from 2017 was known—enacted as she was pursuing an M.F.A. at N.Y.U. Toossi has described “English” as her “scream into the void.” The actual show, then, is a surprise: a gentle, subtle experience that calibrates our ears to shifts in pedagogy and understanding.

“English” débuted at the Atlantic, in a co-production with the Roundabout, in 2022. It’s primarily a schoolroom comedy, directed then as now by Knud Adams with an eye to wry wistfulness. The show tracks an advanced English course, in the city of Karaj, Iran, in 2008, where four adult students

try to master new vocabulary (“Things you find in a kitchen. Go!”) and the very un-Persian sound of the letter “W.” When the characters speak in English, they adopt a heavy accent; when they are meant to be conversing in Farsi, they use accentless English, as swift as unobstructed thought. “My accent is a war crime!” one frustrated student complains. It lands as a joke, but it hints at currents of culture and empire.

The Atlantic production remains essentially unchanged, and the cast, too, has come to Broadway. The teacher, Marjan (Marjan Neshat), is focussed on the *TOEFL* (Test of English as a Foreign Language), but her students’ goals vary: the frequently petulant Elham (Tala Ashe) wants to attend medical school in Australia; the teen-age Goli (Ava Lalezarzadeh) is taking the test to keep her college options open; Roya (Pooya Mohseni) might be moving to Canada; and the lone male student, the nearly fluent Omid (Hadi Tabbal), says he has an American green-card interview. The porousness of Iran’s borders is a given, and everyone oscillates, caught in a limbo between leaving and staying. Marjan exudes a certain sorrowful mystery, which is to say glamour—we learn that she lived joyfully in the U.K. for nine years, yet, for some inexpressible reason, she came back.

Omid, whose motivations rarely make sense, is drawn to Marjan, lingering during her office hours to watch English-language romantic comedies, such as an old VHS tape she has of “Notting Hill.” The unlikely pair’s connection pulses along with the movie’s soaring final track, by Elvis Costello. “*She may be the song that summer sings,*” Costello bellows. (Good luck to anyone learning syntax from that.) Lyrical absurdity also shapes the play’s most precise comic scene. Goli stumbles into poetry even as she claims that she likes English for its unpoetic qualities. She has brought in a Ricky Martin CD for show-and-tell. “She bangs, she bangs!” Ricky sings from a little boom box, as shy excitement flits across Goli’s face. Then she explains:

A bang is a [*Goli demonstrates banging*].  
But more than that:  
A bang is pots and pans inside the head.  
It is a crash. A fender bender? . . .  
Inside the heart.

A bang is how the universe is created.  
That is how she bangs.

The handsome classroom set, designed by Marsha Ginsberg, sits inside a huge rotating framework box, lit by Reza Behjat to seem to float in a black void. Of course, the dark space around the set isn't actually a void. It's our shared atmosphere. Seeing a play written in response to Trump's first Administration at the outset of his second feels surreal. But Toossi keeps her political commentary oblique by showing us a casual, everyday Iran rarely seen in the West. The women do not adjust their loosely worn veils when they head outside, for instance. Is this defiance or nonchalance? Toossi lets us wonder. Her interest lies in a more universal question: the way half-learned languages can rub against one another, sometimes erasing aspects—compassion, graciousness, humor—of the person using them.

Toossi herself speaks both Farsi (her parents were born in Iran) and English (she was born in California), and several characters meditate on the internal displacements of bilingualism. For all the precise realism of the play's setting and dialogue, Toossi seems to be writing allegorically about a wider experience, perhaps one familiar to her, of the immigrant's double consciousness. The students might represent different aspects of a quarrelling inner self. For Roya, English smashes and colonizes; for Marjan, it seduces and abandons. "I always liked myself better in English," Marjan says, but the way she says it—dreamily, nostalgically—sounds like a woman grieving.

If you want to see a play that grapples more overtly with the politics of life in Iran, Amir Reza Kohestani's Farsi-language "Blind Runner," by the Paris-based Mehr Theatre Group, is finishing an engagement at St. Ann's Warehouse, as part of the Under the Radar festival. As video projectors feed grainy images onto dark walls, a jailed Tehrani woman (Ainaz Azarhoush) encourages her husband (Mohammad Reza Hosseinzadeh) to help a woman who has been blinded at a protest. "I don't need to wear a uniform, or cover my hair for you to believe that I'm in prison," Azarhoush tells the camera. "Just imagine it," the supertitles instruct us. I realized that Kohestani's admonition hadn't quite left me when I saw "English" several days later. Even the show's breeziness felt subtly frightening. Goli talks about Facebook—I kept hoping she wouldn't post.

After attending “English,” trying to work out why I was frustrated by some of its plot twists and character opacities, I reread “Wish You Were Here,” Toossi’s second play to première in 2022, written long after “English” but produced only a month later at Playwrights Horizons. In that more finely grained drama, a group of female friends in Karaj chat their way through the decades: revolution, the Iran-Iraq War, the reopening of the universities, religious encroachments. The friends’ raucous intimacy—in many scenes, a woman is either painting another’s toenails or waxing her legs—dissolves as most of the women leave the country. Neshat again played the main character, Nazanin, who comes across as a little mean and quite lost. I was reminded of how brilliantly Toossi can write for people who don’t understand their own motivations, and how Neshat blossoms when her characters have something specific to conceal. In “English,” too, there are inchoate impulses, but Toossi seems to exert less control over them. In the gorgeous “Wish,” the playwright demonstrates far more comfort with elision and, ironically, with the unspoken.

I was thinking about languages and the inner gears of learning them as I sifted through a box of documents in another Under the Radar show, two days after seeing “English.” The Lebanese artist Tania El Khoury and her husband, Ziad Abu-Rish, a historian, staged a combined installation/performance at the Brooklyn arts space Invisible Dog called “The Search for Power,” about electricity outages in Lebanon. (Even before the recent Israeli bombardments, rationing could leave some areas in the country without power twenty-three hours a day.) After one such outage, at their wedding, El Khoury and Abu-Rish took a vow to get to the bottom of the seemingly intractable problem. Over several years, they pursued the mystery, tracking down answers in archives in Brussels, Paris, Washington, and Beirut.

If you attended the installation version of the show, during the day, you were given a pair of headphones and ushered to a long table, laden with a wedding’s worth of nuts and apricots, with a document box at each place setting. Through our headphones, we heard the couple’s account of their research. At their direction, we read Xeroxes of letters, in French, on Hotel St. George stationery, looked at photostats of American redevelopment plans from the nineteen-fifties, and held slippery film reprints of Iranian newspapers. I felt a little like a student again myself, sitting there with my

big wireless headphones and bending my head down toward my work. The answers, as the artists traced the beleaguered Lebanese electricity authority's troubles back more than a century, always had to do with graft and transnational exploitation. Thank goodness the researchers are comfortable in so many languages, I thought, or those secrets would have stayed locked away. ♦

By The New Yorker  
By Doreen St. Félix  
By Susan Morrison  
By Navied Mandavian  
By Françoise Mouly  
By Jane Hu  
By Ian Parker  
By Oren Peleg  
By Cal Newport  
By Andy Kravis  
By Vinson Cunningham  
By Jonathan Blitzer

# Poems

- “[The Bay](#)”
- “[Speaker](#)”

By [David Baker](#)

How many stories among the stars.  
*The boats come in. The boats go out.*

Our friend is dying. He writes,  
he says, more often. Yet more sparingly.

*Now to see what wasn't seen before.*

...

We stay up all night again to scan  
the sky from our deck above the bay.

How slow the constellations spin.  
Invincible heroes. Unrequited loves—

until, it seems, we've lost all count.

...

Soon we'll go, too. *Star, therefore, to start.*  
A cargo freighter pulls across the waters.

We can tell from the placement of the lights,  
the slow procession of it all. And so it's dawn.

Did I say invincible? I mean invisible.

By Lee Upton  
By Paul Tran  
By Bridget Lowe  
By Larry Levis  
By Samanta Schweblin  
By Kanak Kapur  
By Barry Blitt  
By Czeslaw Milosz  
By Jay Katsir  
By Ben McGrath

By [Paul Tran](#)

Can't you see her at her stop  
In her gingham skirt, thinning? Inside, her groan grows  
Louder, growling. False

Spring nibbling her ankles stings like a slap  
As she asks for her Social Security

Check, her needle entering her  
Thimble and thumb. Her bus comes and goes while she daydreams  
Pressing her left wrist to her iron

Until her arteries become artillery. Her bus was a boat  
She didn't take to her toothless mothers

Calling for her, asleep on banana leaves  
Alive with ants. Quivering  
As if under a monsoon with a secret tearing in half

Her baby sister's chronically beautiful smile, a country cut across  
The seventeenth parallel, she's a woman after

Trading her name for her future.  
Nobody's daughter. Nobody's mother. Nobody's bride.  
She unwraps her

Cheese sandwich, a moon moth splaying its iridescent wings.  
Hunger has her. In the ancient world and the new

Hope's the same for moth and monarch: hazy  
Instrument of flight armies gnaw and gnash, leaving the dead  
Uncovered like a girl ablaze

A century ago, crying for help, coveting just a drop of water.  
Hope has no feathers. Hope is nothing

Nobody has known. She takes  
Another bite, tastes

Skull grains, majesty purpled on her tongue. Covert daffodil in the shade

Beginning her inevitable ascent with less than an idea  
Among the tamed irises, she savors her Kraft

Between her Wonder  
Bread. Like hope, wonder is doubt is faith is  
A woman exiled, feeling her way from paradise to an arid wilderness

Stolen in pursuit of ahistorical happiness, amnesiac.  
Self-evident and undeniable, she'd return to that stubborn girl

Stumbling from the village  
Outhouse, her scarf tied tight around her  
Head shorn bright as a pig knuckle, if she could. She can't

Contain her, filling a void by avoiding.  
Despite her trade and livelihood, she has no appetite anymore

For adoration or adornment. I will take everything from you,  
Her Life says. My humiliation, too?  
She asks. You are stupid, ugly, and you have no friends,

Life says. Who?  
She asks. Her bus comes. She opens  
Her Vietnamese-to-English dictionary. You will lose,

Says the speaker. I like you,  
She replies, or I, like you?

Between her and the clearest sky, cold rain's falling  
Through light too bright to see. Her bus goes. Everything goes, breaks—  
Including her water. Who knows

Who's Nobody now. She laughs, laughs loud, a siren  
Announcing invasion

Early on the first morning of a year millions won't survive.  
Tell me who brought down whom.

**By Bridget Lowe**  
**By David Baker**  
**By Lee Upton**  
**By Larry Levis**  
**By Samanta Schweblin**  
**By Anna Journey**  
**By Kanak Kapur**  
**By Czeslaw Milosz**  
**By Sheila Heti**  
**By Louise Glück**  
**By Barry Blitt**  
**By Jay Katsir**

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