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[Mar 10]

- Goings On
- The Talk of the Town
- Reporting & Essays
- Takes
- Shouts & Murmurs
- Fiction
- The Critics
- Poems
- Cartoons
- Puzzles & Games

Goings On

- **Spring Culture Preview**
  By Shauna Lyon, Sheldon Pearce, Helen Shaw, Jackson Arn, Marina Harss, Fergus McIntosh, Inkoo Kang, and Richard Brody | What’s happening this season in music, theatre, art, dance, movies, and television.

Goings On

Spring Culture Preview

What's happening this season in music, theatre, art, dance, movies, and television.

By Shauna Lyon, Sheldon Pearce, Helen Shaw, Jackson Arn, Marina Harss, Fergus McIntosh, Inkoo Kang, and Richard Brody

February 28, 2025

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

With spring comes fresh air, and rebirth. This is especially true on the packed culture horizon, which includes visits from Japanese Breakfast, Mary J. Blige, and Kim Gordon, a strong slate of Broadway revivals—Betty Boop! Gilbert and Sullivan! Chekhov, Williams, Mamet!—a newly renovated Frick Collection, plus the welcome return of "The Threepenny Opera" and PBS's "Wolf Hall." There are also movies from Wes Anderson, Ryan Coogler, and David Cronenberg, and, thank goodness—it's almost summer, after all—a new "Mission Impossible." Your subscription makes it possible for our critics to canvass the cultural landscape and bring you the best shows, films, concerts, exhibitions, and pop-ups in New York City and beyond—thank you for letting Goings On be your guide to the season.—*Shauna Lyon*

Jump to: **Contemporary Music** | **The Theatre** | **Art** | **Dance** | **Classical Music** | **Television** | **Movies**

Contemporary Music

Illustrations by Jesús Cisneros

Leading Ladies, K-Pop Stars

As the memoirist Michelle Zauner, of “Crying in H Mart” fame, returns to her musical project **Japanese Breakfast** (National Sawdust; March 19), she sets the tone for a spring concert slate of renewal and reëmergence. Trevor Powers, who brought his **Youth Lagoon** project out of retirement in 2023, shares glowing new music built around unearthed home videos, at Warsaw, on April 24. After losing his wife and creative partner, Mimi Parker, to cancer, ending the band Low, **Alan Sparhawk** wades through distorted solo songs of grief at Elsewhere (April 2).

Wide-ranging jazz acts manifest the genre’s myriad paths. The L.A. soul and hip-hop producer and composer **Adrian Younge,** co-founder of Jazz Is Dead, arranges a ten-piece orchestra at Sultan Room (March 4-5). The British saxophonist and bandleader **Nubya Garcia** brings her epic 2024 album, “Odyssey,” to Music Hall of Williamsburg (April 5). On March 30, at Carnegie Hall, **Samara Joy** shows off the pipes that won her the Grammy for Best New Artist in 2023. Blurring the line between traditional and exploratory are **Saul Williams** (Blue Note; May 27-28) and the trio of the pianist **Vijay Iyer,** the saxophonist **Henry Threadgill,** and the drummer **Dafnis Prieto** (Jazz Gallery; May 30-31).

As K-pop continues to take over the Top Forty, members of its gate-crashing supergroups, BLACKPINK’s **Jennie** (Radio City Music Hall; March 10) and BTS’s **j-hope** (Barclays Center; March 13-14), set out on their own. A bit more cutting edge is **ARTMS,** a spinoff girl group whose

2024 début, “<Dall>,” pushed a historically twee genre toward the experimental (Town Hall; April 4). For the inverse, look no further than the British auteur **FKA Twigs,** whose tantalizing new album, “Eusexua,” recasts her avant-garde work for the club (Knockdown Center; April 3-4). Other titans of niche electronic music convene in Brooklyn. At Public Records, catch the multi-instrumentalist and dance-music maestro **Ela Minus** (March 18) and the ambient minimalist **Tim Hecker** (April 29-May 1). **Darkside,** a duo made up of Nicolás Jaar and Dave Harrington, brings “Nothing,” its first album in four years, to Brooklyn Steel (March 21-22). On March 25, at Warsaw, the Welsh producer **Kelly Lee Owens** drifts off into the euphoria of “Dreamstate.”

But the season is dominated by artists experiencing a late-career bloom. At Beacon Theatre, the Portishead singer **Beth Gibbons** performs her solo début, “Lives Outgrown” (April 1). The queen of hip-hop soul **Mary J. Blige** takes on a home-town enthronement at Madison Square Garden (April 10). The singer-songwriter **Lucinda Williams,** who has continued churning out classic Americana into her seventies, appears as a special guest for Heart’s Royal Flush tour (Radio City Music Hall; April 16). At Pioneer Works, **Kim Gordon** carries on her one-woman noise movement (May 2). And, in the spirit of restoration, the partners **Gillian Welch** and **David Rawlings** pay tribute to the rebuilt Woodland studio that defined their folk-fusionist sound (Carnegie Hall; May 7-8).—*Sheldon Pearce*

The Theatre

Nat King Cole, Bobby Darin, Stanley and Stella

The retro atmosphere is strong this spring, kicking off with such musicals as Bob Martin, Susan Birkenhead, and David Foster’s **“Boop!”** (Broadhurst;

beginning previews March 11), in which the titular nineteen-thirties cartoon Betty boop-a-doops into “reality,” and Marc Shaiman, Scott Wittman, Rick Elice, and Bob Martin’s throwback backstage comedy **“Smash”** (Imperial; March 11), inspired by the NBC series from 2012 but emerging—Boop-like—into three dimensions.

Nick Jonas and Adrienne Warren appear in Jason Robert Brown’s time-in-reverse musical, **“The Last Five Years”** (Hudson; March 18); the revue **“Stephen Sondheim’s Old Friends”** (Samuel J. Friedman; March 25) stars the tried-and-true divas Bernadette Peters and Lea Salonga; and Adam Guettel and Tina Landau’s 1994 musical, **“Floyd Collins”** (Vivian Beaumont; March 27), revisits a cave-in from 1925. A take on Gilbert and Sullivan’s 1879 treasure, **“Pirates! The Penzance Musical”** (Todd Haimes; April 4), cries ahoy; Itamar Moses, Erik Della Penna, and David Yazbek’s musical about a mummified desperado, **“Dead Outlaw”** (Longacre; April 12), does a do-si-do uptown; and Lisa Loomer, Joy Huerta, and Benjamin Velez set the beloved 2002 film **“Real Women Have Curves”** (James Earl Jones; April 1) to music.

Colman Domingo and Patricia McGregor’s **“Lights Out: Nat King Cole”** (New York Theatre Workshop; April 23) stars Dulé Hill, and Jonathan Groff plays Bobby Darin in **“Just in Time”** (Circle in the Square; March 28). Dramas, too, get new life: LaChanze directs Alice Childress’s **“Wine in the Wilderness,”** from 1969 (Classic Stage; March 6); St. Ann’s Warehouse imports Benedict Andrews’s production of **“The Cherry Orchard”** (March 26); Awoye Timpo directs Wole Soyinka’s 1958 drama, **“The Swamp Dwellers,”** for Theatre for a New Audience (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; March 30); and Jack Cummings III revives William Inge’s **“Bus Stop”** (Classic Stage; May 8). The Wooster Group débuts **“Nayatt School Redux”** (Performing Garage; March 8), remaking their seminal “Nayatt School,” from 1978.

A season of retrospection will necessarily feature men behaving badly: Paul Mescal plays the violent Stanley in **“A Streetcar Named Desire”** (BAM; Feb 28); Kieran Culkin stars in David Mamet’s vicious **“Glengarry Glen Ross”** (Palace; March 10); Sarah Snook channels monstrosity, playing every character in **“The Picture of Dorian Gray”** (Music Box; March 10);

and Kimberly Belflower's **"John Proctor Is the Villain"** (Booth; March 20) knocks a certain hero off his pedestal. In George Clooney and Grant Heslov's **"Good Night, and Good Luck"** (Winter Garden; March 12), Clooney plays Edward R. Murrow, but his antagonist, the red-baiting Joseph McCarthy, appears only via archival footage.

For women behaving well, you'll need to go farther afield. Maryann Plunkett confronts death in Abe Koogler's exquisite **"Deep Blue Sound"** (Public; February 25); Crystal Lucas-Perry stars in **"The Great Privation (How to flip ten cents into a dollar),"** by Nia Akilah Robinson, for Soho Rep (Peter Jay Sharp; in previews); and Deirdre O'Connell graces an evening of four elliptical works by the great Caryl Churchill, **"Glass. Kill. What If If Only. Imp."** (Public; April 3). The rest is memoir: Tommy Dorfman stars in Emil Weinstein's dramatization of the trans rabbi Abby Chava Stein's autobiography, **"Becoming Eve"** (Abrons Arts Center; March 19); Ryan J. Haddad talks about falling in love in **"Hold Me in the Water"** (Playwrights Horizons; April 10); Adil Mansoor's solo **"Amm(i)gone"** (Flea; March 13) addresses his family's homophobia; and Shayok Misha Chowdhury follows "Public Obscenities" with **"Rheology"** (Bushwick Starr; April 22), an onstage collaboration with his physicist mother.—*Helen Shaw*

Art

Abstract Textiles, Revisionist Porcelain, the Frick Returns

If you like blockbusters, some *MOMA* visits are in order this spring. There are close to two hundred works in **"Jack Whitten: The Messenger"** (opening March 23), the artist's first comprehensive retrospective, and—

even considering that he painted, drew, and sculpted from the nineteen-sixties to the twenty-tens—they are ridiculously various. Blockbuster No. 2 is **“Woven Histories: Textiles and Modern Abstraction”** (April 20), in which fibre artists ranging from the early twentieth century (Sonia Delaunay, Hannah Höch) to the present (Igshaan Adams, Rosemarie Trockel) paint a picture of a visual avant-garde that was not, first and foremost, concerned with painting pictures.

Another traditionally feminine medium, porcelain, is the star and possible villain of **“Monstrous Beauty: A Feminist Revision of Chinoiserie.”** The Metropolitan Museum of Art’s new exhibition (March 25) takes a wary view of its own contents, which span half a millennium, arguing that the West acted out its daydreams of a docile Orient one cup-and-saucer at a time. The museum also honors the centennial of the American painter John Singer Sargent’s death, with **“Sargent and Paris”** (April 27)—another show about racy fantasies of foreignness, in a way. Inevitably, everything is centered on the artist’s early masterpiece, “Portrait of Madame X,” the painting that made French society pant. Yes, it’s in the Met’s permanent collection, but a year without a Sargent exhibition somewhere is like a lovely young heiress without a secure dress strap.

The reopening of the **Frick Collection,** on April 17, following almost five years of renovations, should make *everyone* pant. There is a host of new goodies to reward us for our patience, including sculptures by the Ukrainian artist Vladimir Kanevsky and a stunning roomful of drawings by Goya, Degas, and others, too fragile for long-term display but on view through the summer, at least. The building’s second floor, previously off limits, will be full of ceramics and Bouchers from now on, much as it was when actual Fricks lived there.

A day later and a mile north, the Guggenheim Museum opens **“Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers,”** a major survey of one of the most intriguing American artists of the past twenty-five years. If you know him, you probably know “The Broken Five,” the huge, howling mosaic inspired by the Central Park Five; if not, it’s here, along with almost ninety of its siblings. By the time you exit, their scrawls and dried-shit textures should be almost as recognizable as the Coca-Cola logo.

Another mile north, at El Museo del Barrio, **“Candida Alvarez: Circle, Point, Hoop”** (April 24) honors the multidisciplinary artist with her first large-scale museum survey. Like Johnson, Alvarez has hopped between figuration, abstraction, and conceptualism; her finest work, though, may be her “Air Paintings,” the ingenious flypapers of acrylic, ink, enamel, and glitter which are incapable of being dull for even one square millimetre.

Spring ends with the Morgan Library’s **“Arresting Beauty: Julia Margaret Cameron”** (May 30), a celebration of the early photographer who lived on the Isle of Wight and, when she was nearing fifty, started taking pictures of her friends. If you were trying to preserve as much of Victorian England as possible and had only one Victorian’s work to help, you could do a lot worse than these images; everybody’s here, from Tennyson to Darwin, looking wistful and profound and utterly unamused. Brood with them all summer long.—*Jackson Arn*

Dance

Portraits of the Artists

Martha Graham was known for laying bare the inner landscapes of her female protagonists, with psyches as incandescent as hot coals. Several works in **Martha Graham Dance Company's** spring season (Joyce Theatre; April 1-13), such as the second act of "Clytemnestra," "Errand Into the Maze," and "Frontier," share this burning intensity. But "Deaths and Entrances" (1943), which the company brings back after a long absence, is a particularly interesting case, a portrait of a woman artist—Emily Brönte, originally danced by Graham herself—who, like Graham, fights to preserve her creative impulse.

The dancer and choreographer **Bill T. Jones,** too, probes the vicissitudes of a creative life in "Memory Piece: Mr. Ailey, Alvin . . . the un-Ailey?," an

outgrowth of the Whitney's recent excitingly multifaceted "Edges of Ailey" exhibit. Jones, still vigorous at seventy-two, moves through space with ferocious intent while conjuring stories from the past: early dance sensations, tense interactions with the legendary Ailey, and clashes with critics who tried to box him in as a Black artist. "Do you require moral fervor from Merce Cunningham?" he asks, still furious at the notion. "Memory Piece" alternates with a new work for the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane Company that explores the limits of personal freedom, "People, Places & Things." (New York Live Arts; May 15-24.)

A little more than a year ago, **New York City Ballet** unveiled a work inspired by an image from the Russian invasion of Ukraine—a man holding his dead son's hand after a missile strike. The ballet, "Solitude," by Alexei Ratmansky, is by turns surreal, harrowing, and poetic, a surprisingly stark statement for a medium not known for tackling explicitly political topics. The piece returns for City Ballet's spring season (David H. Koch Theatre; April 22-June 1), in a program that also includes Justin Peck's newest work for the company, "Mystic Familiar," an elegant display of dreamy youthfulness with music by Dan Deacon and designs by the artist Eamon Ore-Giron. Also not to be missed is a program of ballets set to the music of Maurice Ravel, including a delicate and stylish pas de deux by George Balanchine, "Sonatine."

Not one for introspection or psychologizing, **Twyla Tharp** instead brings technical dazzle and musical understanding to the stage at City Center (March 12-16). As usual, there is a new piece, set to Philip Glass's meandering "Aguas de Amazonia." But I would place my bets on the older work, "Diabelli" (1998), set to Beethoven's eponymous piano variations, themselves a feast of invention, wit, and intricacy. This is ideal material for Tharp, whose brain thrives on complexity and minute variations in form. And then there is her energizing effect on dancers, who on this occasion include Renan Cerdeiro, until recently of Miami City Ballet—a classical dancer through and through—and the unstoppable Daisy Jacobson.

In recent years, the tap artist **Ayodele Casel** has turned her mind to Latin jazz, tap history, and the improvisations of Max Roach, but this spring she embraces something new: early hip-hop. "I love the way the music swings,"

she says of the as yet untitled show, at the Joyce (May 28-June 8)—and “the way tap dancing and words come together.”—*Marina Harss*

Classical Music

“The Threepenny Opera,” J’Nai Bridges

“An aria about an important squirrel” may not be what you’d expect to encounter at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, but this is one of the things that Joseph Keckler—an artist of operatic talent and irreverent taste—promises the audience at **“A Good Night in the Trauma Garden,”** newly commissioned for the lapidary surroundings of the museum’s Petrie Court (May 9-10). Across the park and its springtime buzz, birds, not rodents, feature in **“Die Zauberflöte,”** opening March 23 at the Metropolitan Opera, though they might be overshadowed by Kathryn Lewek’s famed turn as

Queen of the Night. If that's not enough Mozart, or enough farce, **"Le Nozze di Figaro"** (opening March 31) is quickly followed on the same stage by Rossini's prequel, **"Il Barbiere di Siviglia"** (opening April 15), which finds Figaro, the eponymous barber, in his madcap salad days.

Fantastic beasts may seem less out of place in the **New York Philharmonic's** performance of movie music by John Williams (May 7-9) or, indeed, of a new monodrama called "Orpheus Orchestra Opus Onus," composed and sung by Kate Soper and conducted by Gustavo Dudamel (May 22-24, 27). At Carnegie Hall, Bernard Labadie, making his final appearance as the conductor of the **Orchestra of St. Luke's,** leads that ensemble and **La Chapelle de Québec** in the "St. John Passion," the spikier of Bach's two surviving Easter oratorios (April 10). Music by Shostakovich forms the backbone of a visit by the **Boston Symphony,** which pairs a symphony apiece with outings from **Mitsuko Uchida,** playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 (April 23) and **Yo-Yo Ma,** playing Shostakovich's Cello Concerto No. 1 (April 24). The **Gateways Festival Orchestra,** an ensemble that brings together top players of African descent from around the country, plays symphonies by Dawson and Dvořák, and accompanies **J'Nai Bridges,** a mezzo-soprano of burnished tones, in a selection of songs and spirituals (April 27). A month later, the pianist Evgeny Kissin convenes another supergroup—Gidon Kremer, Maxim Rysanov, and Gautier Capuçon—for a rare all-in-one performance of Shostakovich's singular sonatas for violin, viola, and cello (May 28).

Elsewhere, the viol player **Jordi Savall** and his ensemble **Hespèrion XXI** bring pieces from Renaissance England and Catalonia to the 92nd Street Y (April 11), and the choir **Stile Antico** honors Palestrina's five-hundredth anniversary at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin (March 29). BAM mounts **"The Threepenny Opera,"** Brecht's savage satire of capitalism on the brink (April 3-6). The Brooklyn Art Song Society's **New Voices Festival,** which punctuates the spring, features recent works for the voice, including Juhi Bansal's "Love, Loss, and Exile," which sets traditional Pashtun *landays*, originally sung by Afghan women, to liquid piano-and-cello accompaniment (April 6, May 4, June 1). And, at Roulette, the Palestinian American oud player **Simon Shaheen** presents a program of music from the Arab world (April 26).—*Fergus McIntosh*

Television

“Wolf Hall,” Jon Hamm, a Cinephile Studio Head

If there was a “peak” in the streaming wars, it was in 2022, when the number of scripted series débuting in a single year reached six hundred—too many shows for anyone to keep track of, let alone watch. Now that the battle is over and the fire hose of content has been dialled back, industry observers and TV lovers alike are left wondering what kind of programming this new era of contraction will bring.

If this spring is anything to judge by, the networks’ and the streamers’ favored weapon in the fight for eyeballs is high-concept hooks. Many of the new series in the next few months seem designed for simple yet catchy loglines. Take, for instance, the Jon Hamm vehicle **“Your Friends and Neighbors”** (April 11), an Apple TV+ drama in which a floundering former finance guy turns to stealing from the homes in his fancy suburban enclave to maintain his life style. Also entering a life of crime are the pampered protagonists of Hulu’s **“Deli Boys”** (March 6), a pair of Pakistani American brothers who, after their father’s sudden death, discover that the family’s wealth came from a much more unsavory source than its convenience-store empire—and that they might have the grit to take their father’s place. However quickly they get in over their heads, they probably don’t have as much to worry about as the loyal friends in Apple TV+’s **“Dope Thief”** (March 14). Ridley Scott directs Brian Tyree Henry and Wagner Moura in the first episode of a tale in which two small-fry thieves rob a drug den and become the target of a relentless kingpin.

On the lighter side, Netflix premières **“With Love, Meghan”** (March 4)—Meghan Markle’s life-style series about cooking, gardening, and being friends with celebrities—after a two-month delay. For those who prefer a bit more edge to their downtime, there’s **“The Studio”** (March 26), an Apple TV+ comedy about a recently promoted studio head (played by Seth Rogen) who must sacrifice his cinephile sacred cows at every turn to do his job.

Of course, the season’s most anticipated shows are probably the returning favorites. HBO is on the cusp of dominating Sunday nights again with the follow-up season of the hauntingly fungal post-apocalyptic drama **“The Last of Us”** (April 13), in which a mutant mushroom strain causes mass zombiedom. Sunday mornings, meanwhile, are proverbially soon to be dedicated to the network’s megachurch comedy, **“The Righteous Gemstones”** (March 9), which comes back for its fourth and final season. Also wrapping up their runs are the “Star Wars” spinoff **“Andor”** (April 22), on Disney+, and the serial-killer satire-thriller **“You”** (April 24), on Netflix.

Spring will also see two less conventional returns. In Netflix’s **“Everybody’s Live with John Mulaney”** (March 12), the comedian hosts a live weekly talk show, which builds on his earlier six-part experiment “Everybody’s in LA.” And in PBS’s **“Wolf Hall: The Mirror and the Light”** (March 23), Mark Rylance resumes his celebrated turn as Thomas Cromwell, Henry VIII’s devious yet doomed adviser, after a ten-year hiatus. Heavy is the head that wears the crown; heavier still is the heart that loses the king’s favor.*—Inkoo Kang*

Movies

De Niro’s Gangsters, Coogler’s “Sinners”

Action takes many forms, whether on a grand scale or at arm’s length, in upcoming movies, including **“Black Bag”** (opening March 14), a spy thriller directed by Steven Soderbergh and written by David Koepp. It stars Cate Blanchett as an intelligence officer accused of espionage and Michael Fassbender as the officer’s husband, a fellow-agent, who is torn between his personal and professional loyalties. The director Barry Levinson’s latest film, **“The Alto Knights”** (March 21), named for an erstwhile social club in Little Italy, is a gangster drama, written by Nicholas Pileggi, in which Robert De Niro plays the dual role of the real-life nineteen-fifties mobsters Vito Genovese and Frank Costello. Alex Garland, whose 2024 film “Civil War” was a military fantasy, sticks close to history with **“Warfare”** (April 11), co-written and co-directed by Ray Mendoza, whose experiences as a Navy *SEAL* during the Iraq War are the basis of the story. Mendoza is also the main character, played by D’Pharaoh Woon-A-Tai. Tom Cruise returns as Ethan Hunt, and again does his own stunts, in **“Mission: Impossible—The Final Reckoning”** (May 23), directed by Christopher McQuarrie.

The supernatural realm dominates some of the most eagerly anticipated new films. **“Sinners”** (April 18), the director Ryan Coogler’s first film since “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,” is set in the South, during the Jim Crow era; Michael B. Jordan plays twin brothers who return to the family’s home town and confront evil in both practical and mystical forms. The octogenarian David Cronenberg’s new horror drama **“The Shrouds”** (April 18), set in a high-tech near future, stars Vincent Cassel as a widowed scientist who devises a camera and software to observe corpses in their graves and discovers that the system has been hacked for malevolent purposes. **“A Big Bold Beautiful Journey”** (May 9), directed by

Kogonada, stars Colin Farrell as a man whose mysteriously equipped car leads him to a woman (Margot Robbie) and takes them on a wondrous road trip.

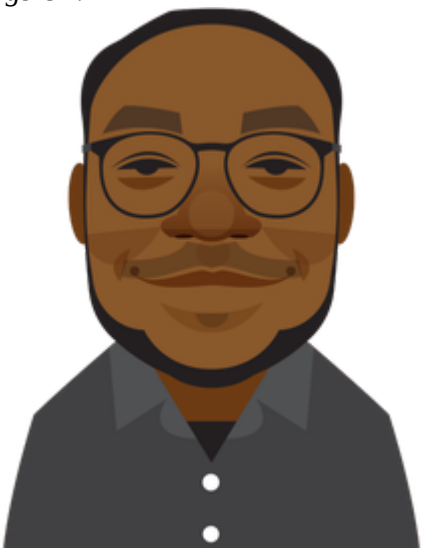
Trouble is all in the family in a varied array of new movies, such as the French thriller **“Misericordia”** (March 21), directed by Alain Guiraudie. It’s set in a rural village, where a young man (Félix Kysyl) attends the funeral of a baker who’d mentored him, stays with the baker’s widow (Catherine Frot), and comes into conflict with her son (Jean-Baptiste Durand). Tracie Laymon’s first feature, **“Bob Trevino Likes It”** (March 21), is the quasi-autobiographical story of a woman (Barbie Ferreira) who, in a search for her estranged father (French Stewart), instead connects with another man of the same name (John Leguizamo). Wes Anderson’s new film, **“The Phoenician Scheme”** (May 30), is tightly under wraps but is described as being about a family and its business; it stars Benicio del Toro as a European tycoon and Mia Threapleton as his daughter, a nun. The teeming cast includes Tom Hanks, Scarlett Johansson, Jeffrey Wright, and Hope Davis.

Movies themselves are a subject of the season, as in the Chinese director Lou Ye’s **“An Unfinished Film”** (March 14), a drama about a filmmaker’s effort to complete a long-abandoned project that again stalls because of *COVID* lockdowns. Duke Johnson’s **“The Actor”** (March 14), based on a novel by Donald E. Westlake, stars André Holland in the title role of a performer who, after an assault, has amnesia and must rediscover his identity and his art. **“Being Maria”** (March 21) is a biographical drama, directed by Jessica Palud, about the traumatic experiences endured by the actress Maria Schneider (played by Anamaria Vartolomei) during the shoot of “Last Tango in Paris”; Giuseppe Maggio plays the film’s director, Bernardo Bertolucci; Matt Dillon plays Schneider’s co-star, Marlon Brando. *—Richard Brody*

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- So you want to be an actor
- “Poog” rules for life
- Remembering Roberta Flack

Shauna Lyon is the editor of Goings On.



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Helen Shaw, The New Yorker's theatre critic, joined the magazine in 2022.

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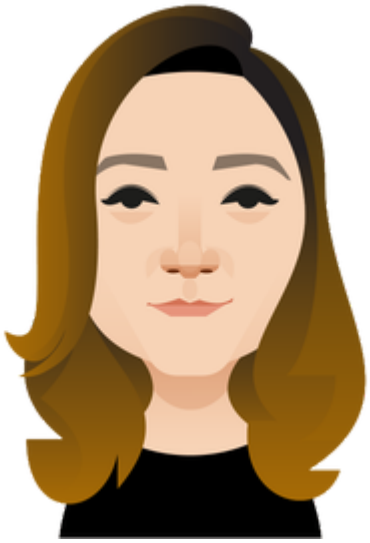
Fergus McIntosh is the head research editor at The New Yorker and runs the magazine's fact-checking department.



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Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of "Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard."

The Talk of the Town

- **Trump’s Disgrace**
  By David Remnick | While F.D.R. set a modern standard for the revitalization of a society, Trump seems determined to prove how quickly he can spark its undoing.
- **Should Aaron Judge Get a Chinstrap?**
  By Zach Helfand | After the Yankees reversed their longtime beard ban, facial-hair experts, including ZZ Top’s Billy F. Gibbons, weighed in.
- **A Fired Yosemite Locksmith Messages Trump from the Summit of El Capitan**
  By Brad Wieners | Nate Vince, a park staffer whose job was just terminated, unfurled a giant upside-down flag on the side of the rock dome.
- **How a Gizmo Used to Photograph Taco Ads Took Over the Red Carpet**
  By T. M. Brown | Ready, set, Glambot! At the “SNL50” show, the high-speed camera snapped Maya Rudolph and Lady Gaga. Larry David and Tom Hanks? No chance.
- **Democrats in the Wilderness**
  By Barry Blitt | Chuck Schumer, Hakeem Jeffries, and Nancy Pelosi practice some self-care.

Comment

Trump’s Disgrace

While F.D.R. set a modern standard for the revitalization of a society, Trump seems determined to prove how quickly he can spark its undoing.

By David Remnick

March 1, 2025

A wingless reconstruction of Tatlin’s flying machine, the Letatlin.

It was one thing to anticipate this prolonged political moment; it has been, these past weeks, quite another to live it. Each day is its own fresh hell, bringing ever more outrageous news from an autocrat who revels in his contempt for the government he leads, for the foreign allies who deserve our support, and for the Constitution he is sworn to uphold. Since beginning his second term, six weeks ago, Donald Trump has commandeered public attention to such an extent that it is hard to recall that there was ever a time

when an American President went about his first weeks in office in a frenzy of activity characterized not by threat, chaos, and corruption but by discipline, competence, and compassion.

Yet there was such a time. On the overcast morning of March 4, 1933, Franklin Roosevelt arrived at the U.S. Capitol to deliver his first Inaugural Address. The country was in a general state of misery. Since the start of the Depression, in late 1929, one out of three American workers had lost his job. Countless schools were shuttered. Banks were collapsing. Edmund Wilson, reporting for *The New Republic*, wrote that "there is not a garbage-dump in Chicago which is not diligently haunted by the hungry."

Roosevelt, having defeated Herbert Hoover in the popular vote by eighteen points, could honestly boast of a mandate and understood its meaning. As he said in his speech at the Capitol, the demands of the "stricken" electorate were clear: "This nation asks for action, and action now." Before the notion of a President's "first hundred days" was ever codified, he set off on a tear of executive orders and legislative initiatives. Roosevelt, with the support of enormous Democratic majorities in Congress, quickly saved the national banking system, took the U.S. off the gold standard, paid out significant relief to the poor, and created federal agencies that not only provided work to the jobless but helped revive the country's economy and infrastructure for decades to come.

It has not taken Trump a hundred days to match Roosevelt's New Deal for its speed, its "muzzle velocity," as Steve Bannon, Trump's formerly incarcerated court philosopher, has put it. But, while Roosevelt set a modern standard for the revitalization of a society, Trump seems determined to prove how quickly he can spark its undoing. In record time, he has brought shame and disorder to the country. Where F.D.R. set out to build and to comfort, Trump has set out to fire countless civil servants, punish his adversaries, and threaten the press. He has cast aside essential climate actions, humiliated undocumented immigrants and trans men and women, coddled dictators, and unnerved allies. F.D.R. appointed Cordell Hull, Harold Ickes, and other formidable advisers to his first Cabinet; Trump has empowered extremists distinguished principally by their conspiracy thinking, sycophancy, and incompetence.

F.D.R. created the Civilian Conservation Corps and the Tennessee Valley Authority; Trump has deputized Elon Musk, who has billions of dollars in contracts with multiple federal agencies, to freeze federal funding for programs that millions of Americans depend on and to fire thousands of workers in vital government agencies. “We will make mistakes,” Musk said in the White House, flashing a smile of privilege and malice. So far, these little goofs include, but are not limited to, momentarily laying off people who oversee the nuclear-weapons stockpile and cancelling Ebola-prevention measures.

Roosevelt, in his time, led the conquest of global fascism and the rescue of Europe. On matters of foreign policy, Trump has rapidly made common cause with autocrats from Budapest to Beijing and has made it clear to our European allies that when they come to Washington they had best flatter his ego and bear gifts, such as an invitation to visit King Charles. In the Oval Office on Friday, Trump nakedly sided with Russian aggression, berating the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, for failing to show him sufficient gratitude and respect and for “gambling with World War Three.” Zelensky is a hero of historic scale, brave beyond measure; Trump’s behavior was disgraceful. He and his Vice-President, J. D. Vance, deliberately tried to intimidate Zelensky with all the finesse of a couple of small-time hoods. The incident was both shocking and inevitable, all in line with the over-all temper of Trump’s Presidency—the threats, the firings, the multiple *doge* fiascoes, the proposal to cleanse the Gaza Strip of two million Palestinians.

Is this really what Trump’s supporters voted for? How does the decimation of American values, institutions, and commitments bring down the price of eggs? Writing in *Foreign Affairs*, Steven Levitsky and Lucan A. Way make a painstaking and convincing case that most autocracies that have emerged since the end of the Cold War retain certain democratic features, particularly elections, but weaponize the state, purging it of perceived enemies. This sort of “competitive” autocracy—like Erdoğan’s Turkey and Orbán’s Hungary—is, the authors argue, what is now taking shape in Washington. To minimize the unending fusillade of Trump’s first weeks in office, to choose to turn away, to shut off the news, is to indulge in self-soothing.

There is no guarantee that Trump's perverse momentum will slow, or be derailed, of its own accord. He has the unwavering support of his *MAGA* base, the cowed compliance of his congressional caucus, and the backing of multibillionaires such as Jeff Bezos, who would rather diminish the vitality of his newspaper than risk the dinner invitations of the sovereign.

And yet the current torrent, fuelled by years of planning in right-wing circles and by Trump's demagogic energies, is hardly unstoppable. Will working-class and middle-class Americans tolerate the self-indulgence and the corruptions of Trump's favored billionaires while their own interests go unaddressed? Will Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., who is currently being tested by an outbreak of measles in Texas, have the public's trust in the event of another pandemic? We have already seen how at least some courageous judges, governors, and law-enforcement officials have refused to bow down to the politicization of the law, or, as Levitsky and Way put it, the weaponization of the state.

Roosevelt, at the start of his Inaugural Address, said that there was no need "to shrink from honestly facing conditions in our country today." In our time, the crisis resides in the Oval Office. Whether there is a mandate for what is being practiced there will be made clear in the months to come—in Congress, in the courts, in the press, in the streets, and, eventually, at the ballot box. Fear itself was the singular enemy in Roosevelt's time. It remains so today. ♦

David Remnick has been the editor of The New Yorker since 1998 and a staff writer since 1992. He is the author of seven books; the most recent is "Holding the Note," a collection of his profiles of

musicians.

Chin Music

Should Aaron Judge Get a Chinstrap?

After the Yankees reversed their longtime beard ban, facial-hair experts, including ZZ Top’s Billy F. Gibbons, weighed in.

By Zach Helfand

March 3, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

Everywhere you look these days, norms are collapsing, rules are disappearing, and chaos prevails among the élites. The latest: last week, the Yankees decided to eliminate their long-standing ban on beards. Depending on one’s leanings, the ban was either a quasi-authoritarian assertion of corporate control over personal expression or a symbol of professionalism and institutional stability. It might surprise casual fans to learn that the rule was formal, even legalistic, laid out in a five-hundred-page document called “The Yankee Systems Development Manual.” The manual prohibited

beards, and “scalp hair” falling below the collar, but carved out seventies-era-hair exceptions: “Long sideburns and mutton chops are not specifically banned.” (There were also style laws: “Uniform pants must be bloused.”) In any case, it became a tradition, a way to mark the time. In New York, after winter always came the Shearing of the Free Agent.

Regimes don’t crumble all at once, and in recent years there has been evidence of the ban’s decay. Armchair pogonologists might have noticed that C. C. Sabathia pushed the bounds of stubble—a five-o’clock-the-next-day shadow—and that Giancarlo Stanton has got away with a beard subspecies known as the soul patch. The rule allowed exceptions for religious beards, though no player ever claimed one. Still, it could be argued, and it has, that the policy was an overreach, on freedom-of-worship grounds. Lou Piniella: “Jesus Christ had long hair and a beard. Why can’t we?” George Steinbrenner: “See that pond? Walk across that pond and you can have a beard and long hair.”

Had Piniella appealed, he might have established a baseball corollary to what some New Yorkers recognize as the Leviticus Standard of beard law. Last year, when the N.Y.P.D. issued Procedure No. 304-08, reinstating a ban on facial hair, the department found the order difficult to enforce. Many officers, even the secular-seeming, exercised religious exemptions. One described his legal standing to the *Daily News* as “Leviticus, bro.”

For years, the N.Y.P.D. granted religious beard exemptions only to those who could prove that their beliefs were “sincerely held.” The unwritten rule was that beards, exempted or not, must not exceed one millimetre. “That’s basically a five-o’clock shadow,” Masood Syed, a beard exemptee who served seventeen years on the force, said the other day. “They’d literally use a ruler and measure it.” Syed, who is Muslim, refused to comply, and he was questioned and harassed regularly. “Some cops would be, like, ‘Hey, by the way, the Yankees can’t have a beard, either,’ ” he said. “We’re law enforcement. What does that have to do with the Yankees?”

In 2016, Syed was suspended over the beard, and he sued. He moved for class-action status. “I wanted to apply the policy change to all different faiths,” he said. Leviticus was now in play: “Ye shall not round the corners of your heads, neither shalt thou mar the corners of thy beard.” Syed won

reinstatement. He also won the authority to rewrite the policy's wording. The rule crafted by Syed, who now runs his own law practice, prevents the department from challenging the sincerity of an officer's beliefs.

What lessons could the Yankees learn? Beard changes can be liberating but also overwhelming. After Syed's case, "almost every single police officer in New York City had a beard," he said. "It spread like wildfire. It was crazy. There were executives who said, 'Well, Leviticus also says you can't have tattoos.' Because guys would walk in there with full sleeve tattoos and say, 'Hey, Leviticus.' But everyone knew the game."

The Yankees of the late beard-ban era had become, like the Supreme Court, or the Cuomos, a humbled institution. There's a good case to be made that the ban was bad baseball policy. The cleanly shaved Steinbrenner teams won a World Series, on average, every seven years. Previously, the organization had won one every three and a half years. Certain players, without their hair, could appear gaunt and impotent. With head rounded, Johnny Damon saw his batting average drop twenty-five points. Randy Johnson's E.R.A. rose by more than a run.

Who might benefit the most from a beard? "I was just talking about this with the gang the other day," Billy F. Gibbons, the lead guitarist for ZZ Top, whose own beard is the size of a small bath towel, said. Gibbons is a beard-history buff and a baseball fan. Once, during a gig in Havana, he learned that Fidel Castro had a baseball team called the Barbudos, or the Bearded Ones. (A newspaper headline announcing Gibbons's arrival: "Otro Barbudo.") He thought that the Yankees' reversal was smart ("By letting it fly, it's one less element to occupy the mind"), though there were new practical questions to consider: "Will you keep it on top of the covers or under the covers?"

Gibbons and the gang decided that some older players would've looked great with beards: Reggie Jackson ("a goatee and a jazz dot"), Don Mattingly ("a full-out lumberjack look"), and Alex Rodriguez and Derek Jeter ("Once they were sprouting the goodly whiskers, they could actually include maybe some team coloration"). Current players had to navigate the Yankees' confusing stipulation that the beards must be "well groomed." "I think that's a polite way of saying 'indications of trimming,' " Gibbons

said. He had a few ideas. For Aaron Judge, “perhaps the chinstrap,” he said. “We call it the Macbeth.” Gerrit Cole could take lessons from the beards that he maintained while on the Astros and the Pirates. “He also had the makings of a nice handlebar mustache,” Gibbons said. As for the manager, Aaron Boone, “he’d have to play it straight and narrow,” Gibbons said. “Let’s leave him clean-shaven.” ♦

Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

Yosemite Postcard

A Fired Yosemite Locksmith Messages Trump from the Summit of El Capitan

Nate Vince, a park staffer whose job was just terminated, unfurled a giant upside-down flag on the side of the rock dome.

By Brad Wieners

March 3, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

Before a visit to Yosemite National Park, it never hurts to reacquaint yourself with the hazards that can accompany its wild beauty: rockfalls, the swift currents of the Merced River, an encounter with a bear. (Never throw food at one.) A lesser, more recent concern: getting trapped in a park toilet.

Locks that jam, handles that break off, doors that stick owing to swings in temperature—these lavatory failures afforded the Yosemite Valley's go-to locksmith, Nate Vince, a measure of job security. Or so he thought. On Valentine's Day, Vince, a forty-two-year-old welder turned park staffer, was among a thousand National Park Service personnel who were terminated via e-mail, a shock that he shared on Instagram: "The people that fired me don't know who I am, or what I do." Vince does a great deal more than free tourists from rest rooms. For four years, he shadowed the previous locksmith, getting to know thousands of keys and locks in the park, from gun safes and an on-site federal courtroom to storage lockers for emergency medical supplies.

His time suddenly his own, Vince got an idea to photobomb the park's annual "firefall" spectacle as a protest. For two weeks in late February every year, the setting sun lends the snowmelt at Horsetail Falls an orange glow, giving it the appearance of molten metal. This fleeting display draws thousands, a ready audience for what Vince had in mind—unfurling an inverted American flag.

"What's happening is bigger than me," Vince said by phone from the Zodiac route on the vertical granite of El Capitan, about two thousand feet above the Valley floor. Yes, he needs a new plan for his life, but he also felt a need to speak for those who now feared for their jobs. "I'd say there's a mild hysteria right now," he said, adding that the park rangers "have been told not to talk to the media. Now they've got this e-mail saying they have to justify what they did last week or it'll amount to a silent resignation. The people who love our parks need to know what's happening to those who care for them."

Inverted flags, a pre-radio, even pre-Morse-code, sign of nautical distress—a visible SOS—became a popular form of protest during the Vietnam War. Last May, supporters of Donald Trump adopted the gesture when he was convicted of falsifying business records. Vince said that he saw the inverted flag as a free-speech symbol that would "disrupt without violence and draw attention to the fact that public lands in the United States are under attack."

“I see some umbrellas, a monkey . . . I’m waving . . .”
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

For the visual to register, though, the flag had to be big. Last year, when four climbers placed a banner (“*STOP THE GENOCIDE*”) on the monumental rock face of El Capitan, “it ended up being sort of a postage-stamp-sized thing, halfway up there,” Miranda Oakley, a Palestinian American climber who hung it with three friends, recalled. “Once people got binocs or a telephoto lens on it, then they got it.”

Vince obtained a thirty-by-fifty-foot flag from Gavin Carpenter, a Yosemite maintenance mechanic who is an Army veteran. He and Carpenter agreed that they’d observe proper flag etiquette. With mild surprise, Vince noted, “One of our climber friends didn’t know you aren’t supposed to let it touch the ground, or that you’re supposed to take it down when it’s not illuminated.”

He had no trouble finding co-conspirators. Although Yosemite rangers and rock climbers have not always been the best of friends, these days they mostly are. Rangers appreciate the annual cleanups led by climbers, and although some older climbers prefer their status as outlaws, even the cranky big-wall pirates muster for mountain rescues. One climber whom Vince tapped to help flew in from New Mexico.

On February 22nd, a crew of six rose at 4 *a.m.* and headed up the East Ledges, a trail that rock climbers often use to descend from El Capitan after an ascent of its face. On the summit, they used haul bags (for ropes and other gear) to weight the corners of the giant flag before rappelling over the cliff’s edge to unfurl it just off the stone. Wind and thermals—pockets of

warmer air on the rise—nearly caused them to abort. Vince recalled a moment that spooked him: “I’m looking over and I see the flag billow and one of our guys floating up like Mary Poppins.”

Two golden eagles surveyed their stunt, one swooping so close that they all stopped to gape. As the sun began to set, the wind relented, and the flag draped down in full. Then, twenty minutes before last light, the team folded it up. “We’d made our point and didn’t want to interfere with people’s experience of firefall,” Vince said. “We brought it up right before the sun lasered the falls. It really had a ceremonial feel. I’ve been down there with the crowd for firefall, too, and the moment builds and everyone just cheers.” ♦

Brad Wieners was previously an editor and a writer at Wired and National Geographic Adventure, among other publications.

Red Carpet Dept.

How a Gizmo Used to Photograph Taco Ads Took Over the Red Carpet

Ready, set, Glambot! At the “SNL50” show, the high-speed camera snapped Maya Rudolph and Lady Gaga. Larry David and Tom Hanks? No chance.

By T. M. Brown

March 3, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

On a drizzly recent Sunday night, the Art Deco lobby of 30 Rockefeller Plaza was clogged with celebrities attending “Saturday Night Live” ’s fiftieth-anniversary show. Taran Killam, who played Donald Trump on the show in 2015, strolled in wearing a double-breasted tux and stopped cold when he noticed a curly-haired man in a green suit standing beside a rig that looked like a ten-foot-tall Swiss Army knife.

“Oh, *here* it is,” Killam said. The man was Cole Walliser, a forty-three-year-old director, and the gizmo was the Glambot, a high-speed camera mounted on a giant robotic arm. Walliser oversees the device during the E! network’s red-carpet coverage, and the resulting dramatic slo-mo celebrity action clips are posted to TikTok and Instagram. (“S.N.L.” was a warmup for the Oscars, two weeks later.)

Killam paused before strutting up to the Glambot, planning his shot. “Just imagine it’s raining and I’m not wearing a shirt,” he told Walliser. When Walliser called “Action!” Killam unleashed a roundhouse kick for his portrait.

Walliser has become a fixture at awards-show red carpets in the past decade, ever since E! replaced the Mani Cam (Julianne Moore and Jennifer Aniston led a revolt that shut it down) with the Glambot. “When we first started doing this, I had to tell people not to leave their mark, because there’s this huge arm that might be flying at them,” he said. The camera arm swings around, toward, and away from its subjects, like a big metal snake. “Someone covered their face like it was going to attack them one time,” Walliser said. “But it made for a good shot.”

The souped-up camera has humble roots. “It was mostly used for food commercials,” Walliser said, while he waited for the “S.N.L.” crowd. “So maybe there was a Taco Bell commercial where you see the taco break in half slowly and the camera’s whipping around, and somebody had the idea ‘Hey, what would happen if we shot *people* with it?’ ”

Walliser grew up in Vancouver, filming his friends skateboarding, before moving to Los Angeles, where he directed commercials and music videos. He started working with E! as the official Glambot host in 2016; he has a laid-back charm that’s handy when he’s dealing with people who attempt,

and sometimes fail, to pull off audacious pirouettes, often in heels. A few subjects have stumbled while doing a pose.

Celebrities are usually happy to see Walliser on the red carpet, he said, in part because “they’re answering the same question fifty times.” He added, “I have to figure out the difference between what we talk about them doing and what their body language is telling me. If someone is clearly anxious, I’m, like, ‘Let’s not try a spin—let’s just do something chill.’ ”

At 30 Rock, a line had formed for the Glambot, with wranglers handing off clients to Walliser as their stylists made tweaks to outfits and makeup.

Maya Rudolph cheered on Bowen Yang while he struck a pose in a sharp red suit and adjusted his glasses like a Bond villain. When it was Rudolph’s turn, she tried out some angles and hand motions.

“Can you give me a push-in on that side?” Walliser asked his camera operator. Then: “Three, two, one, action!”

Rudolph daintily fluttered a rosette petal on the shoulder of her blue satin gown while the robot arm sprang toward her like a cobra.

“This is terrifying,” she said, laughing. “It’s like being at a dentist.”

Not everyone is a fan of the process, which can feel a bit like live-streamed mugging. When Tom Hanks and Rita Wilson walked up, Wilson talked through some moves with Walliser, and Hanks slunk away. “The Glambot is none of my business,” he said. “It’s a little like getting invited to the Latin Grammys. Like, I appreciate the invite, but you don’t really want me there.”

Pete Davidson ambled in and locked eyes briefly with Walliser before heading to the elevator. “No Glambot for me, thanks!”

Lady Gaga, a Glambot veteran (seven portraits), had a no-nonsense approach. Wearing a slate one-shoulder dress, she spun straight toward the camera’s arm and tossed her hair forward. Then she stepped over to Walliser’s monitor to see a replay.

Jerry Seinfeld and his wife, Jessica, were getting ready for their Glambot moment when Larry David wandered by. Seinfeld tried to get him to be in the shot.

“What did I get myself into?” David asked, annoyed. “I just said hello.”

Walliser explained, “It’s a slow-motion camera, so we’re looking for a little pose.”

David cut him off with a nod and a wave. “I’ll see you later,” he said, and vanished. ♦

T. M. Brown is a writer and journalist in Brooklyn. His work has appeared in the New York Times, Rolling Stone, and Vice.

Sketchpad

Democrats in the Wilderness

Chuck Schumer, Hakeem Jeffries, and Nancy Pelosi practice some self-care.

By Barry Blitt

March 3, 2025

Barry Blitt, a cartoonist and an illustrator, has contributed to The New Yorker since 1992. In 2020, he won the Pulitzer Prize for editorial cartooning.

Reporting & Essays

- **A Fan’s Notes on the Spectacle of Super Bowl Week**
  By Nick Paumgarten | There’s the game itself, and then there are the parties and promotions, a glad-handing orgy for the sports-entertainment complex.
- **Menopause Is Having a Moment**
  By Rebecca Mead | If you’ve got ovaries, you’ll go through it. So why does every generation think it’s the first to have hot flashes?
- **Will Harvard Bend or Break?**
  By Nathan Heller | Free-speech battles and pressure from Washington threaten America’s oldest university—and the soul of higher education.
- **When an American Town Massacred Its Chinese Immigrants**
  By Michael Luo | In 1885, white rioters murdered dozens of their Asian neighbors in Rock Springs, Wyoming. A hundred and forty years later, the story of the atrocity is still being unearthed.

Letter from New Orleans

A Fan’s Notes on the Spectacle of Super Bowl Week

There’s the game itself, and then there are the parties and promotions, a glad-handing orgy for the sports-entertainment complex.

By Nick Paumgarten

March 3, 2025

The President was in the Superdome, and the Eagles were in the end zone.Photographs by Bill McCullough for The New Yorker

I ’m a native New Yorker but a fan of the Philadelphia Eagles. I very rarely miss a game. By the standards of the species, I’m an ordinary ape, yelling at the TV, conjuring referee conspiracies, poring over (but never commenting in) fan forums and game threads online. Wherever I’ve lived or visited, through the decades, I’ve sought out the Eagles bar. In recent years, I have frequented the Merrion Square Pub, at Ninety-fifth Street and Second Avenue, where the patrons join in the periodic incantation shouted by the guy they call R.J.—“Good things *happen when you RUN THE BALL!*”—and then, after wins, dance together to Bill Withers’s “Lovely Day.”

But, more often than not, I watch at home, alone, standing slightly to the side of the screen, arms crossed. Frederick Exley, on the first page of his autobiographical novel “A Fan’s Notes,” describes the “high and delicious

anxiety" of an N.F.L. afternoon, which induces symptoms—"the pain was excruciatingly vivid"—that he mistakes for a heart attack. In January, during a particularly harrowing fourth quarter, in the Eagles' playoff game against the L.A. Rams, I measured my blood pressure, for science, and the result was so obscene that I will not share it, in case my doctor is reading this. When the Eagles escaped with the win, I jumped up and started removing my clothes. The first chapter of "A Fan's Notes" is titled "The Nervous Light of Sunday," and though I am not a suicidal drunk like Exley—or, let's say, not much of one—I know the wobbling migraine radiance of game time.

I'm an Eagles fan because of my father, a Philadelphian who started going to games as a boy in the fifties, when they played at Connie Mack Stadium and then at Franklin Field, at the University of Pennsylvania. (At the time, Ivy League football, in Philly anyway, was bigger than the N.F.L.) His stepfather was one of the so-called Happy Hundred, the syndicate of local officials and businessmen who, in 1949, bought small stakes in the team, for three thousand bucks a head. My father was there when the Eagles beat Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers, in the 1960 Championship, six years before the first Super Bowl. The iconic Eagle at that time was Chuck Bednarik, a.k.a. Concrete Charlie, a steelworker's son from Bethlehem and a B-24 gunner who flew thirty combat missions over Nazi Germany, then played at Penn. But the winning touchdown was scored by a rookie running back named Ted Dean, whose mother had been my step-grandfather's laundress.

I didn't know any of this when I joined the elders at the altar of the Trinitron, at age eight, in 1977. The team, which had mostly been lousy since that championship year, was finally starting to win games again. The sight of the Kelly-green jerseys, against the sickly inchworm green of Veterans Stadium's diabolical artificial turf, got its talons in me. The Dick Vermeil years: the Eagles placekicker went barefoot; they had a quarterback called Jaws and a receiver named Harold and a cornerback named Herman. In the 1980 season, a high-water mark, they reached the Super Bowl but lost to the Raiders. I came to understand that rooting for the Birds meant agony and disappointment, and that there may even be some honor in it. Even the best rosters and incarnations inevitably came up short. But then, in

2018, they unexpectedly won a Super Bowl, their first. The joy was as peculiar as it was intense. Suddenly, I began to see the team's paraphernalia everywhere, and to participate more often in the terse exchange of blessings: "Go, Birds." "Go, Birds."

I have appreciated the fellowship, but, then again, I am, in truth and in most other respects, a New Yorker. In my twenties, when I made it down to the Vet, I took in the drunken mayhem and belligerence and, once the amusement had worn off, thought, These are my people? There were, infamously, a judge and a jail on the premises. And so the Eagles devotion was mainly a private kind of church, with a congregation consisting of my father, my brother, and eventually my sons—and, before he died, my mother's father, another Philadelphian, who for a time ran a factory that manufactured little plastic Eagles pins. My mother disdained football, and the Eagles, just for the riotous emotions they stirred up in her boys and men.

Apprehension of another kind took hold a few Sundays ago, at the Superdome in New Orleans, as Jon Batiste, on a grand piano at midfield, tucked into the first notes of "The Star-Spangled Banner." We'd made it through "Lift Every Voice and Sing" (Ledisi), "America the Beautiful" (Lauren Daigle and Trombone Shorty), and "Hold My Hand" (Lady Gaga, evidently prerecorded), not to mention days of revelry and prognostication. Here came the cloying sentiments, the farcical calls for unity, the moment of sorrow over a long list of recent American tragedies whose anguish this spectacle purported to relieve. By the time of the anthem, it was clear that we were on a giant television soundstage. The artifice, when you're in the stadium, is in the foreground: the hurried erecting and taking down of sets, with production platoons dashing to and fro; the long fallow spells of the commercial breaks, with the next act mustering outside the tunnel. Were we ready for some football? You bet. The heart raced.

Eagles fans outnumbered Kansas City Chiefs fans by a considerable margin—it had been a running gag all week in New Orleans to hazard a ratio; mine was seven to one—and had already proved capable of summoning a deep roar of a baleful kind, which, with all due respect to Arrowhead Stadium, the home of the Chiefs, I hadn't encountered before anywhere outside the

Northeast Corridor. The throngs, in their respective colors, crammed the concourse; you could hardly move. Getting into the Dome had been eerily easy, even with Secret Service agents superintending the metal detectors, but now the thought of getting out, if one had to do so, induced anxiety unrelated to the game itself. I'd seen the movie "Black Sunday," about a Goodyear-blimp bomb attack on the Super Bowl, the same year I became a fan of the Eagles. Also on my mood board: "The Hunger Games" and "Olympia," the Leni Riefenstahl documentary about the 1936 Berlin Games.

The President was in the Dome. It was hard to know where. He'd visited a corner of the field earlier, to some gumbo of boos and cheers, but I'd somehow missed him. Attention was diffuse, amid the distractions and noise, the bright colors and lights, and the bombardment of commercial agitation. The only thing that could concentrate our eyes and minds, in this reverse panopticon of seventy thousand gazes, was the football itself, that precious prolate spheroid of dimpled cowhide, which had yet to be teed up or booted into play.

One row in front of me, several family members of a Chiefs starting defensive tackle remained seated for the anthem, as did, behind me, the Philadelphia 76ers great Julius Erving. In Dr. J's case, one surmised it might be the knees. (He left his seat soon afterward, I hope for a private skybox reserved for Philly sports gods.) Still, I thought of the exiled quarterback Colin Kaepernick, and his kneeling-during-the-anthem protests, what seems like a hundred years ago. You'd have to be a fool to think that the fresh removal, the week before, of the slogan "End Racism," from the end zones and the players' helmets, meant that racism had been ended.

In recent days, Canadian hockey fans had taken to booing the American anthem, in response to Donald Trump's tariffs and his threats to annex Canada. But this was America, damn it, and no one was about to boo Batiste. During the anthem, the image of Trump appeared on giant screens at both ends of the stadium, with his daughter and his grandson and his dour salute. The moment came and went; a noise rose, of indeterminate temper. There were almost definitely more cheers than boos, but also maybe just a din of collective noticing. Afterward, people would claim that it was more

one way than the other—more ratio speculations—or try to advance the idea that Fox Sports had piped in cheering on its broadcast, which, if you compared it with the European feed, reposted here, maybe doctored, maybe not . . . who can say, really?

Any attempt to put the football game itself into the binary ping-pong of our current politics was equally simplistic or self-serving. The Chiefs wear red; they are Midwestern; Brittany Mahomes, the wife of the quarterback, Patrick Mahomes, had liked a *MAGA* Instagram post. Who owns the Chiefs? A conservative Christian, Clark Hunt, whose father, Lamar Hunt, founded the team, as well as the American Football League, the merger of which with the N.F.L., announced in 1966, was the basis for the first Super Bowl. (Lamar coined the name, too, in an offhand comment, prompted by his having seen his kids playing with a Super Ball.)

The Eagles are owned by Jeffrey Lurie, who made his money in the movie-theatre business and has donated primarily to Democrats. Philadelphia is a blue city. But who are we kidding? I saw a video, earlier this season, of an Eagles fan waving a red *maga* hat walking up the aisle at the Eagles' stadium; pretty much everyone in the crowd cheered him and chanted Trump's name. Anyone who has spent any time around athletes, especially white ones, or around Eagles fans, ditto, must know that it's all a long way from Berkeley or the Upper West Side.

Not long after the anthem, during a TV timeout, the image of Taylor Swift, seated with a friend, flashed onscreen, and there arose a more unified response, a thick surge of boos—presumably from Eagles fans, for her connection to the Chiefs, through Travis Kelce, the Chiefs tight end and, for those who live on Mars, her boyfriend. It was ugly to see a young woman and artist derided in such a way, merely for her playful allegiance to her lover. But maybe it wasn't just about the Eagles and the Chiefs: Swift had opposed Trump in the past, and Trump had subsequently singled her out for ridicule as a result. The moment deepened my sense of my own tacit abetment. The game, people had been saying all week, was a welcome distraction—from the American moment, let's call it. But in the Dome it felt like the distraction was more like a mirror, a fun-house perversion of the

thing itself, in the way that dreams can be animations of amorphous preoccupations.

This was Super Bowl LIX, the VIIIth one at the Superdome. There's the contest itself, the Big Game, and then there's the week leading up to it, a jubilee of parties and promotions, a glad-handing orgy for the sports-entertainment complex and a bucket-list indulgence for fans who can spare the time and the expense. Eagles plus the Big Easy: I had to be there. I secured a bed with friends in the Garden District and went about trying to hustle up a ticket.

The Super Bowl may well be the last great vestige of the monoculture: it's the pop event that most Americans, whatever their beliefs, circumstances, or motivations, can gather around. It's hard to think of anything that comes close, unless you count Christmas. Like Christmas, it is by no means immune to the culture wars, but its popularity seems to be. This year's Super Bowl set a record for the price of a thirty-second advertising spot and was the most-watched event in the history of the United States.

My only previous Super Bowl was XXXVIII, 2004, in Houston. Patriots-Panthers. I was there on assignment, a Profile of Mike and the Mad Dog, the sports-talk-radio duo. I stayed at the home of a friend, a beer distributor, and through various connections got into a few satellite happenings, including the Playboy party, where young women in Bunny garb served drinks and flirted with corporate executives and other guests. I was the plus-one of Billy Bush, a childhood friend from New York, then a correspondent for "Access Hollywood," whose first cousin was at that time entering the last year of his first term in the White House and the eleventh month of our occupation of Iraq. It was three months before this magazine published photographs from the military prison at Abu Ghraib, and several more before Billy Bush laughed along while a future President spilled some "locker-room talk" on a hot mike. It would cost only one of them a job.

“There they go again—taking a perfectly nice home and turning it into a library.”
Cartoon by Paul Karasik

For the game, the N.F.L. had assigned me to the stadium’s basement, with the foreign press, where the only way to watch the action was on TV. I wanted more. Bush was sitting in the box of the National Rifle Association. He sneaked me in, and so I got to watch the game in the flesh, while seated next to Wayne LaPierre, the N.R.A.’s C.E.O. I ate his popcorn and drank his beer, while a sense of compromise and corruption seeped through me.

I was glad to see the game, anyway, even if I had no real rooting interest; it was an excellent one, a back-and-forth aerial bombardment, with Tom Brady prevailing, for his second of seven Super Bowl wins. The box next to the N.R.A.’s was occupied by a half-dozen models from the *Sports Illustrated* Swimsuit Issue, out the following week. At halftime, the boxes mingled on the concourse for cigarettes and chitchat, and so we missed the halftime musical performance by Janet Jackson and Justin Timberlake—which included the infamous wardrobe malfunction, when Timberlake, maybe accidentally on purpose, exposed Jackson’s right breast on live TV.

I’m tempted to say that those were different times, but on reflection they seem quite a bit like today’s. Guns, boobs, war. The vulgarity and rot were palpable then, as they seem to have been, come to think of it, even when Hunter S. Thompson was in Houston for Super Bowl VIII, in 1974. He started his report on his time there with a quote from the Book of Revelation: “And whosoever was not found written into the book of life was cast into the lake of fire.”

I spent a lot of time at the 2004 Super Bowl on Radio Row. Twenty years on, it is Media Row. Sports talk long ago expanded well beyond the AM dial. Widespread legal sports gambling, fantasy sites, podcasts, social media, influencers: none of this really existed in 2004, and now it dominates the landscape and accounts for a lot of the revenue. To a certain extent, professional sports have always been a vehicle for selling product, but now the product, as often as not, is oneself. The name of every game is relevance. Followers are more valuable than first downs.

Media Row occupied a cavernous hall at the convention center downtown. An outer ring consisted mostly of the elaborate imported studio sets of sports talk shows. The scale and reach of the ones inside the ring were smaller: ESPN Wichita, “4th & 1 with Cam Newton,” “Bring the Juice,” Telemundo New Orleans. All the characters from the flat screen were alive in 3-D. The loudmouth and future American President Stephen A. Smith was taller than expected, hamming it up with Jayden Daniels, the former Louisiana State University Tiger and N.F.L. Offensive Rookie of the Year—area man made good. Joe Montana had the hunched posture of a regular desk serf, though he’d come by it honestly, at the hands of Lawrence Taylor, the Hall of Fame linebacker. And, look, off-tackle, there was L.T. himself, decrying the softness of the game today, to the unlikely Gen-X X phenom Ricky Cobb.

The stars, past and present, made the rounds on the Row, handlers and cameras in tow, each gaggle sweeping up curious civilians and clogging up the narrower byways. The athletes were easy to pick out—height and musculature, drip and bling—but not always easy to identify. They swung onto sets and spoke into microphones, often on behalf of a cause or a product as well as themselves, and then made their way to the next booking. George Kittle, the San Francisco 49ers tight end, wearing a Little Caesars T-shirt adorned with pizza-slice icons, showed up with his mother at the *Sports Illustrated* booth—a sad little Wayne-and-Garth-calibre nook, reflective perhaps of the diminishment of both a medium and a “brand”—with boxes of Crazy Puffs.

Meanwhile, the on-air stars, the hosts and prognosticators, filled the hours on air with analysis and predictions, then spent the minutes in between

reconnecting. Everyone told everyone they should come on one another's podcasts. The convention hall was a hive of content generation, of the most disposable, empty-caloried kind: hours and hours of Crazy Puffs. I felt an itch to be a content destroyer, but everywhere you looked there were police of one kind or another, with the occasional bomb-sniffing dog. Content protection.

I saw a man in a green Saquon Barkley jersey, green Eagles overalls, and green-and-silver face paint—bald but for a tight green Mohawk. I know that dude: the Philly Sports Guy. His name, under the paint, was Jamie Pagliei. He's fifty-two and lives in Delco—Delaware County, Pennsylvania—and was a stonemason and a chimney sweep before going sports guy full time, during the pandemic. "I'm the first professional fan," he said. (I rifled through the memory banks—Fireman Ed? Dancin' Larry?—but at a glance no one else qualified.) "I went to a hundred and thirty games last year. Eagles, Phillies, Flyers, Sixers, Union, Wings. I've been painting up for years, but this is my first time here on Media Row." He was pulling some notes together to do a podcast. He'd picked up some sponsors—he had patches on his overalls for Garage Beer, Travis and Jason Kelce's lager venture, and TickPick, a ticket broker. Jerome Bettis, the retired running back known as the Bus, walked by, and Pagliei called out, "Bus!," and Bettis smiled and waved back. "I don't think of myself as famous, but I have made some semblance of a career," Pagliei said. "I love going to games. I mean, who wouldn't want to be the hype guy?"

On Media Row, everyone was a hype guy. The game, the show, the hot take, the cold truth. The probiotic beverage. The Super Bowl was the leviathan in whose eddying wake the pilot fish feed. At the Bounty House of Wingman, the hype guys lined up for free boxes of chicken wings to go with a roll of paper towels, while on a nearby patch of artificial turf civilians and pros took turns attempting to throw green Nerf footballs through downfield targets. Tucking into some chicken at a standup table, I bumped greasy fists with Steve Flisler, who wore a ball cap that read "Fantasy Loser." He'd come to promote his startup to the industry people he'd got to know over the years as an executive at NBC, Twitch, and the X Games. The venture: an online platform that curates punishments for the last-place finishers in fantasy sports leagues. "It's a thing—losers must be punished," he said. The

punishments were rated on a five-tier scale, five being the most onerous; a Tier 2 might require a guy to hang a poster of the winner's face on his wall for a year. "The idea is to unlock engagement in fantasy leagues. 'Losing is winning when you lose to your friends,' " Flisler said, reciting his venture's slogan. "An A.I. bot will go into your history to surface nuggets to keep the banter going."

The night before, he and his co-founder, Pete Jimison, had attended a party thrown by Wondery, the podcast company, in honor of "New Heights," the show featuring the Kelce brothers. They'd crushed Garage Beers with Jason. This Philly sports guy, who wept with joy when Kelce, in full Mummer regalia at the Eagles' 2018 Super Bowl victory rally, drunkenly told off all the team's detractors ("We're from Philly, fucking Philly. No one likes us. We don't care"), felt a pang of regret, but the Fantasy Loser guys reassured me that I hadn't missed too much: "By the end, it was linemen asking other guests to try to guess their weight." They promised to tell me about any other upcoming parties, and we paper-towelled our fingers, shook hands, and parted ways, as Rob Gronkowski, the retired tight end turned content-creation juggernaut, Gronk-spiked a Nerf football on the Bounty turf.

Here are some of the other places I wasn't. The Fanatics party ("always the best," a friend assured me), hosted by the company's founder, the "serial entrepreneur" Michael Rubin, with performances by Travis Scott and Post Malone. No dice. The *Sports Illustrated* party, with performances by Dom Dolla and Diplo. No bid. I was not on Bourbon Street when Cardi B unveiled a world-record three-hundred-and-fifty-gallon daiquiri.

On Friday, I heard from an old college acquaintance, a very successful businessman, that he had an extra ticket. He had considered giving it to someone else—a ten-year-old who, when a jet crashed onto a street in Northeast Philadelphia, nine days before the Super Bowl, had protected his sister from flying debris. The boy caught a chunk of metal in his head. When he woke up in the hospital, after emergency surgery, he wondered if he'd missed the Big Game. He hadn't, and my friend thought he'd reach out to the family and offer it to the boy. But it didn't happen. So the ticket was mine, if I wanted it.

Two nights before the game, I met up with the businessman and his friends in the French Quarter, and we piled into a van and sat in traffic for a half hour before inching up to Rao's, a pop-up of the clubby East Harlem red-sauce joint. We were too late to see the former Super Bowl champion quarterbacks Russell Wilson and Eli Manning throw out the first meatballs or to catch the brief performance by Darryl McDaniels, of Run-DMC, but we did get to see the former Patriots coach Bill Belichick glowering at a table beside his girlfriend, Jordon Hudson, his junior by nearly fifty years. Earlier in the day, I'd seen a photo online of them together, side by side with a sixteenth-century painting, by Lucas Cranach the Elder, of an old bearded fellow arm in arm with a young lady, entitled "An Ill-Matched Pair." The businessman posed for a picture with the coach: a better match, maybe.

After a while, the van scooped the group up and delivered us to a night club out beyond the Superdome called Empire. Bouncers ushered us past the line and through the throngs inside to a table near the front. The word was that 50 Cent was due to perform. Anticipation, and spirits, ran high. Women bearing sparklers and bottles of champagne descended, as clubbers gawked from the perimeter. I felt ill-matched and sneaked away. 50 Cent never showed.

Another tip: I had it on reliable authority that Taylor Swift intended to appear the following afternoon at Preservation Hall and perhaps even perform with the Preservation Hall Jazz Band. She'd recorded a few tracks with some of the members on her most recent album. Pres Hall is the storied jazz club on St. Peter Street, in the heart of the French Quarter—a tiny room, the anti-Superdome. This was the only public performance there that weekend. Ben Jaffe, the owner of Pres Hall, had arranged it, without announcing it, at the behest of Swift's team. (Swift's team denies the behesting.) At the appointed hour, the club's five rows of benches filled up with oblivious tourists, mostly Eagles and Chiefs fans, with dozens more patrons standing behind. The Eagles chant, ubiquitous all week, broke out —"E-A-G-L-E-S, Eagles!"—and then out came the musicians, including Jaffe himself, on the tuba. Led by Wendell Brunious, on trumpet and patter, they kicked into the Professor Longhair classic "Go to the Mardi Gras." More patter, more essential New Orleans, but still no Taylor Swift. The

show ended and the band slipped out. Swift, too, couldn’t be everywhere at once—or here, anyway. I later heard that Leonardo DiCaprio was standing at the back of the room, with his mother. I didn’t see him, either.

By now, the regular fans, who, although not quite working stiffs, were obliged to recognize the traditional boundary between week and weekend, were arriving in New Orleans, and the proceedings were morphing from a corporate convention and media event into a mass happening and citywide bacchanal. The hotel district teemed, in the vicinity of Caesars casino, where you could pick up your wagering menu: forty small-print pages of possible bets and scenarios. The French Quarter was in full Brueghel, inside a makeshift Green Zone. The Louisiana State Police, in combat gear, had set up blockades on the cross streets, to guard against an attack like the one that had killed fourteen people on Bourbon Street on New Year’s Day.

At an Eagles-fan party in the Garden District—cheesesteaks from Yinzer’s, soft pretzels, and Tastykakes—I met a young lawyer who worked for a legal-aid organization in the city, who preferred that I not use his name, lest he get fired. He told me that Louisiana, under the direction of Governor Jeff Landry, a conservative Republican, had—under the powers made permissible by the Supreme Court’s recent decision, in Grants Pass v. Johnson—swept the city streets of indigents, in preparation for Super Bowl week. Law enforcement had cleared the homeless encampments under the interstate between the convention center and the Superdome and bused scores of people to a temporary shelter in Pontchartrain Park. So the New Orleans of the Super Bowl, both guarded and scrubbed by the state police, was, he said, a Potemkin New Orleans that called to mind what the Chinese Communist Party had done during the Beijing Olympics. Certainly, most of the locals I talked to disdained this particular tourist invasion, especially the way that so many of the events were private and invitation-only, in contravention of the come-one, come-all ethos of New Orleans. And the local businesses that weren’t reserved for such occasions were doing hardly any business at all. The locals I saw were lying low and waiting for the Super Bowl crowd to leave town.

“As soon as you all fuck off,” one said, “it’s Mardi Gras.”

That local took me to see the Dirty Dozen Brass Band at Tipitina's, the venerable club uptown. Inside, the Eagles chants persisted. Upstairs, by the bar, before hearing my second "Go to the Mardi Gras" of the day, I met a cluster of fans: two Bucks County fathers named Bill, with their college-age daughters, Brynn and Maria, all four in Kelly-green tracksuits but as yet ticketless, and then Al Zone (as in calzone), Sr., and Jr. Zone the younger ran a zoo in Norristown, and was the keeper of the team's "official live mascot," which is actually a pair of bald eagles, Noah and Reggie, who do suite appearances at home games. "They wouldn't let us bring them," Zone, Jr., said.

My father played boarding-school football. My mother once went to watch a game, and her abiding recollection was of his having burned himself badly with a tanning lamp, in preparation for her visit, and hardly being able to put on his helmet. My younger brother took up the sport in prep school, and the memory I have of him, as a ninth grader with the thirds (the team below junior varsity), is from the opening kickoff, in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Ludicrous in his pads, like Peter Boyle in "Young Frankenstein," he ran full tilt downfield and caught the runner clean, knocking him cold. "Jesus," I said. I have never played a down.

By now, we know the case against football. The violence and the carnage, the shattered bodies and brains it leaves in its wake. The N.F.L. retirees, hounded by addiction and depression, driven to harm others, or themselves, or both. Though the pay is great, the job security is not. The contracts aren't fully guaranteed, and an N.F.L. career lasts on average about three years. They call it a business, but the business is the grinding up of young men's bodies, the majority of them Black. The owners are nearly all white billionaires whose franchises balloon in value much faster than the athletes' shares. Then again, many people grumble about the players, too, the football guys everywhere, their legacy of wild or violent behavior in high school and college and beyond, the coddled jocks, the tribal entitlement, the sexual violence. A dozen years ago, when the concussion scourge came to the fore, with a class-action suit featuring thousands of ex-players, many commentators and scolds predicted that the league was in jeopardy, that good-hearted educators would phase out the game—soccer's ascendance, at last!—and that ultimately this would deprive the league of bodies to grind

up. Instead, the league has boomed. Violence sells: *quelle surprise*. Or maybe it's the gambling, now legal in most states and profitable in all, though not for the gamblers.

I know all this—and the first glimpse of the games each autumn, with the crack of the helmets and the car-wreck collisions, always stuns me afresh—and yet I continue to tune in. I love the sport itself, the complexity of it, the variety of bodies and roles, the grace amid the peril, the sacrifices, the story lines, the religious devotion to the fate of a team and a city that's not even my own.

Game day. The tailgates, many of them ticketed, started early. A Philly anthem, Meek Mill's "Dreams and Nightmares," boomed out of the Birds backers' lots. Tributaries of fans—from Bourbon and Baronne, Tchoupitoulas and Magazine—poured into Poydras Street and flowed toward the Dome. The doomsday prophets and kooks along the way brought to mind the streetside hubbub in John Kennedy Toole's "Confederacy of Dunces." You had your born-agains bearing signs: "God Hates Your Idols" (possible), "Free Will Is a Satanic Lie" (true enough), "God Hates Drunks" (no, He does not), "God Hates Fags" (no), "God Hates You" (me?). A vender evaded the constabulary with his pushcart of "Donald Fucking Trump" and "Bitch I'm an Eagle" T-shirts. A group of gentlemen dressed in white, in white cowboy hats, with patches of presumably fake blood over their privates, led a protest against male circumcision, with a sign that read "Nobody Wants Less Penis." It seemed right-wing-coded, but I couldn't be sure. The Black Israelites, meanwhile, were out on Canal Street. Scalpers offered tickets: for a man bearing a notebook, the price was "face value." (The average price of a ticket, on the secondary market, was sixty-five hundred dollars. The cheapest ticket was twenty-six hundred.) But there were some bargains around: you could get your face painted with your team's colors for twenty bucks, and a Coors Light for eight.

By the time the game began, hours later, I was aching for football, for the one real thing. No baloney, just an honest struggle on the field of large bodies and agitated minds—that is, if you don't believe that the games are in some way fixed, as some really do. A notion had absorbed the commentariat, equally hard to credit or ignore, that the Chiefs were the

league's darlings and had benefitted from refereeing so expedient that it had to have been orchestrated. The guys in my row had bet on the coin toss: "Tails never fails!" And, this time, they were correct. High fives all around.

"It all comes down to this!" the announcer said, in the exaggerated bellow of a prizefight m.c.

By now, a few weeks after the final whistle, it would be hard to find an American who couldn't tell you who won. But to refresh: the Birds kicked the crap out of the Chiefs, won their second Super Bowl, and then, days later, had another besotted victory parade up Broad Street and then to the steps of the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where their disarrayed arrival, amid fireworks and smoke and a backdrop of Ionic columns, looked just a little like an insurrection.

For Eagles fans, the game was glorious—a football clinic, a take-that to their doubters, and a prolonged love-in with a cherished group of personnel. For most everyone else, it was either dismal or boring, so lopsided that the greater debate to emerge, after the fact, was about the halftime performance of Kendrick Lamar, who for thirteen minutes spoke and danced a certain kind of truth to a certain kind of power, if you had the ears and eyes for it.

Inside the building, the halftime performance, geared toward a TV audience, rarely hits. Football fans, the ones who will pay tens of thousands of dollars to go to a game or bet hundreds of dollars on the flip of a coin, tend not to be art lovers or revolutionaries. The crowd, already dazed by hours of sensory overload, was subdued. In my section, most people were only dimly aware of what was going on, what the stage set looked like from above, who the guest performers were, what the songs were about. Maybe they appreciated the dis of Drake—a Canadian, after all. I, for one, was distracted by the bathroom line, and the need for the Birds to keep the pedal to the metal and shut down the Chiefs' first possession of the second half. Not long afterward, the Eagles quarterback, Jalen Hurts, completed a deep throw to DeVonta Smith, at our end of the field, to make it 34–0, and one of my host's friends jumped up—he'd hit on some bet—his lapful of nachos erupting onto the heads and shoulders of the patrons in front of us. Gobs of Cheez Whiz splattered the caps and new Saquon Barkley jerseys of the three daughters of a real-estate developer from Wayne, Pennsylvania.

The drubbing continued, the conclusion foregone. My attention began to wander, and I experienced an uncanny weariness, something almost like boredom. My host and his friends decided to leave early, as did the Chiefs fans to their left. So, as the clock wound down, I sat alone in a row of empty seats, wondering why I didn't feel more, why the joy had cooled. Was winning losing when you're not with your friends? My chest began to ache, and for a few moments, growing faint, I persuaded myself that I might be having a heart attack, and that I might die alone here in the Superdome, with the cheese-spattered family from Wayne. I closed my eyes and breathed slowly, steadying my pulse, and after a time the pain and the panic subsided, and then the game had ended and confetti was raining down and it seemed all of New Orleans was singing "Fly, Eagles, Fly," and the team was up on a hastily constructed stage in the end zone not far away, getting their trophy, which for some reason is not a bowl, and maybe because I was overjoyed, once again able to feel something, or because my mother, dead now for four years, was from Wayne, too, and was also one of three daughters, of the father who made the Eagles pins, or maybe just because of the immense shit show of it all, I began to cry. ♦

Nick Paumgarten, a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2000.

Reflections

Menopause Is Having a Moment

If you've got ovaries, you'll go through it. So why does every generation think it's the first to have hot flashes?

By Rebecca Mead

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Three new books join an expanding shelf of menopause-related publications. And a growing number of physicians are studying and treating menopause, too—they're known, among themselves at least, as the "menoposse."Photo illustration by Joan Wong; Source photograph by Kinga Krzeminska / Getty

Few celebrities have lived so much of their lives in the public eye as Drew Barrymore has. She appeared in commercials as an infant, achieved global fame after starring in Steven Spielberg's "E.T." at the age of seven, and became notorious for her battles with drugs and alcohol before she even hit her teens. A few years ago, the actress launched "The Drew Barrymore

Show," and it was on an episode of that program that she underwent a usually private transition in the glare of public scrutiny. During an interview with Jennifer Aniston and Adam Sandler, Barrymore suddenly peeled off a pin-striped suit jacket as she exhaled and fanned herself, announcing, "I think I'm having my first hot flash!" Aniston gamely ad-libbed, exclaiming, "I'm so honored!," and laying the back of her hand on Barrymore's exposed sternum like a mother assessing the temperature of a feverish child, while Sandler looked on in perplexed sympathy. The clip went viral.

Barrymore, who turned fifty this year, is not alone among high-profile women in speaking frankly and openly about the trials of perimenopause, which is now the preferred term for the extended period, lasting as much as a decade, when the reproductive hormones estrogen and progesterone are in flux, but during which a woman is still getting her period, even if sometimes erratically. The phase that encompasses the full transition from perimenopause to postmenopause is referred to clinically as "climacteric" and is colloquially just called "menopause," although, strictly speaking, menopause designates the single day on which a woman has gone three hundred and sixty-five days without menstruating—a milestone that is easy to miss, at least for the generations who came of middle age before the advent of period-tracking apps. Michelle Obama once described on her podcast her experience of hot flashes: "It was like someone put a furnace in my core and turned it on high." On Instagram, Courteney Cox satirized a mid-eighties feminine-hygiene advertisement in which she, then an unknown actress, had appeared. (Dressed for an aerobics workout, she confides, "Tampax can change the way you feel about your period.") Contemporary Cox, clad in an eighties-style leotard and tights, announced, with wide eyes and a rictus grin, "Menopause will eat you alive! It's horrible."

Now we've got a triad of books about menopause, each written by a woman who has enjoyed a professional life that has depended on visibility—and, to varying degrees, has demanded of her the maintenance of an appearance of youthful femininity. Naomi Watts, the actor, has written "Dare I Say It: Everything I Wish I'd Known About Menopause" (Crown), and Tamsen Fadal, a former TV news anchor in New York City, has produced "How to Menopause: Take Charge of Your Health, Reclaim Your Life, and Feel Even

Better Than Before" (Balance). From across the Atlantic comes Mariella Frostrup, well known in Britain as a broadcaster, with "Menopause Is Hot: Everything You Need to Know to Thrive" (Scribner), an American edition of a volume co-authored with Alice Smellie, a health journalist, that was published in the U.K. four years ago. The books present themselves as guides for those entering and enduring years of disorienting symptoms, which include hot flashes, night sweats, brain fog, vaginal dryness, heavy periods, weight gain, hair loss, insomnia, anxiety, and depression—a panoply of woes that often coincide inconveniently and confusingly with demanding life changes, ranging from the midlife acceleration of a high-pressure career to raising adolescent children or the emptying of the familial nest. Each of the three volumes vies to be the must-have companion for women of a certain age, a thumbed copy on the nightstand of a sweat-drenched bed—a kind of "What to Expect When You're Exploding."

These books join an expanding shelf of menopause-related publications, among them a pair of best-sellers—"The New Menopause," by Mary Claire Haver, an ob-gyn who provides the foreword to Watts's book, and "The Menopause Brain," by Lisa Mosconi, a professor of neuroscience at Weill Cornell Medical College, who wrote the foreword for Fadal's. (In a neat circularity, the foreword to Frostrup's book is by Watts.) In the introduction to "Dare I Say It," Haver notes the growing ranks of physicians who are studying and treating menopause, known, among themselves at least, as the "menoposse." Watts, Fadal, and Frostrup are lay members, each having become in her own way an advocate for menopausal awareness. Fadal and Frostrup have applied their skills as journalists by making personally inflected documentaries on the subject, and Watts has gone the Goop route, founding Stripes, a line of wellness products aimed at the perimenopausal market.

At the heart of each book is a similar story: that of an apparently savvy, professionally successful, abundantly resourced woman blindsided by the onset of an inevitable hormonal change. Frostrup offers, "Until my late forties I'd believed myself to be a reasonably well-informed woman of the world. . . . *Then wham!* My ignorance about menopause knocked any such certainties firmly aside. I felt as though I was being sucked into a black hole, with no bearings and no ideas of how to change course." Watts gives a

similar account: “Why had I, a relatively worldly person who’d been going to my annual exams and hanging out with the most wonderfully open and fiercely intelligent women my whole life, never once heard, ‘Heads up, here are the details about this thing that is going to happen to you in the coming years and what it might be like’?” Fadal, who says that she spent her career as a reporter “chasing stories and hurricanes from the mountains of Afghanistan to the coast of Florida,” strikes an Everywoman note: “Being an 80s girl, I’m an expert on every diet under the sun. But I didn’t know a damn thing about menopause. If I thought about it at all, I believed it was something that happened just before you die, and hoped I wouldn’t be around for it.” How can it be that such a conspiracy of silence surrounds a process that affects every human being who has ever had ovaries for long enough?

The story of menopause dates back as far as history itself; Sarah’s laugh in the Book of Genesis, upon learning that she is to bear a child at an unusually advanced age, may be the earliest recorded instance of the habitual descent into weary irony which is among the symptoms of menopause, albeit not one on any medical checklist. But the science of menopause is considerably more recent, dating to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when physicians in Europe began to research the effects of chemicals secreted by the body which control reproduction. The hormone estrogen, levels of which surge at puberty and decline in perimenopause, was first identified, in guinea pigs, in 1917; its crystalline form was isolated in 1929, by Edward A. Doisy, the chair of the Department of Biochemistry at St. Louis University’s School of Medicine. In an autobiographical essay written after he retired, Doisy, who in the forties won a Nobel Prize for his work on Vitamin K, an essential element in blood clotting, colorfully recounted his earlier scientific endeavor. The process of isolating estrogen required obtaining a supply of it in its unpurified state, which could be found in urine excreted by pregnant women. When supplies from Doisy’s family and friends proved insufficient (in his essay, he pays special tribute to the contributions of a niece), he enlisted the help of a local obstetrics department. On one occasion, a driver ferrying the precious amber liquid was almost arrested for bootlegging—this was at the height of Prohibition—and was saved only after he invited the officer to take a whiff from the suspicious vessels.

When it was discovered that estrogen could be supplied not just by expectant women but by expectant horses, commercial production of the hormone took off. Premarin, approved by the F.D.A. in 1942 to treat menopausal symptoms, soon dominated the market, its innocuous-seeming name barely disguising its primary ingredient, pregnant mares' urine. By the end of the twentieth century, Premarin was consistently the first or second most prescribed drug in the United States, beating out medications for common ailments like high blood pressure and diabetes, with an estimated forty per cent of women of postmenopausal age taking it or an alternative estrogen formulation. Were these women—a quarter century or so older than Watts, Fadal, and Frostrup—engaged in a conspiracy of silence about this perilous life transition while simultaneously popping pills to cope with it?

They were not. As has been demonstrated by scholars of culture and medicine, notably Elizabeth Siegel Watkins, the author of "The Estrogen Elixir: A History of Hormone Replacement Therapy in America" (2007), and Judith A. Houck, the author of "Hot and Bothered: Women, Medicine, and Menopause in Modern America" (2006), menopause was regularly discussed, in the media and beyond, during the nineties. The U.S. Senate's Subcommittee on Aging, part of the Committee of Labor and Human Resources, held a one-day hearing on the topic, in April, 1991, during which the director of the National Institutes of Health, Bernadine Healy, announced the launch of a years-long study of morbidity and mortality in women that became known as the Women's Health Initiative, or W.H.I. Menopause was on the front page of the *Times* and on the cover of *Newsweek*. By Watkins's count, more than a hundred books dedicated to the subject were published in the first half of the decade. Among them was Germaine Greer's "The Change," which presented menopause as an opportunity for dawning clarity—"Many women only realise during the climacteric how little of what has happened to them in their lives has actually been in their interest," Greer wrote, acidly—and argued for the liberation of becoming a crone. In 1992, the journalist and author Gail Sheehy published "The Silent Passage," a best-seller in which she gave her own account of being blindsided. "Shame, fear, misinformation—and, most of all, the stigma of aging in a youth-obsessed society—are the vague

demons that have kept us silent about a passage that could not be more universal among females," she wrote.

In Sheehy's telling, the era immediately preceding her own had been the one in which menopause was the life stage that dare not speak its name. As Barbara Ehrenreich noted in her review in the *Times*, though, there already existed "a vigorous body of work" on the matter, including by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, which had published the groundbreaking guide "Our Bodies, Ourselves," in 1970. In the 1984 book "Women Coming of Age," Jane Fonda explored menopause, and almost two decades before that a book titled "Feminine Forever," by the gynecologist Robert A. Wilson, had become a best-seller by arguing that symptoms might be mitigated by estrogen. Watts and Frostrup both treat Wilson with disdain for his paternalistic and sexist perspective, and he certainly is very concerned with how a woman's change of life can undermine a man's conjugal satisfaction. (It was also revealed some years after publication that Wilson's work was underwritten by a pharmaceutical company.) But Wilson's diagnosis of menopausal misery is not so different from their own: "This is a condition intolerable to modern women. Such a waste of human life and happiness cannot be justified either medically or philosophically."

"If I knew you'd be using it for this, I'd never have posed for the picture in the first place."
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

If Watts, Fadal, and Frostrup share a sense that they arrived at menopause without having been warned, they attribute that deficit to a single event: the

sudden, much publicized cessation, in July, 2002, of a medical trial being conducted within the Women's Health Initiative that sought to determine whether estrogen could reduce the risks of chronic conditions afflicting postmenopausal women. Contrary to expectations, preliminary data indicated that subjects receiving a combined estrogen-progestin medication were at an increased risk of heart attacks, blood clots, and strokes. (Progestin is the synthetic form of progesterone.) Most alarmingly, women who had taken hormones for an average of 5.6 years were at a twenty-six per cent higher risk of developing breast cancer than those in the placebo group.

The findings made global headlines, and millions of women who had been prescribed estrogen-based drugs quit them on the spot. (Another consequence was that tens of thousands of factory-farmed horses were no longer needed for their urine; many were sent to slaughter.) Hormone-therapy research went into a tailspin, although, even at the time, a more thorough reading of the numbers revealed a far less scary picture. The increased breast-cancer risk was, indeed, twenty-six per cent, but in absolute terms the results showed that a total of thirty-eight women for every ten thousand taking a combined estrogen-progestin pill might be expected to develop the disease, eight more than in the control group.

Watts, Fadal, and Frostrup all cite the ways in which the results from that fateful study have since been reëxamined and found to be misleading: its subjects, with an average age of sixty-three, were older than the typical users of hormone therapy, who start on medication while in perimenopause or shortly after the onset of menopause. In 2024, a twenty-year follow-up study of the W.H.I. participants showed that mortality rates among trial subjects who had received estrogen and those who had been in the placebo group were statistically insignificant, and it concluded that hormone use was supported for women under the age of sixty with "bothersome menopausal symptoms." Many women over sixty may consider the benefits of hormone therapy worth the associated risks; JoAnn Manson, the principal author of the W.H.I. follow-up and the chief of the preventive-medicine division at Brigham and Women's Hospital, told the Washington *Post* that the increased risk of breast cancer from the long-term use of combined estrogen-progestin drugs was the equivalent of drinking one or

two alcoholic beverages a day. “The absolute risk is low, and all choices involve trade-offs,” she said. Advances in hormone therapy include the delivery of estrogen through a transdermal patch or gel, which appears to impart a lower risk of developing blood clots than oral delivery does. Research suggests, too, that hormone therapy reduces susceptibility to osteoporosis, another calamitous disease of aging for women.

In Watts’s, Fadal’s, and Frostrup’s books, you’ll find personal testimonies of the transformative power of hormone therapy along with due deference to those for whom that option is unavailable. “Going on hormone therapy wasn’t a silver bullet for every last issue I had, but it did provide instant, massive relief,” Watts writes. “I no longer woke up sweating in the middle of the night, convinced my blankets were trying to kill me.” After dealing with hot flashes, brain fog, and loss of libido, Fadal is finally told by a sympathetic clinician, “You can keep struggling but I am not sure why you are doing this to yourself.” A year later, on hormone therapy, she reports, “I was alive again.” Frostrup writes that between the ages of forty-nine and fifty-one she “barely slept, raged at my husband and kids, and was swamped by levels of anxiety that were as debilitating as they were irrational.” Going on hormone therapy restored her well-being, she says, and “contributed to maintaining my state of health, hope, and (mostly) happiness ever since.” Frostrup avows that she will take hormones for the rest of her life. “My estrogen gel will have to be prised from my cold dead hands,” she writes.

Of the three, Watts’s book is the most winningly memoiristic, though a reader might wish for slightly fewer references to her own line of products. (One chapter is titled “Vag of Honor,” which is also the name of a hydrating gel available to order online.) Watts, who went into early perimenopause in her mid-thirties, gives a painful account of her struggle, eventually successful, to get pregnant with her then partner, Liev Schreiber. She also gives an account of the first night she spent with Billy Crudup, now her husband, which could be lifted straight from the screenplay of a meno-positive rom-com: after laboring in the bathroom to remove a firmly attached hormone-delivery patch, Watts emerges with raw skin and confesses, “I’m in early menopause, which means I am *old*.” Crudup points out that they are the same age. “Hey, if it makes you feel better: I’ve got

gray hairs on my balls," he tells her. Watts writes, "Those to date remain the most romantic words I've ever heard, onscreen or off."

Watts's profession may make the prospect of aging, or admitting to it, particularly terrifying. "I was told I would never work again if I admitted to being menopausal, or even perimenopausal. Hollywood's lovely term for such women was 'unfuckable,' " she writes. But one need not be a movie star to recognize the ways in which the onset of menopause can feel like the beginning of a cultural diminishment, not only in the eyes of others but also, alarmingly, in one's own. None of these books exactly celebrate the status of the crone; all offer midlife beauty-maintenance tips. (Using an eyelash curler is highly recommended.) "Even when I was forty, if you asked me to give you one word to describe midlife, I would have said 'irrelevant,' because that is what the culture has taught us," Fadal writes in "How to Menopause."

Fadal offers her personal story, too: perimenopause struck while she was in the midst of a difficult divorce from a man with whom she had co-branded herself as a love consultant, together publishing advice books and appearing on a Lifetime reality show called "Matched in Manhattan." That unfortunate knock to Fadal's credibility as an expert aside, her book is informative, filled with useful checklists and bullet-pointed tips, including questions to pose to one's health-care provider: "What do you recommend for treating my symptoms? Are these treatments F.D.A. approved? What are their benefits? What are their risks according to research?" She even provides a draft of a letter one might write to a partner to explain why, with the onset of night sweats and bloating, intimate relations might be less appealing than they once were. (Fadal recounts how, as a surprise for her boyfriend one Christmas, she answered the door wearing nothing but a big red bow; when he requested the same gift the following year, she told him that he had lost his mind.) Frostrup's book also combines anecdotal revelation with research-based advice, although an American readership unaware of her fame at home—she is well known enough for the *Daily Mail* to publish photos of her, at fifty-five, in a bikini—may be disconcerted by her assumptions of familiarity. To begin a section about menopause and alcohol, she writes, "Speaking as someone who once spent four days holed

up at the Hotel du Cap during the Cannes Film Festival with a selection of debauched movie moguls and George Clooney . . .”

Frostrup says little about the differences between Britain and the U.S. in policy, medical treatment, and public attitudes. In the U.K., Parliament has recently held hearings on menopause and the workplace, and last year the Labour Party pledged in its preëlection manifesto to strengthen protections against menopause discrimination. She doesn’t inquire into why hormone therapy is far more commonly prescribed in England—around fifteen per cent of women aged forty-five to sixty-four received it in 2023, compared with less than four per cent of American women in their fifties, according to a Menopause Society report. Nor does she mention that, unlike in the U.S., hormone therapy in Britain is available through the National Health Service at little or no cost; at most, it’s about twenty-five dollars a year.

In the U.S., entrepreneurs have stepped into what is estimated to be a seventeen-billion-dollar global market. One such effort, the telehealth startup Evernow, offers online consultations and prescriptions; it counts Drew Barrymore among its angel investors. If menopause awareness seems to be “having a moment,” as Lisa Mosconi writes in her introduction to Fadal’s book, it is in part because of the considerable purchasing power of the generation of women currently going through it. But menopause has had many moments before, precipitated sometimes by a widely publicized medical breakthrough or scare and sometimes by a public figure making it her cause. Popular discussion has flared and receded during the past sixty-odd years like a series of cultural hot flashes, each time presented as if nobody had talked about menopause before. And perhaps that’s no wonder. As with the thrilling adolescent discovery of sex or the earth-shattering destabilization of childbirth, the experience of undergoing menopause can be so disorienting that it’s impossible to conceive of its creeping but relentless onslaught until it’s your own body that’s combusting and your own psyche that’s been scrambled. It’s not that there’s a conspiracy of silence around menopause; rather, it’s that, like death, menopause is a thing that happens to other people, until it happens to you. ♦

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| Section menu | Main menu |

Annals of Higher Education

Will Harvard Bend or Break?

Free-speech battles and pressure from Washington threaten America's oldest university—and the soul of higher education.

By Nathan Heller

March 3, 2025

"Administrations, not only at Harvard, are behaving in a way reactionary to political pressures," a professor said. "It's not based on principle."Illustration by Ricardo Tomás

There would be debate about who struck the match that lit the fuse that spiralled around campus, but the sequence of events was plain enough to everyone who saw it burn. On October 9, 2023, two days after Hamas-led fighters from Gaza invaded Israel, killing twelve hundred people and taking more than two hundred hostages, Claudine Gay, the new president of

Harvard University, exchanged e-mails with a small group of colleagues to draft a suitable response. Should they call the attacks “violent”? (Too charged, they decided.) Should they denounce a letter, signed by more than thirty student groups, which called Israel “the only one to blame”? The matter seemed delicate, and the administrators took time to work over their language. That night, they published a statement so widely dismissed as anodyne that Gay released another one, taking a stand against the violence, the next day. By then, Larry Summers, a former president of the university, had broken the norms of that role to blast the current leadership for inaction; Bill Ackman, an alumnus with a hedge fund, had picked up the criticism; and Elise Stefanik, a Republican in Congress, had condemned students’ “vile anti-Semitic statements.” Two months later, Gay was at the Capitol, addressing the House Committee on Education and the Workforce. It was the start of what one professor described to me as “an endlessly metastatic sense of crisis over the course of the whole year.”

Gay, who appeared on Capitol Hill in thick-rimmed glasses and a jacket that resembled gessoed canvas, sat beside the presidents of the University of Pennsylvania and M.I.T., who had also been summoned to give testimony. The questions that the committee posed, on alleged antisemitism on campus, had an air of ritualistic repetition. At one point, Stefanik asked whether “calling for the genocide of Jews” violated the schools’ rules of bullying and harassment. Gay joined the other presidents in saying that her administration allowed freedom of speech but would take action over anything more.

“Antisemitic rhetoric, when it crosses into conduct that amounts to bullying, harassment, intimidation—that is actionable conduct,” she said. Stefanik pressed her. “Again,” Gay answered, “it depends on the context.”

Across the country, campuses were undergoing paroxysms of protest and counter-protest, pulled between the Palestinian and Israeli causes. At the University of Texas at Austin, police in riot gear dismantled tents, deployed pepper spray and stun grenades, and arrested more than a hundred students. At Columbia, “doxing trucks”—vehicles that broadcast purportedly pro-Palestinian students’ names and faces while labelling them antisemites—circled the campus, and student protesters were arrested by the New York

Police Department. Harvard, too, roiled—there were tents in Harvard Yard and doxing trucks in Harvard Square—and a range of voices, including those of congresspeople and donors, questioned Gay's capacity for leadership.

Then other complaints surfaced. In December, the press began publishing allegations of plagiarism in Gay's scholarly work, in the field of political behavior. The Harvard Corporation, the more powerful of Harvard's two governing boards, brought an inquiry to a close with Gay's coöperation. All the same, Gay was out of her office by the first week of January—the fastest presidential exit in Harvard's history. Alan Garber, the university's longtime provost, took her place.

And yet what should have been the end of a tempestuous season wasn't. More than a year later, the campus remains in a state of bewildered unease. Harvard is the flagship of American higher education—the oldest, the wealthiest, and, by many measures, the most selective university in the country—and what started as a crisis of speech and authority on campus has grown into a fear that internal conflict, amplified by outside pressures, can run it and the whole fleet of American universities aground. Polls show trust in higher education falling. In December, Garber appeared at a faculty meeting after speaking with about forty members of Congress, and was alarmed, he said, by the frustration he sensed toward the institution. The worry was that, in 2025, with a new regime in the White House and a sympathetic Congress, the struggles of the previous year could be not an anomaly but a template for the time ahead.

Last fiscal year, two-thirds of Harvard's sponsored research funding—nearly seven hundred million dollars, or more than the growth in the university's unrestricted endowment assets—came from the federal government, which supports everything from cancer studies to art instruction in museums. The figure isn't unusual: federal funding also supports three-quarters of Stanford's research projects and half of all research at both the University of Wisconsin–Madison and U.C. Berkeley. "There's no university in the country that could survive the loss of federal money," Brian Leiter, a professor of law and philosophy at the University of Chicago, who writes a popular blog on philosophy and the academy, told

me. When the second Trump Administration, during its first week, feinted toward freezing federal funding programs, universities were among the institutions whose blood ran cold.

During its first term, the Administration had levied a 1.4-per-cent endowment-earnings tax on wealthy schools. In 2023, in the Senate, J. D. Vance sought to increase that tax to thirty-five per cent. (The measure failed, but similar legislation has already been introduced in this year's Congress.) Donald Trump has threatened to oust accreditors who focus on diversity—not an imminent threat to the accreditation system as a whole, but a step toward potentially devastating consequences. If a school were to lose its status, it couldn't offer the federal loans and aid needed to attract students, and the nature of the institution would change overnight.

Under President Trump, who sees universities, in the main, as enemies in the political culture wars, this pressure on élite higher education could always be expected. But the protests of the past year have given the offensive a special edge. In 2019, Trump used an executive order to formalize antisemitism protections in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, a nondiscrimination law from 1964. If the government can show that a university failed to act to discipline antisemitic or other discriminatory speech and that the school refuses to implement a remedy, it may have grounds to cut funding. Between October, 2023, and February, 2024, the number of Title VI complaints submitted to the Department of Education increased fifteenfold. Legally speaking, Leiter told me, Gay and the other university presidents who appeared before the congressional committee had erred in letting their examiners shift the focus from speech rights to the Title VI question of campus discipline.

"The starting point should have been: 'This speech, even if I did not agree with it, is lawful political speech under the First Amendment of the United States Constitution,' " he said. (According to the student newspaper the *Harvard Crimson*, Gay was coached for her appearance by the law firm WilmerHale; Leiter, like many others, thought that she had received poor legal and political advice.) Leiter says that Title VI suits are likely to ramp up among many identity groups, producing a crossfire of discriminatory-

speech complaints that will keep universities on the line and beholden to the Administration's mercy.

"I think it's great!" Bill Ackman, who likened President Trump to God in a recent tweet, told me. "The government withdrawing funding will cause Harvard, and the Harvards of the world, to reform themselves." It is an irony, sweet to the universities' critics, that schools have been made vulnerable by the speech-and-sensitivity debates that have swirled around campuses for years. And yet conceding those messy parochial disputes to powers outside the university seems to some to represent no less of a crisis.

"By the time I get my workout clothes on, I'm done exercising."
Cartoon by Kaamran Hafeez and Al Batt

"There is a nearly impossible choice being put to university leaders at this point," Andrew Crespo, a professor at Harvard Law School, told me. "On the one hand, you have outside funders, including the federal government, who have the ability to threaten the university's ability to operate. On the other, you have the mission of the institution." Caught in the middle is the influence of universities on fields as disparate as medicine and art. "This is not about any one institution," Crespo said. "It's about higher education in the United States, and whether it is going to survive and thrive or fade away."

I visited Harvard this past autumn, during a period when two dozen professors were barred from entering the main library on campus—a punishment meant to show that the university penalized all unsanctioned speech comparably. Earlier that year, pro-Palestinian student activists had

undertaken a “study-in” there: wearing kaffiyeh scarves, they had studied together silently with messages such as “Israel Bombs, Harvard Pays” (a call for divestment) taped to their open laptops.

After those students were banned from the library, sympathetic professors organized a study-in of their own. They wore black scarves instead of kaffiyehs, and their signs said nonspecific things such as “Embrace Diverse Perspectives,” a phrase from the library system’s mission statement. Security guards appeared and collected their I.D. cards. “The mood of the faculty at Harvard right now is pretty ugly,” a professor told me. “The idea that they would be punished for their speech by their university is outrageous—though, after last year, it doesn’t surprise me.”

That spring, Harvard had moved toward a standard often called “institutional neutrality”: an idea, also adopted by Stanford and several other campuses, that a university as a whole ought not to take positions on the issues of the day. (The policy, a former dean wryly noted, would forbid statements like the one that Gay and her colleagues put out on October 9th.) Neutrality is meant in part to support those who might not agree with an “official” position, and in part to ward off comparisons: in the congressional hearing, Stefanik asked why the Israeli flag had not been flown in Harvard Yard as, under a previous president, the Ukrainian flag had been. Harvard’s new institutional policy suggests: no flags.

Adopting such policies is easy. Applying them to discipline is hard. One way to be institutionally neutral is not to discipline anyone for anything they say. Yet few people want to live and work in a ruleless environment, and the culture on campus has gone in the other direction. A decade ago, concepts like “microaggressions” and “trigger warnings” proliferated to correct for language that, although not illegal, had a way of making specific populations feel unwelcome—creating hidden inequalities, the notion went. The idea that speech can do damage is also the premise of many Title VI and Title IX, or sexual-harassment, lawsuits. But the war in Gaza “is a special case, and an especially difficult set of issues,” Tomiko Brown-Nagin, a law and history professor and the dean of the Harvard Radcliffe Institute, a research center, told me. Last year, she co-chaired a working group on campus communication which, after collecting responses from

more than five thousand students, identified a “chill” that caused them to “self-censor rather than debate charged issues.”

Critics of discipline for harmful speech often cast it as a restriction of free-speech norms on campus. But there’s no era in the history of the American university when such norms reigned. The Berkeley Free Speech Movement of 1964 was a movement precisely because it went against the standards of the place, which included a ban on much political organizing. More than eight hundred students were arrested. In 1975, Yale adopted a famous set of free-speech standards from a committee chaired by the historian C. Vann Woodward, but that regime had come into question by 1986, when a student was disciplined for mocking Gay and Lesbian Awareness Days. (The punishment was later rescinded.) Advocates of free expression today often point to the so-called Chicago principles, standards supporting even speech believed to be “offensive, unwise, immoral, or wrong-headed,” which were originated by the University of Chicago and adopted by schools from Purdue to Princeton (but not, so far, by Harvard). Those principles are ten years old.

A more accurate claim is that the norm for campus speech is to live in a tug-of-war between expression and protection. “I do not understand why the university spokesman keeps saying that antisemitism will not be tolerated on the Harvard campus—part of a commitment to free speech is tolerating prejudiced speech,” Larry Summers told me. He also suggested that the university should have taken steps to disassociate itself from the student groups that signed the letter about October 7th. (Summers resigned from the presidency after floating the hypothesis, in 2005, that women were underrepresented in science because they might have less “intrinsic aptitude” for it.) He has long identified as a free-speech champion, but said that he didn’t worry about the chilling effects of discipline per se.

“Look, we want to chill certain things—people who come into classrooms with megaphones, people who shout down speakers,” he said. “What would be problematic would be to have rules that were differentiated with respect to the *content* of the speech.”

Harvard’s current leadership seems to have embraced a similar rationale. In addition to punishing the professors in the library, the university had, over

the year, tightened its rules on the posting of unauthorized flyers of any kind, as well as unapproved "chalking" on university property—a restriction that bemused some faculty members, who wondered whether they were meant to stop writing on their lecture-hall boards.

"You'd open your e-mail, and it was like Dolores Umbridge at Hogwarts in 'Harry Potter 5'—every time, boom, boom, boom, there was a new rule going up on the wall," a senior professor told me. He had joined a band of protest chalkers, writing "*I LOVE PUPPIES*" on the pavement before running away. "They literally had a librarian who went out and wrote in chalk on the pavement, in front of the library, something like '*HAPPY NATIONAL LIBRARIAN DAY*'—the person was completely oblivious, just lighthearted, and got called in by the dean."

Students found the neutral rules officious. "It's annoying everyone that the university is saying 'No chalking' rather than saying, you know, 'Drawing a pro-Hamas symbol in the Yard is bad'—*that's* what we want to stop," Charlie Covit, a Harvard sophomore and a supporter of the Israeli cause, told me. The chalking ban, perhaps because of its reductiones ad absurdum, was lifted in the fall by the dean of one part of the university, but other rules remain. Some on campus saw them as a marker of a change in speech tolerance.

"Protest is always disruptive—it always breaks some rules," Steven Levitsky, a Harvard government professor, told me. He had participated in anti-apartheid protests as a college student at Stanford, in the nineteen-eighties, a period when there were tent cities in Harvard Yard. "Governments tolerate protests in democracy and err on the side of forbearance," he said. "I think those principles are under threat." What was going on now, with the stringency about chalk and libraries and signage, could be taken as a rehearsal of more authoritarian norms.

Ryan Enos, another government professor, joined the library protest in an effort to push back against what he worried was a widespread clamping down. "One thing that has become very clear is that administrations, not only at Harvard, are behaving in a way reactionary to political pressures," he said. "It's not based on principle." Faculty in some specialty fields have been unsettled by new guidelines that seem to discourage political speech

by leaders in their institutional capacities—a constraint that they worry could apply to increasingly politicized subjects like vaccination and masking. “The way that people describe the guidelines is: You can’t say anything about anything,” Lara Jirmanus, a Harvard Medical School clinical instructor, told me.

Enos believed that the fault lay partly with the faculty. Of the nearly four hundred Harvard faculty members who responded to a *Crimson* survey in 2023, only three per cent of the ones declaring their politics identified as conservative. “There’s almost no political reason for a Republican *not* to attack universities now,” he said. Except, of course, that higher education is one of the sectors in which the United States remains preëminent, a forum of free thought last seriously challenged during the second Red Scare.

“In the nineteen-fifties, when it was politically convenient, there were politicians who went around using universities as a cudgel to attack free speech in this country, and it wasn’t because the universities were prioritizing inclusivity or people’s feelings or trigger warnings or anything like that,” Enos said. At Harvard, a physicist named Wendell Furry had been investigated for possible Communist connections but was defended by the university president; Enos worried that Harvard today wouldn’t take a stand against political antagonists. “The historical parallel, in my opinion, is crystal clear—it looks like a rerun of McCarthyism,” he told me. “One day, people will look back on this and be embarrassed.”

Wildfires burned in late October north of Boston. The air in Cambridge had a still, warm glaze. In a plaza before Harvard’s ziggurat-shaped Science Center, dozens of students assembled with cardboard signs. A divinity student named Alexandra Potter, dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, wielded a bullhorn.

“Gaza, Gaza, you will rise!” she chanted, as the crowd echoed the phrase. “Palestine will never die!”

The protest, originally scheduled to take place in Harvard Yard but moved so as not to run afoul of the new rules, seemed low-key. Many of the protesters wore backpacks. Some clutched to-go coffee cups. A stream of

freshmen coming from their mailboxes, several of them carrying large Amazon packages, paused to watch.

On a bench nearby, a man and a woman stood holding counter-protest signs. "*Never again*," one read, and quoted incendiary language from a Hamas leader. Another showed an infant hostage. The woman, Rotem Spiegler, an alumna of Harvard Law School, wore a T-shirt that said "Shut Up" in Hebrew and told me that she represented an initiative called Cambridge Voices for Israel. "We feel it's important to have this presence here to show the other side and also make those people from the Jewish community feel a little safer," she explained. A few yards away, a pale, middle-aged man wearing a military-style windbreaker and industrial cargo pants with bulging pockets took photographs.

"First and foremost, I'm here to document," he said, pointing at a camera attached to his breast pocket. He said he lived in town but would not give his name. "These kids, they don't know any better—they just have something that gives them a sense of community, and they're happy to show up," he said. "It's only if they say something downright supportive of terrorism that I'll engage them and ask them more questions."

Harvard was the site of a very early student protest in the Americas, when, in 1766, students spent weeks demonstrating against the quality of campus food. (Their chant: "Behold, our butter stinketh!") During the height of the school's Vietnam activism, in 1969, protesters were evicted from an occupied building by police, leading to more than forty injuries. That protest was heavily covered by national media, which was unusual for college activism. Today's protests, however, are carried out continuously in the public eye—a social-media vantage that makes the campus less a world apart than a snow globe for all interested parties. Since October 7th, Israel's bombings of Gaza have killed fifty thousand people, mostly women and children. Some students who spoke out against Israel found themselves the target of doxing campaigns. Faculty got the same treatment. After Kirsten Weld, a history professor and the president of the Harvard chapter of the American Association of University Professors, signed a letter to Claudine Gay urging that the term "antisemitism" be better defined in the university's

usage, a Web site was set up for her, and for other signatories of the letter, with a head shot and the phrase “Harvard’s Leading Antisemite.”

“My husband is Jewish, whatever,” Weld told me. “But I had to have a weird conversation with my dad.”

For students, the involvement from outsiders has a cost. “I kind of want to be a lawyer,” Violet Barron, a college junior who joined the pro-Palestinian protests, told me. “But the top twenty law firms will never hire me because of my activism.” It is unclear who *will* hire her, with a doxing Web site identifying her as an antisemite; at some point, she had to make a choice between her professional future and what she felt was an urgent moral cause. “We do all this because we don’t want to see hate, don’t want to see genocide,” she said. “But there’s an understanding that, if you put yourself out there, you will be doxed, and the career that you’ve come to Harvard to try to achieve is in jeopardy.”

Barron was brought up going to Hebrew school. In high school, she volunteered at food pantries and, through her synagogue, lobbied for gun reform and climate legislation on Capitol Hill. “My Judaism went hand in hand with social justice,” she said. “I grew up believing in Israel as this dream project, the place that had been saved, the refuge for a wandering people.” The bombings in Gaza had unsettled her. “I had this dissonance, which I didn’t even realize was dissonance, which was to fight for these values of social justice and liberation but also stand by Israel,” she continued. “I was harshly awoken.” All her life, Barron said, she had been a believer in the two-state solution; now she favored “one binational state where you have freedom of movement and equal legal rights for everyone, from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea.”

Several students told me that they didn’t think campus leaders realized how defining the war had been for members of their generation. “Everything was tangentially related, in some way,” Charlie Covit observed of campus discussion last year. During the spring term, the university began offering a series of programs intended to encourage “constructive dialogue” and “civil discourse,” but many students I talked to were more aware of incidents that struck them as suppressive.

“Now open your mouth and say, ‘Ooh! Aah!’ ”
Cartoon by Justin Sheen

In October, 2023, the *Harvard Law Review* commissioned an article from Rabea Eghbariah, a doctoral candidate at Harvard Law School and a Palestinian citizen of Israel who had worked on developing a legal theory for Palestinians’ situation in the region. During a meeting of the journal’s staff, however, a majority of editors voted to cancel the publication of his contribution, called “The Ongoing Nakba: Toward a Legal Framework for Palestine.” An expanded version eventually appeared in the *Columbia Law Review*, after a conflict between that journal’s board and some of its editors. “Unfortunately, our silencing has been extreme to the point where even when we’re *given* the platform to speak we’re silenced—which ultimately serves to manufacture consent for the Israeli genocide in Gaza and the subjugation of Palestinians more broadly,” Eghbariah told me.

If there are major donors to the university who favor the Palestinian cause, they have not been nearly as vocal as those, like Ackman, who identify as Zionists. “It was shocking and appalling to the establishment that pro-Palestinian voices were probably majoritarian at Harvard and other campuses,” Levitsky, the government professor, told me. People on both sides of the issue posited that, for all the claims of equipoise, the new rules at Harvard had been introduced with the goal of containing pro-Palestinian protest.

“The university doesn’t want us talking about Palestine,” Barron told me, sitting at a picnic table as the protest cleared away. “They don’t want us calling them out for being invested in Israel. And they’re cracking down in this unprecedented way—it’s what we call the Palestine exception to free speech.”

At noon that day, I was rushing behind Matthew Meyerson, who seemed to be always in motion. “We should probably keep moving or we won’t get lunch!” he exclaimed, and led me swiftly down the corridor of his large laboratory in the Broad Institute, a genomics-research center that Harvard and M.I.T. co-founded in 2004. Meyerson has spent nearly his entire adult life at Harvard, where he arrived as an undergraduate in the nineteen-eighties. His laboratory’s successes include the discovery of a genetic link for lung cancer that helped inform its drug treatment.

Meyerson had round wire-rimmed glasses, a checkered navy jacket, and a batting of snowy hair that, with his brisk solicitude, put me in mind of Lewis Carroll’s white rabbit. He bounded through heavy doors and into the multilevel garage where he kept a Chevy Volt, and we drove to the medical campus for a lunch meeting of Harvard Faculty for Israel, a group that he co-founded in September.

“This is probably the world’s largest collection of biomedical research,” Meyerson said, after we parked and began walking up Longwood Avenue. “The Dana-Farber Cancer Institute is to the right. That’s Boston Children’s Hospital. And you see that building to the far right? Part of Brigham and Women’s Hospital, one of *two* large hospitals here.”

Longwood Avenue, the Appian Way of global health, shows the stakes of defunding. Sixty per cent of the School of Public Health’s operating budget and more than a third of the Medical School’s comes from sponsored funding. But it is also a reminder of what the American university, in its singular tangle of service, scholarship, and enterprise, represents. With public and private money, Harvard had created a small city of medicine. “A conservative institution but with radical functions” is one way that Clark Kerr, the postwar University of California president and theorist of higher education, described the reality of the American university. Meyerson’s father, Martin Meyerson, was Berkeley’s acting chancellor under Kerr, at the height of the Free Speech Movement, and subsequently became president of the University of Pennsylvania—the first Jewish head of an Ivy League school. For Meyerson, Longwood is both a crown jewel of the university’s growth and an alarming measure of a fading Jewish presence.

Harvard keeps no official figures for its Jewish population, but surveys suggest that representation has more than halved since the Vietnam era. Today, less than ten per cent of Harvard College students are reported to be Jewish, one of the lower proportions in the Ivy League. “I initially appreciated more the problem for Israelis, who faced, especially after October 7th, really fierce shunning and discrimination,” Meyerson told me as we arrived at the lunch—a small group sitting in a medical amphitheatre, eating kosher wraps. “But it has also been more serious than I appreciated for Jewish students and staff.” He believes that Jewish representation among the younger generation at Longwood is smaller than on the campus broadly. “I’ve talked to graduate students whose advisers had basically never heard a Jewish perspective,” he said.

If the struggle to find Jews on a medical campus sounds like the setup for a Yiddish joke (“Bubbeleh, how about you start in the ophthalmology department?”), it has become unfunny to many people. Meyerson’s lunch group, which meets weekly, acts as a support group for an alienated-feeling minority. Charleen Adams, a computational geneticist, told me she had grown frustrated by social-justice initiatives that struck her as reflexively anti-Israel and allowed no space for dissenting views. “It seemed like a top-down, ‘Shut your mouth if you’re for Israel or are Jewish’ campaign,” Adams said.

One Israeli medical researcher and Harvard professor who had raised his kids—happily, he said—in a social circle of “stereotypical Cambridge liberals who used to drive Subarus and now drive Teslas” described to me being shocked by the community’s response to the Hamas attacks on October 7th, even before there was Israeli retaliation. “I got zero responses, except from open supporters of Israel,” he said. “It’s almost as if empathy has become politicized.”

A Title VI complaint filed against the university is filled with accounts of experiences of unsympathetic response, alienation, and aggression. It cited a widely circulated video clip of an Israeli student at Harvard Business School being surrounded by protesters holding open kaffiyehs, and accused the university of insufficient discipline. It described a community social-media feed that, at one point, included posts such as “All of you Zionists

are the same. Killers and rapists of children!” and suggested Jewish conspiracy. It noted a student who felt disturbed by the prospect of discussion about the Israel-Hamas conflict in his torts class. “It’s sort of a philosophical question whether that’s antisemitism or not,” Jesse Fried, a Harvard Law School professor who co-founded Harvard Faculty for Israel, said. “But, whatever it is, it’s immiserating students, and that type of humiliation, discrimination, harassment, and shunning would not be directed at any other group.” The complaint suggested that Jewish people on campus weren’t afforded the same protections offered other subjects of discrimination.

“You’re either the oppressed or the oppressor,” Daniel Kuritzkes, a professor of medicine at Harvard and the chief of the infectious-disease division at a Harvard-affiliated hospital, observed of current campus discourse when I visited him one morning. The split struck him as nonsensical for Jews, who, he noted, had broadly been “economically successful” but, on the other hand, had been beaten, vilified, and killed nearly everywhere they’d ever lived. Kuritzkes described himself as a longtime critic of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s policies but found attacks on Israel’s basic legitimacy suspicious. Students and faculty who sought to get Jewish identities protected by the school’s diversity offices reported having been met with mixed responses, which some have perceived as a rebuff.

Kuritzkes recalled that the corporate-style sensitivity training he had received at his hospital seemed unscholarly and reductive—too pro forma in the orbit of a university where scholars come at subjects like diversity and pluralism with years of thought and research. When members of his division were told during a diversity training to consider their white privilege, he bristled: he had gone from public school in Queens to Yale, where he had been made to feel like an outsider amid a patrician Wasp culture.

“I’m saying, you have no *idea* what my background is,” he said. “You don’t know that my father came to the United States at age nine speaking no English. Or that my wife, who is Chinese, came at age six.” American identities comprise many layers and pathways. “D.E.I. makes certain

assumptions about who and what people are," he said. "And the solution *can't* just be that you have to watch a thirty-minute video about how to be nice to Jews or how to be nice to Muslims."

Kuritzkes, like a number of his colleagues, sees these weaknesses as an invitation for more of the nuanced scholarship that has been central to the twenty-first-century university. Many politicians on the right have seemed to disagree. In late October, a congressional committee chaired by the House Republican Virginia Foxx released a three-hundred-and-twenty-five-page report detailing what it described as incidents of antisemitic behavior on university campuses, including Harvard. "Extremist faculty members hijacked the disciplinary process to allow ideologically aligned students to avoid consequences," the report claimed.

"We're not asking for special treatment—we're asking for equal treatment," Shabbos Kestenbaum, a Title VI plaintiff and a former Harvard Divinity School student, who spoke out against Harvard and other universities at the Republican National Convention last summer, told me. " Jewish students deserve equity, equality, and justice, and, if Harvard is not going to fulfill their mandates under federal law, we're going to insure a court of law forces them."

Higher education isn't an especially scarce resource in America. Two-thirds of Americans below the age of thirty have attended college. Of the nearly four thousand accredited colleges in the United States, a majority admit most people who apply; the average acceptance rate is about seventy per cent. What "élite" schools, the Harvards and the Michigans and the Caltechs and the Spelmans, offer is two interlocking promises of special access. First, help with tuition: a rich university, with its deep financial-aid coffers, is likelier to be more affordable for students without means than a state school. Second, a Willy Wonka glass elevator to blast you from where you are to places you might want to go. Because these universities can summon senators, activists, and maestros; because their scientists need researchers and co-authors; and because some of their grateful alumni have lunch budgets, they are hubs of convocation and acculturation. All conflict on élite campuses—even conflict about Israel and Palestine—ends up as an equality-of-access conflict, because access is the key to these schools'

democratic function. Change the norms of access on a campus, and you redraw many larger maps.

Harvard was among the first élite American universities to extend merit-scholarship programs, and one of the earliest Ivy League campuses to make classrooms coeducational. In the nineteen-seventies, it made such an effort to reach communities of color that a landmark U.S. Supreme Court opinion of 1978 asserting the constitutionality of affirmative action touted “the Harvard Plan” as its ideal. Much later, in 2023, the university was at the center of the Court decision that struck down affirmative action. In the first law-school class admitted after the decision, nineteen Black students enrolled—a drop from forty-three in the previous class.

“D.E.I.” was by that time a catchall term for projects in diversity. (In some quarters, it has become a euphemism for the demeaning suggestion that unqualified people are elevated solely on the basis of their gender or their race; some recent efforts to limit D.E.I. programs—like a lawsuit against Starbucks, filed by the Missouri attorney general, alleging that its workforce is “less qualified” because it has become “more female and less white”—seem to have overlap with the ideology of white supremacy.) Harvard created what would become the Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging in 2018, on the recommendation of a task force that had also released a report noting that only a third of faculty members across the university were female, and only a fifth minorities. Harvard’s president, the historian Drew Gilpin Faust, invited John Silvanus Wilson, Jr. —a former president and graduate of Morehouse College, the Harvard Graduate School of Education’s president-in-residence, and a member of the Board of Overseers—to become a senior adviser to that effort and a mission that she had in view.

“What was very much on my mind was that we had brought a lot of different people to this campus, but we hadn’t made sure that they felt they were complete full citizens of the place,” Faust told me. For Wilson, that struck a chord.

“ It was very clear as soon as I arrived on Morehouse’s campus that Morehouse was made for me, but it was very clear as soon as I arrived at Harvard that Harvard was not made for me,” he explained. “It’s in the

campus curriculum. It's in the campus culture. It's in the campus communications." In 2019, Wilson, leading the new initiative, ran the largest optional survey in Harvard's history, comprising twenty thousand people, to measure "belonging" with a tool that a researcher in the education school had devised. " The profile of the person at Harvard who felt most like they belonged in 2019 had the following descriptors," he said. "White, male, heterosexual, educated parents, U.S. citizen, conservative or liberal, Jewish or Christian." The situation on campus for Jewish people had changed since then, he thought, but, as far as bringing them into "the D.E.I. orbit" went, "the challenge is complicated by the fact that reasonable people can no longer agree on what constitutes certain forms of discrimination, antisemitism included."

The Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging, which has since passed to other leadership, now has six full-time staffers and affiliates across campus. It offers trainings, events, and internal grants and is run out of the office of the president. Critics of D.E.I. programs at colleges note that, for initiatives intent on giving voice to the marginalized, they have a way of drawing power to the executive center.

"The difference is the managerial elements," Michael Clune, an English professor at Case Western Reserve University, told me. In the fall, he published an editorial in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* called "We Asked for It," arguing that scholarship had become self-defeatingly politicized. "In the sixties, or the nineties, when I was a college student, you'd see students protesting against administrators," he said. "Increasingly, the agents of this politics *are* management and bureaucracy."

Clune views it as a misdirected response to student concern. When students a decade ago confronted national inequity and called for support, he thought, university leaders saw less a social urgency than a service-and-liability problem—the way United Airlines might staff its way out of a customer crunch. "Administrators heard it as a request for the creation and expansion of bureaucracies around student services and so forth—one of the main drivers of tuition," Clune said. "It created this feedback loop."

Cartoon by Jared Nangle

At Harvard, administrative staffers outnumber the faculty around three to one in the most recent count. There is about a one-to-one ratio of undergraduates to administrative staffers at the university. Some of this explosion at schools across the country has been in legal staffing, for instance in response to the increase in litigation under Title IX, the sex-discrimination law originally passed in 1972 that addresses sexual harassment.

Clune saw D.E.I. programs as the stronghold of an overrepresented administration more than the voice of underrepresented people. (He noted that the ideas of Adolph Reed, a leading scholar of Black politics and a co-founder of the U.S. Labor Party, would have no place in the programs, which Reed has criticized for overlooking issues of class by focussing on race, creating a more diverse élite rather than a more egalitarian society.) And turning to management as a solution to big problems, he thought, encouraged a new mind-set.

I first visited the Harvard.edu home page as a callow West Coast high-school student more than twenty years ago. Back then, it had links to basic topics: “Academics,” “Admissions,” “Campus Life.” There was a virtual tour and low-resolution QuickTime videos. In the lead reel, I remember, Seamus Heaney, Harvard’s Nobel laureate in literature, read a poem as a choir sang “Shenandoah.” At the time, my family knew exactly three people with ties to Harvard College—an English teacher who advised my high-school newspaper, a departed upperclassman from my school whom I’d spoken with perhaps twice, and a neighborhood kid years ahead of me—so the Web site was my portal to an unfamiliar world.

Harvard.edu now has a different mood. When I looked recently, the top item was a guide to following New Year’s resolutions. Below that was a module advertising Harvard’s free branded online courses (“Building Personal Resilience,” “Backyard Meteorology”), with a link to many others—some

free, some purchasable for a few thousand dollars. Next came a module with mindfulness instructions (“1. Sit, 2. Focus, 3. Expand, 4. Embrace”); another was called “Read an Engaging Book” (“Revisit anything Agatha Christie wrote. She is more brilliant than you remember. I’m immersed in the *Body in the Library*”). Nowhere on the home page was there any information about the academic institution.

“Universities have already begun to shift how they justify their existence,” Clune went on. “It’s away from the traditional, you know, ‘pursuit of knowledge’ and toward the stuff you read on corporate Web sites—like, we’re here to ‘create value’ and ‘create engaging customer experiences.’ ”

A fairly reliable way to judge whose power is ascendant in American society is to see who’s making influential demands about campus access at a given moment. For the past couple of years, newly but to no one’s surprise, greater Silicon Valley has led the way. Newly because the business world’s interest in higher education has traditionally flowed through clubby, connected M.B.A. types with an eye for institutionalism. And to no one’s surprise because, after years of political pragmatism bordering on apathy, Silicon Valley’s style of business thinking has sharpened to a social-ideological point. Last spring, a group of powerful figures in tech and finance touted a cause that one called “M.E.I.” (“Merit, Excellence, and Intelligence”) and proclaimed their commitment to hiring on those principles. Last summer, a small but noisy group of venture capitalists, many of whom had criticized left-of-center workplace norms, endorsed the candidacy of Donald Trump. In the fall, Elon Musk backed Trump’s campaign with promises to champion free speech. These figures seem to hold extraordinary sway over the President, who may see, in their taste for drawing theories of the universe from the growth of their own enterprises, a reflection of himself. In January, Amazon and Meta rolled back some of their D.E.I. programs. The same week, the venture capitalist Peter Thiel published an editorial touting Trump’s challenge to “media organizations, bureaucracies, universities and government-funded NGOs,” which were united, he posited, in a conspiracy to censor information on such topics as *COVID*-19 and the Kennedy assassination.

Few in the greater tech world share such views. But many are sympathetic to their counter-institutional thrust. Sam Lessin, a venture capitalist who graduated from Harvard in 2005 and went to Silicon Valley a few years later to join the early Facebook, told me, “A lot of my friends were saying, ‘Look, Harvard is too complicated, too far gone, we’re going to support the University of Austin’ ”—an unaccredited institution founded, in 2021, by such figures as the historian Niall Ferguson, the venture capitalist Joe Lonsdale, and the columnist Bari Weiss. “That’s a very West Coast mentality: These things are too hard to reform—it’s easier to start a new thing.”

Lessin, a longtime donor, described himself as Harvard’s defender among his Silicon Valley friends. Still, after October 7th, he wondered whether they were right. He turned his mind toward joining the university’s leadership. Although members of the Harvard Corporation are chosen through an arcane internal process, candidates for the university’s lower, larger body, the Board of Overseers, are nominated by committee and picked by an open alumni vote. Lessin wasn’t nominated. But, he learned, with 3,238 alumni write-ins, he could get on the ballot, so he launched a campaign.

“Harvard must be focused on fostering a safe and open environment for academic free speech AND protect the academic focuse [sic] of the institution,” he wrote in his opening pitch—the first of ten mass e-mails in two weeks. “No disruptions in class. No protests in Widener. This should be obvious, it is sad that it is not to some.”

He enlisted faculty supporters, such as the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker. He hosted live Zoom events, including one in which Mark Zuckerberg and Priscilla Chan interviewed him about his candidacy. “I’ve done my part—I voted for Sam,” Chan said, adding, with mock pity, that Zuckerberg couldn’t vote because he never graduated. (Zuckerberg grinned and agreed: “My honorary doctorate of letters is meaningless in this context.” The university had awarded him a doctorate of laws in 2017; in 2021, he and Chan pledged half a billion dollars to fund a Harvard center for A.I.) When, in the final tally, Lessin fell short by three hundred and thirty-seven write-ins, he vowed not to give up the fight. He launched a project he calls the

1636 Forum, for the year of Harvard's founding. It publishes a weekly newsletter to twenty thousand subscribers, with a focus on free speech and academic excellence.

"We can talk about what excellence means—I'm not saying the highest SAT scores," he told me one day at a Blank Street Coffee in midtown Manhattan. He had flown to New York on his way to Cambridge for a dinner that Garber was hosting for donors. He wore a puffy navy jacket over a navy T-shirt and had a scruffy beard; his manner was of the Peninsula-boardroom kind, easygoing but executive. "The big mistake is when you start trying to manufacture who you want to be in the élite," he said, of efforts to diversify the student body. "You're optimizing for the end rather than the input."

To Lessin, campus protest, too, set the wrong terms of exchange. "People always say, 'Students have a right to free speech,' " he said. "I'm, like, *Americans* have a right to free speech. If people want to say whatever they want, they can go to Boston Common. Harvard is a private institution." During Lessin's campaign, he weighed in against Derek Penslar, a professor of Jewish history and the director of Harvard's Center for Jewish Studies, who was chosen to co-chair Harvard's antisemitism task force; Ackman, Stefanik, Summers, and others found Penslar to be the wrong man for the job. (Penslar told me, " I remember thinking, First they came after Claudine Gay, and now they come after a very middle-level person like myself. If they can get me to buckle, they can go after anyone.")

"I did in-person lunches and breakfasts with a lot of the largest donors," Lessin told me. "Over the years, alums of all shapes and sizes have given on trust, and have ended up seeing their money used in ways that wasn't their intention." Today, the 1636 Forum's reports serve in part as action memos for the donor class, with advice on restricting or channelling giving to help guide the university's course. From 2023 to 2024, philanthropic contributions to Harvard fell by roughly a hundred and fifty million dollars, or fourteen per cent.

Lessin considered running for overseer again but gave up the idea. "There are all sorts of things in the world—government, companies, et cetera—where, if you're on the inside, things become harder," he told me. Instead, he is turning the 1636 Forum into a nonprofit, seeded with his capital.

Disenchanted with academic credentialling, he has launched, with Lonsdale, an initiative focussed on professional recruitment for people from unconventional backgrounds through standardized tests graded by A.I.

Universities have always gone far to court wealthy donors: both Lessin and Ackman were first introduced to Claudine Gay when she was a dean. Just how far became clear through a motion filed in 2024 in a long-running lawsuit against seventeen élite colleges and universities, Harvard not among them. Subsequently released testimony and records indicated that some schools had policies of waving through applicants whose parents were expected to give a lot of money. Traditionally, big-ticket donors were held apart from campus politics, but that boundary has eroded. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis and like-minded donors have begun to refashion schools in their ideological image. Universities elsewhere have removed the names of unsavory historical donors from buildings. In 2023, Harvard named its Graduate School of Arts and Sciences for Ken Griffin, an erstwhile backer of DeSantis's and a big Harvard donor. Theda Skocpol, a sociologist who was previously dean of the school, described herself as "absolutely disgusted."

Lessin told me he shares a widespread donor view that, at a moment when universities have become large and growth-oriented, more like companies, scholars are the wrong people to guide their trajectories. "The wild card is the faculty—they're by far the hardest thing to solve for," he said. "The students change every four years, so you can make a mistake, put the wrong people in, select for the wrong things, and fix it." Scholars were often there for life, and held misguided sway. "The faculty is a unique characteristic of universities versus companies," he noted. "It's not clear what to do about it."

By the end of Trump's first month in office, universities had been squeezed, like stress balls, into new and painful forms. The Department of Health and Human Services began a fresh round of antisemitism investigations at medical schools, including Harvard's. In January, Trump signed an executive order barring public funding from any efforts devoted to diversity, though a federal judge has since temporarily blocked that order; in mid-February, citing Harvard's recent affirmative-action case, the new

acting Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights gave universities a two-week deadline before which to end D.E.I. programs or face possible funding cuts. (At a diversity forum last month, Garber reiterated the university's belief that "exposure to different backgrounds, different perspectives, and different experiences leads to intellectual and personal growth," and unveiled four student projects that it was funding to try to bridge differences.) The National Institutes of Health announced that it would be capping its indirect funding, which supports researchers' overhead costs, at fifteen cents per dollar of direct funding, which is meant for pure research. (The directive is currently held in legal challenge.) Harvard, which had been receiving around sixty-nine cents per dollar, would lose out on more than a hundred million dollars a year.

The neurobiology laboratory of David Corey, a Harvard Medical School professor who has spent forty years studying hearing, works on gene therapies for children who are born deaf. "I'm going to have to let people go," he told me last week. The N.I.H. indirect-funding cap would cut his laboratory's federal funding dramatically. "Maybe only half the supplies and half the equipment can be purchased," he said. "Maybe half the discoveries will be made, which could lead to half the new ideas for therapies, and maybe half the new medicines that get to the clinic." At a major center of medical innovation like Harvard, indirect funding is tightly wound into the progress of research itself. It keeps the lights on in laboratory buildings, pays grants managers, and so on—but it also goes toward building and maintaining shared centers for specialty microscopes, or rearing thousands of the special mice essential for genetic research like his. "These are all things that are too expensive for any one lab to maintain, but that can be shared among many labs," he said.

Because funding for laboratories like Corey's often leads to new treatments, its reduction can wither not just university research but the entire health economy. When word of the funding threats came down, some grant-giving meetings were cancelled at the eleventh hour. " It's going to be really devastating if that N.I.H. cap is upheld," Corey said. "We don't have a strategy. We don't know what's going to happen. The news is different every day." Like many universities, Harvard has refocussed its political

lobbying efforts, but some feel that it and other schools should be taking a stronger stand.

“ I don’t think many people would argue if higher education were generally described as fearful, confused, uncertain—I can think of a few other words—and beneath what institutions think their brand is,” John Silvanus Wilson, Jr., told me. “I think it’s time for courageous leadership.”

At Harvard, there were fears that Garber was putting the university into a supine pose. “He’s worried about attacks on higher education, and his approach has been to try to represent the university in ways more palatable to its critics,” one professor said. “I don’t think you can lead a university if your goal is to make Elise Stefanik think you don’t have a liberal bias!” People at four separate institutions noted to me that university presidents, in this administrative age, were hardly selected for qualities of fearlessness and probity. (Garber, through a spokesperson, declined to be interviewed on the record about Harvard.) “They’ve become more cautious,” another professor said. “I think that’s because of social media, and because there’s such an ever-present reputational danger that attends speech by a university leader.”

A president like Garber is now pulled, as much as anyone in America, in the direction of a hundred strong interests. But it is also true that universities of increasingly administrative character can more easily be held to account for their policies; schools confronting the loss of public funding are obliged to dance with donors and government officials all the more. Of the eight schools in the Ivy League, five have had new presidents in the past two years. Columbia has had a new president annually, and Harvard, like a small, suffering nation embroiled in civil war, has had more presidents than commencement parades. What used to be the grandest post in academia now looks like the hardest job to hold. And the routes to it have changed. Of the eight Ivy League presidents, five rose to high administration from professional schools, and four have a medical background. All this has left many faculty members feeling beside the point, especially in pursuits like chemistry, classics, English, government, or law—five scholarly fields that together produced every Harvard president of the twentieth century. Undergraduates are said to have ever more pre-professional orientations at

the expense of the liberal arts; one professor ruefully described the place as the world's most élite trade school.

In the spring of last year, eighteen professors met to discuss university governance and alighted on the idea of creating a faculty senate—something that Stanford, Chicago, Johns Hopkins, and many other schools already have. "Yes, the fall of 2023 was very turbulent, but it's not like we woke up one day and suddenly started thinking about governance," Danielle Allen, a professor of government who helped organize the project, told me. Frustrations had accrued.

Tension reached a head that spring, after the university forbade a protest encampment. Campers who did not move were placed on involuntary leave, until the president made a deal. When the tents disappeared, the leaves were rescinded—but a small group of Harvard College students, including thirteen seniors due to graduate, were put on probation.

"There's no point talking to you if you're just going to talk nonsense."
Cartoon by William Haefeli

Every May, in a meeting so sparsely attended that it does not have a quorum requirement, professors go through the formality of voting to confer degrees on graduating students. Last May, the meeting was exceptionally full. Two of the thirteen seniors had been chosen as Rhodes Scholars, and would likely lose their places in the fall without a diploma. Others came from low-income households, or were the first in their families to attend college. Some faculty were furious and at least one, according to Kirsten Weld, was "prepared to vote down the entire list"—that is, to vote to graduate no one in the class of 2024. In the end, the faculty voted simply to amend the graduation list to re-include the thirteen.

But those students didn’t graduate on commencement day, because the Harvard Corporation rejected the faculty’s list. Eleven of the thirteen ultimately got their degrees, after an appeals process, and yet a bond of trust between the top of the university and its faculty had frayed. “I think we’re seeing the sheep’s clothing fall off,” Steven Levitsky, the government professor, said.

The goal of the Harvard faculty-senate project is to increase scholarly input on scholarly matters. Each of the nine Harvard faculty bodies will nominate representatives—thirty-seven altogether—who will meet and slowly design a senate. (The president announced that he would convene his own advisory counsel of faculty members, on a two-year trial period.) Harvard, unusually, does not make its statutes readily available; it took the senate organizers six weeks to receive them. They learned that the statutes already described a university-wide body of faculty governance.

Distrust at universities has a way of flowing upward. Like the boards at many other schools today, the Harvard Corporation has few fans. In a column in the *Crimson* last spring, Bill Kirby, a historian of China and a former dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, noted that the merits of the Corporation had been weighed seriously during the uproar of 1969 and suggested that such an assessment might be in order again.

“The M.I.T. corporation came out in support of its president immediately, and never wavered, and the situation at M.I.T. did not become the crisis that it became here,” Kirby, who was dean during Summers’s presidency, told me. The Harvard Corporation used to include six members and meet fortnightly; over the years, it began meeting about half as often and doubled in size. The goal was partly to open up the Corporation to members who might wish to fly in from places like California, but Kirby thought that the expansion also unplugged the board from the rhythms of the university.

“You used to see the members with some frequency on campus, and they would interact with faculty and students,” he said. Now they came with other connections. During his deanship, he said, he had refused a few gifts given with excessively controlling terms. He told me, “No university can afford to alienate a few donors more than this one.”

In January, Harvard resolved an anti-Palestinian-discrimination complaint, settled two antisemitism cases, and recognized the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance's definition of antisemitism, which condemns criticism of Israel "as a Jewish collectivity." The program director of the Nonviolent Action Lab at Harvard's Kennedy School quit in protest. Harvard's own antisemitism-task-force report has yet to be released. Derek Penslar, who has criticized the I.H.R.A. standards in the past for being too restrictive, sounded a circumspect note. "We need to teach and research controversial issues like Israel-Palestine without reprisals or interference so long as we go about our work responsibly, fairly, and with integrity," he told me. He worries about antisemitism being dismissed, but also about accusations of antisemitism being used as a tool to stifle inquiry. "This is not the Harvard of thirty or forty years ago, when it was eighty per cent white. Now it's thirty-three per cent white and a different university. We're more diverse. We're going to have more disagreement," he said. "We have a strange phenomenon where people on the right who often directly associate with antisemites are also claiming to speak in defense of Jews."

One afternoon, I spoke with Tarek Masoud, a political scientist at the Kennedy School. In October, 2023, Masoud organized a panel discussion about Gaza whose panelists included a Zionist "able to hear the other side," an Arab citizen of Israel, and a longtime American diplomat in the region. The panel was a success. "Then two things happened," Masoud said. A student wrote in to the Boston *Globe* to lament an absence of informative discussions about the events in Israel and Gaza. And Ackman, during a visit, complained before an audience that the university had provided insufficient discussions of the conflict.

"I was, like, *Mother of God!*" Masoud said. "I literally have been busting my, you know, behind to put these out, and it's making no impact!"

Masoud decided to reach out to individuals with controversial views and personally grill them onstage. His first interview, in February, 2024, was with Jared Kushner, Trump's son-in-law, who has counselled the President on Israel and Palestine; among other things, Kushner spoke to Masoud about the waterfront property values of the Gaza Strip and displacement models for its residents. "A lot of people inside the university were upset

with me," Masoud said. But he went on to invite the conservative columnist Bret Stephens and Dalal Iriqat, a professor and the daughter of a lead Palestine Liberation Organization negotiator. Many Harvard administrators now tout the series as a model of exchange.

Masoud told me that he thought the series was a gigantic mistake. Before his interview with Iriqat, social-media posts she had released moved some people to call her pro-Hamas. "I got a lot of grief within the Kennedy School about the event," he said. The dean of the Kennedy School issued a statement distancing himself from the talk. Stefanik, Senator John Fetterman, and others excoriated Masoud from Washington, and the event was dissected in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* and the *Daily Mail*.

"If you were to ask many of our colleagues, they would put the blame on students," Masoud said. "They would say that our students are incapable of 'absorbing' or 'coping with' views that they object to, which they then label as offensive and harmful." He thought that this was an idea to which a vulnerable and anxious leadership was overly attached. The university made a show of rolling out "candid and constructive conversation" programs, but Masoud saw an increasingly public, corporatized institution imposing its own anxieties on young minds.

"By making debate or disagreement seem excessively difficult, they are pathologizing it," he told me. "You trigger everybody to think that this is a dangerous thing. It's not dangerous! Nobody is going to die from a discussion with Bret Stephens!"

Incisive writers about higher education have pointed out that the American university is a bundle of contradictions held in an uneasy balance that miraculously works. And yet, in marvelling at the miracle, it is possible to overlook how fragile even an uneasy balance is. Last year's struggles over speech—among protesters and counter-protesters, scholars and administrators—seemed to show a system falling out of equilibrium. This year's ideological pressure, from government officials and donors, has made higher education, one of the greatest achievements of American culture, vulnerable. Universities are the reason that this country has been able to attract talent, chase breakthroughs, and respond to change. If the American university survives the twenty-first century, that resilience will

probably have to do not just with rules and standards but with a certain magic flexibility and eclecticism being upheld.

Like many others I spoke to, Masoud kept returning to Gay's encounter with Stefanik on Capitol Hill. "Claudine Gay, she's a person for whom I have considerable respect, but I think one of her errors was that she did comment on what the students said. She said, These students don't speak for Harvard," he recalled. "What I wish she had done was say, 'We have a lot of students. And, yes, those students said this, but here are other student groups who said something else.' " The real diversity of views brought by a real diversity of people, he thought, was American higher education's strongest, truest claim to power.

He reflected for a moment, then continued. "The message should be: Look. We are a university," he said. ♦

Nathan Heller began contributing to The New Yorker in 2011 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2013.

American Chronicles

When an American Town Massacred Its Chinese Immigrants

In 1885, white rioters murdered dozens of their Asian neighbors in Rock Springs, Wyoming. A hundred and forty years later, the story of the atrocity is still being unearthed.

By Michael Luo

March 3, 2025

After the killings, the town's newspaper noted, "Nothing but heaps of smoking ruins mark the spot where Chinatown stood."Photo illustration by Mike McQuade; Source photographs from Library of Congress / Union Pacific Coal Company Collection at Western Wyoming Community College

The town of Rock Springs sprouts out of a vacant landscape of sandstone cliffs and sagebrush in southern Wyoming. It is a fading former mining town, where herds of deer now meander through the streets. A century-old sign overlooking the railroad tracks downtown reads "*Home of Rock Springs Coal*." The mines closed decades ago. In the late nineteen-eighties, workers began filling the honeycomb of underground tunnels beneath the town with a cement-like grout, to prevent cave-ins. Ominous crevasses—evidence of "subsidence," in geological parlance—recently opened in a one-acre park situated between a Catholic church and a former Slovenian community hall. State officials concluded that more grout should be injected. But, before that happens, there's another pressing need: understanding what else lies beneath the surface.

On a chilly morning this past July, a small group bearing shovels, trowels, brushes, and other tools gathered in the park and began digging into the topsoil. In the course of several days, they excavated a series of neat squares, eventually carving out a chamber about a metre deep. They removed the dirt with buckets and poured it onto rectangular screens to be sifted. Curious neighbors wandered by.

The leader of the group was Laura Ng, a thirty-eight-year-old historical archeologist from Grinnell College, in Iowa, who specializes in the study of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Chinese migration to the United States. She wore an archeologist's field uniform of work pants, boots, and a floppy sun hat. Ng and her colleagues were looking for artifacts left behind by Chinese residents of Rock Springs. One of their aspirations was to stumble on the flattened traces of an outhouse, with feces and trash. "That would be amazing," she told me, explaining that refuse piles are full of clues about daily life. Ng's team was also searching for a pancaked stratum of black charcoal—a "burn layer"—which would signal that they'd found the remnants of an atrocity carried out by inhabitants of the town.

On September 2, 1885, in one of the most gruesome episodes of racial terror in American history, a group of white miners killed at least twenty-eight Chinese residents in Rock Springs and burned down the town's Chinese quarter. This summer, civic leaders are planning to erect a

memorial, titled “Requiem,” on the wedge of land where the crew was digging, marking the hundred-and-fortieth anniversary of the massacre. Local officials had granted Ng’s team permission to excavate the memorial’s planned footprint, to make sure that the installation does not damage any buried cultural treasures.

Ng and her colleagues worked in ten-centimetre increments, digging and sifting. They were joined on most days by Dudley Gardner, a former professor of history and archeology at Western Wyoming Community College, and perhaps the world’s foremost expert on the massacre. He has spent more than four decades researching the Rock Springs Chinatown—at times overcoming residents’ reluctance to probe the past. “There were remnants of the community who remember having relatives that actually perpetrated the Chinese massacre,” he told me.

After a week of digging, Ng and her team concluded that there were few intact artifacts to be unearthed. In 1913, a school was built on the site of the former Chinatown. The school has since been razed, but the construction disturbed the soil beneath it. The group moved toward the northeast corner of the park to see if that location would prove more fruitful. A few days later, Paul Hoornbeek, an archeologist, discovered beams and timbers that were likely the remnants of a Chinese dwelling. Meanwhile, George Matthes, an undergraduate at Grinnell, found himself with the archeological equivalent of a fish on the line. “He kept finding stuff,” Ng told me. A coin, a piece of glazed stoneware, a fragment of bone. Close to a metre down, Matthes began digging through charcoal, as if he were crouched in the middle of a fireplace. He uncovered a melted glass jar, then an intact pig’s jaw. He’d found it: the burn layer. “I realized, I’m standing on top of one of the most horrible events in Wyoming’s history,” he told me.

But the archeologists had run out of time. They had funding only for a two-week-long excavation. On their final day in the field, they wrapped the timbers in aluminum foil to protect them, and laid down gardening tarps. They tossed dirt back into their holes and placed sod on top. Uncovering the past would have to wait for another day.

Violence usually has a proximate cause that is straightforward to identify—an insult, a taunt, a source of aggrievement. More challenging is tracing its

larger patterns. “For historians violence is a difficult subject,” the historian Richard Hofstadter once wrote. “It is committed by isolated individuals, by small groups, and by large mobs; it is directed against individuals and crowds alike; it is undertaken for a variety of purposes (and at times for no discernible rational purpose at all) . . . it stems from criminal intent and from political idealism, from antagonisms that are entirely personal and from antagonisms of large social consequence.”

It was the promise of riches from the gold rush that first drew Chinese migrants in droves to American shores. They called the land across the ocean Gum Shan, or Gold Mountain. In 1850, Chinese arrivals to San Francisco were welcomed at a public ceremony, but as their numbers grew the sentiment toward them turned ugly. Horrific episodes of racial violence soon erupted in the minefields. California’s highest court ruled that Chinese testimony against a white person was inadmissible. Politicians, sensing an opportunity, began to call for the removal of Chinese residents.

“You won’t find another apartment in the city that offers this kind of debilitating vertigo.”
Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

In the eighteen-seventies, as a prolonged economic downturn shuttered businesses and idled white workingmen, the anti-Chinese movement accelerated. In 1882, Congress passed a law, later known as the Chinese Exclusion Act, that barred Chinese laborers from entering the country. But shiploads of Chinese passengers continued to journey across the ocean, finding ways around the law. Restive white workers, small-business owners, and even prominent community leaders on the West Coast soon resolved to take matters into their own hands. In February, 1885, an errant

bullet from a dispute between rival Chinese factions in the town of Eureka, California, killed a white city councilman. Angry white residents banded together and forced more than three hundred Chinese people to leave town. This turned out to be the opening act of a harrowing period in American history that became known as “the driving out,” when dozens of communities expelled their Chinese residents. But the expulsions did not begin immediately. There was an interregnum, during which the fury over Chinese immigration seemed to be largely contained. Then, in September, 1885, in Rock Springs, the fury spilled over.

The story of Rock Springs, as with many places in the American West, begins with the transcontinental railroad. Previously, the area that would become the Wyoming Territory had been a transitory place that covered wagons passed through on their way west. But as tracklayers from the Union Pacific Railroad worked their way across the plains, towns began to spring up in their wake. The trains needed fuel, which turned coal mining into one of the region’s most important industries. In 1868, a fabulously thick seam of bituminous coal was discovered two miles south of a stream known as Bitter Creek. This led to the establishment of Rock Springs.

By 1875, the town’s population had grown to about a thousand, with five hundred men, mostly English, Welsh, Scottish, Irish, and Scandinavian immigrants, employed by the Union Pacific. It was a rude livelihood. The workers toiled in pairs in underground “rooms”—work areas usually forty to sixty yards long. They used picks and black gunpowder to extract the coal, which mules then hauled to the surface. The work was dangerous. In 1869, in the Avondale mine, in Pennsylvania, an underground fire killed more than a hundred workers.

In November, 1875, the standard wage in Rock Springs was four cents per bushel of coal mined, which meant workers made anywhere from two to four dollars a day. With winter approaching, company officials sought to increase production. The exact details of what came next are contested. Accounts from mine executives claim that employees rebuffed orders to step up their work. The miners contended that their wages were cut, and that the company reneged on a promise to reduce prices at the company

store. In early November, miners walked off the job, and company officials acted swiftly to bring in a new workforce.

On the morning of November 13th, it was bitterly cold and snowy. Striking miners were astonished to discover soldiers from the U.S. Army disembarking from train cars, their bayonets glittering in the frosty air. “Marther alive!” one miner said. “If here ain’t the sogers!” Later that month, Union Pacific officials and the territory’s newly appointed governor arrived with a train full of Chinese miners, brought in by the contractor Beckwith, Quinn & Company. As the soldiers stood guard, mine officials put the Chinese laborers to work. They also posted a list of names of white miners who would be hired back—only a third of them—and declared that there would be no further negotiations. Work in the mines resumed with a hundred and fifty Chinese miners and fifty white miners. The company erected primitive shelters for its new Chinese employees on a sagebrush flat about a quarter of a mile north of town. White miners derisively referred to the Chinese encampment as “Hong Kong.”

A. C. Beckwith, one of the suppliers of the Chinese miners, later testified that “no complaints of a serious nature” had been made about their presence. But he was likely unaware of the actual dynamics in the mines—or perhaps he was dissembling. In the summer of 1884, the Knights of Labor began organizing restive Union Pacific workers, encouraging them to walk off the job. The Knights got its start as a secretive fraternal organization in Philadelphia, but it eventually became a driving force behind the national labor movement and an ardent backer of Chinese exclusion. Terence Powderly, the Grand Master Workman of the Knights, barred Chinese laborers from the organization. (By contrast, the group actively recruited Black members.) Powderly later sought to distance his organization from the violence in Rock Springs, but he also blamed the unrest on Congress’s failure to stop Chinese immigration. “In desperation the people of the Pacific coast have petitioned and demanded of Congress to do something to enforce the law, but the Chinese still continue to come,” he wrote.

In Rock Springs, white miners asked their Chinese colleagues to join them in work stoppages, but the Chinese workers demurred. White miners

typically earned a dollar more per day, but they complained that Chinese workers got the most lucrative assignments and were hired back first after a mine shutdown. By 1885, there were about five hundred and fifty Chinese workers in the mines, compared with fewer than three hundred white workers. Notices were posted in mining towns throughout southern Wyoming demanding the expulsion of Chinese residents. “Hints were thrown out that the Chinese were to be driven out of town,” O. C. Smith, the Rock Springs postmaster, later recalled. In late August, Dave Thomas, a mine boss whom Chinese workers affectionately called Davy Tom, met with an acquaintance, who would become one of the leaders of the riot. He warned Thomas that “there would be something doing.” On August 28th, John L. Lewis, a labor leader in Denver, warned Beckwith, Quinn & Company officials in a letter about a “storm that is brewing” over the “Chinese problem at Rock Springs.” In a separate letter, he pleaded with Union Pacific officials, “For God’s sake do what you can to avoid this calamity.”

On the night of September 1st, Andrew Bugas, a nineteen-year-old white miner, was at home with his cousin. A fellow-miner named Sandy Cooper showed up unannounced and asked Bugas’s cousin if he had a rifle or a shotgun. “I will furnish you with one which you must use tomorrow, for we are all going hunting and shooting all the Chinamen we see,” Cooper said. Bugas and his cousin thought Cooper was joking, but the man returned half an hour later with a heavy rifle and two boxes of cartridges. Cooper then urged Bugas’s cousin not to go to work in the morning, because it was important for white miners to be “present.” It would become clear the following day what he meant.

Leo Qarqwang knew his way around the dark passages of the mines, knew how to handle his pick. He was among the cohort of Chinese miners who had arrived in Rock Springs in 1875. (More than a hundred and fifty members of the Leo clan ultimately made their way to southern Wyoming.) Many Chinese miners had September 2nd off, in observance of a holiday. Leo, however, was working the early shift at the No. 6 mine. That morning, the temperature hovered around freezing, and a light frost covered the ground. According to Leo’s subsequent testimony, soon after he began work a gang of about fourteen white miners barged in on him and his partner with

spades, picks, and shovels. They demanded, “What do you Chinamen mean by working here?” Leo offered to leave, saying, “We Chinamen do not want to have any trouble.” But the white miners set upon them. One bashed Leo in the head with a shovel, leaving him with a gash a quarter inch deep.

White miners later blamed James A. Evans, the shift foreman, and Dave Brookman, the pit boss that morning, for the dispute. By their account—contradicted by Chinese witnesses—the supervisors had assigned a room to Chinese miners which had been promised to two white men, Isaiah Whitehouse and William Jenkins. Whitehouse, a forty-five-year-old Englishman who had recently been elected to the territorial legislature, claimed that he’d started working in the room the day before but had taken the afternoon off because he felt ill. When he returned, he found two Chinese miners occupying the room. In the melee that ensued, Chinese miners working in other rooms rushed in to defend their countrymen. When the fighting was over, four Chinese miners were badly wounded; one of them later died. Several of the white miners sustained cuts and bruises.

When Evans, the foreman, finally arrived, he found the white assailants getting ready to leave the mine in pit cars. They grumbled that they were “not going to suffer Chinamen.” Evans tried to stop them, but the men walked out. One called, “Come on, boys; we may as well finish it now.”

Bugas, the young miner who’d had the perplexing encounter the night before, was in his cabin alone that morning. At ten o’clock, he saw a group of men and boys hurling stones at Chinese dinner carriers—men who carried meals on poles slung over their shoulders, to deliver to miners—causing them to scatter. Soon afterward, he watched as a brigade of sixty or seventy white men assembled nearby, most with rifles or revolvers. They headed to the Knights of Labor hall, chanting, “White men, fall in.” When they spilled out, later that afternoon, a cry went up: “Vengeance on the Chinese!” The mob took a vote and decided that the Chinese residents should be expelled. A group of seventy-five men began making their way toward Chinatown. When they encountered a group of Chinese workers along the railroad tracks, they fired wildly at them. The mob halted just outside the Chinese quarter, and a committee of three men delivered a

message: residents had an hour to pack up their belongings and go. But barely half an hour later the rioters invaded Chinatown.

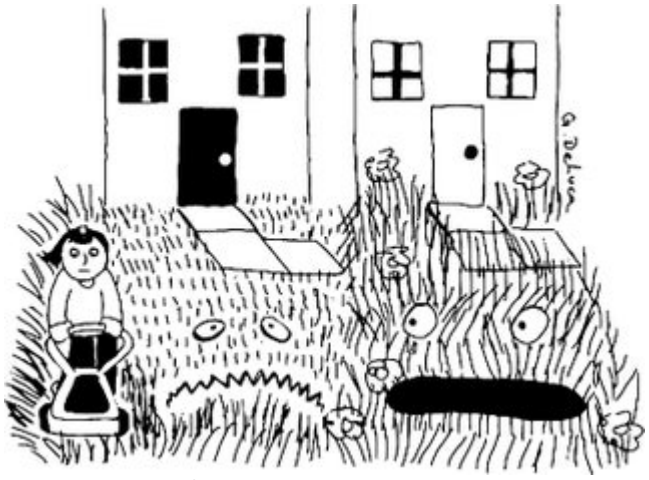
They came from two different directions, Chinese witnesses later said. One group crossed a plank bridge over Bitter Creek, and another advanced from the railroad tracks. A man named Lor Sun Kit was the first resident shot. A bullet pierced his back; he crumpled to the ground, wounded but still alive. The rioters shot a fifty-six-year-old miner named Leo Dye Bah in the chest, killing him. A thirty-eight-year-old man named Yip Ah Marn was also shot dead.

Five or six hundred people lived in the Chinese encampment. They fled in all directions. One witness later described the hills to the east of town as "literally blue with the hunted Chinamen." Leo Qarqwang was getting treatment for his wounds when he saw armed men approaching. He ran toward the hills. He later compared Chinese residents to a flock of frightened sheep. He spent several days wandering through the sagebrush, with nothing to eat. Eventually, he found the railroad tracks and caught a train to the nearby town of Evanston. Many of the fleeing Chinese residents tumbled down the steep banks of Bitter Creek, splashing into the muddy water. At least one man was cut down as he struggled to clamber up the bank on the other side. His body was later found half submerged in the creek. Another man, Leo Mauwik, was shot in the arm as he fled. He didn't stop running until about four o'clock in the morning, when he reached the neighboring town of Green River, about fifteen miles to the west.

Violence coursed through Rock Springs. A white woman—likely "Mrs. Osborn," the owner of a local laundry—fired a revolver at some Chinese men as they fled, felling two of them. Another woman, by one account, had a baby in her arms but still managed to knock down a Chinese man running by. When her child wailed, she spanked him before turning to pummel the Chinese man.

The rioters began setting fire to buildings, and dense black smoke billowed over the area. Frightened residents dashed outside with blankets covering their heads. Rioters tossed bodies into the burning buildings. The smell of charred flesh was acrid. A gusting wind soon led to fears that the conflagration would spread through the town, and rioters suspended their

torching of the Chinese huts, but more than forty still burned to the ground. Miners usually stored their gunpowder inside their homes. When the flames reached a cache, the sky would flash with a powerful explosion.



“I’m telling you, it looks really cute so far.”
Cartoon by Gina DeLuca

Ah Lee, a Chinese laundryman, had barricaded himself inside his home. Attackers broke through the roof and shot him in the back of the head. A female rioter looted bundles of laundry he had laid out for delivery. Ah Kuhn, a Chinese interpreter known for wearing a fur coat around town, took shelter in a cellar. When he emerged, several white men opened fire, and he ran in a panic, dropping about sixteen hundred dollars in gold—more than fifty thousand dollars today. He made his way to a house east of town, where a white resident gave him bread and water and allowed him to rest before he continued on his way. Several Chinese residents approached the Reverend Timothy Thirloway, who lived near Chinatown. His two daughters taught English to Chinese miners in the evenings. The fleeing residents asked if they could hide in the family’s home, but were told it would be safer if they left town. One miner, known as China Joe, hid in a large oven for three days, then sneaked out in the middle of the night and fled.

A group of rioters marched on the home of Evans, the foreman who had arrived at the No. 6 mine after the melee, and advised him to leave town. He departed that night. Next, the group visited the home of Soo Qui, one of the Chinese head men, but he was in Evanston. His terrified wife met them instead. “Soo, he go,” she said. “I go to him.” Two days later, she arrived in

Evanston by train, disembarking in a colorful gown. A newspaper reporter characterized her as the “last of her race” to abandon Rock Springs and “probably the last to set foot in the place for many a long year.”

At around 7 *P.M.*, Dave Thomas and others visited Chinatown to assess the situation. They spotted an elderly Chinese man they knew, lying in agony in the dirt. They debated whether to end his suffering by shooting him, but left him to die. The local sheriff deployed deputies around town, but struggled to muster enough men to hunt down the rioters. Throughout the night, gunfire continued, and rioters recrossed the creek to torch the remaining buildings in the Chinese quarter. The fires burned all night, bathing the town in a red glow.

In the morning, the full extent of the atrocity became clear. The flat expanse where Chinatown once stood had been transformed into a hellscape of smoldering, blackened walls, broken crockery, and other detritus. Bodies were found in the burned-out cellars, often clustered together. Some people had draped wet cloths over their heads and burrowed into the earthen walls, trying to escape the smoke and flames. Hogs feasted on a corpse that they had dragged from the ruins. “Today for the first time in a good many years, there is not a Chinaman in Rock Springs,” the town’s newspaper proclaimed. “Nothing but heaps of smoking ruins mark the spot where Chinatown stood.”

Survivors who had hidden overnight in the hills crept back to the railroad tracks near town. Union Pacific officials loaded a freight train with food and water and sent it on a rescue mission along the tracks. A man who managed to reach Green River was chased by a band of forty men until the white manager of a local hotel ushered him inside. “She cowed the mob as effectually as could a whole battery of artillery have done,” a newspaper account later said. Several hundred people eventually took refuge in Evanston. Some went to a gun store in town and bought all the revolvers in stock, in preparation for another attack.

Francis E. Warren, Wyoming’s governor, had sent an urgent telegram asking that soldiers be dispatched to put down the mob. Army officials told him to make a formal application to President Grover Cleveland. But the President was in the Adirondack Mountains, hunting and fishing with friends. After

Warren sent the request, officials concluded that it was insufficient, because he'd failed to make clear that the territorial legislature—the entity normally authorized to make such applications—was not in session. The Secretary of War was also out of town, leaving his second-in-command to confer with Thomas Bayard, the Secretary of State. They decided to send two companies of troops to Rock Springs with orders only to prevent interruption of the federal mail service. When Warren arrived in town, he found the scene hard to bear. "The smell of burning human flesh was sickening and almost unendurable, and was plainly discernible for more than a mile along the railroad both east and west," he later wrote.

Railroad officials feared additional violence. "The local authorities are wholly powerless and the City is in the hands of a mob," one company official said. Subsequent reports noted that white miners had broken into Beckwith, Quinn & Company's storehouse of gunpowder; that Chinese miners at a Union Pacific mine in the Utah Territory had been given twenty minutes to leave town; and that white miners in Evanston were organizing to drive out the Chinese there. In Green River, white vigilantes told Chinese residents that they were no longer welcome. Mine operations had ceased almost entirely. Nevertheless, in Evanston, Ah Say, a refined, slender man who spoke fluent English and served as the leader of the Rock Springs Chinese community, pressed company officials to put his people to work. They had lost everything—he estimated that their losses totalled about two hundred thousand dollars. They needed wages.

In Rock Springs, the local coroner summoned a half-dozen residents to conduct an inquest into the fifteen bodies that had been discovered. The jurors concluded that four "Chinamen" had died by gunshot wounds by "some means unknown to the jury" and that the others "came to their death from exposure to fire," though their nationality was uncertain, because they'd been "defaced beyond recognition." The rooting of hogs in a cellar led to the discovery of five additional corpses. Newspapers reported other ghastly stories. According to one account, a Chinese family of three—a husband and wife and their baby—was found in the hills. The mother and child had died, and the father had killed himself. Another report: a group of six men who had fled into the hills during the attack wandered for several days amid the sagebrush and greasewood. Without any food or water, they

ate their own excrement. One by one, they died. Coyotes ate their remains. Three days after the riot, a lone survivor crept back into town, hungry and thirsty.

Railroad officials were resolute about returning their Chinese workforce to the mines. “Yield nothing to the rioters,” Union Pacific’s president told a lieutenant. On September 6th, President Cleveland finally emerged from the wilderness. Two days later, he ordered soldiers to protect Chinese miners “at all hazards.” A week after the massacre, two hundred soldiers and six hundred and fifty Chinese miners arrived in Rock Springs. A jeering crowd of white miners greeted them. Some of the dead had been buried, but other bodies remained strewn on the ground, mangled and decomposing. “It was a sad and painful sight to see the son crying for the father, the brother for the brother, the uncle for the nephew, and friend for friend,” a statement from the Chinese laborers later said. The new arrivals bedded down on sodden ground along the tracks, their campfires flickering in the night.

The first attempt to resume coal production failed miserably, as gangs of white workers stood outside mine entrances. “The Chinese are so easily frightened,” D. O. Clark, the superintendent of the Union Pacific Coal Company, later reported. “They run as soon as any one says anything to them.” Complicating matters for the mine bosses, white employees refused to work, making it difficult for coal to be hauled out, weighed, and placed on train cars. On September 19th, mine officials issued an ultimatum: if the strikers did not report to work on Monday morning, they would be fired. The day of the deadline, officials managed to re-start production in two mines. By the end of the month, two hundred and fifty Chinese laborers were back at work. The company began rebuilding Chinatown. Mine officials arranged to replace the striking white workers with a contingent of Mormons, another persecuted group.

White residents continued to harass Chinese laborers. In late October, a gang of white men attacked a railroad building west of town, driving a group of Chinese track workers into the woods. But by December there were nearly five hundred and fifty men working in the mines, only eighty-five of whom were white; the rest were Chinese. The attack had failed in its ultimate purpose—ejecting the Chinese from Rock Springs.

From the outset, Union Pacific officials recognized that the odds of bringing the riot's ringleaders to justice were slim. Most residents were sympathetic to the white miners' grievances. Anyone who testified also faced a threat of retribution. "I fancy it will be difficult for us to get any of them punished," Samuel Callaway, the general manager of the Union Pacific, wrote to his bosses three days after the massacre. By September 7th, the sheriff had taken twenty-two men into custody. (He was accommodating to his prisoners, letting some stop at a nearby saloon before he locked them up.) The jailed included Isaiah Whitehouse, who had been involved in the initial brawl, in the No. 6 mine. The others were men of varying ages and backgrounds. "They would never be singled out from a crowd as rioters and murderers," one account noted. A preliminary court hearing had to be delayed until a judge arrived, but the prisoners seemed to be in good spirits, "with no great anxiety as to the result."

Officials from China's diplomatic delegation in the United States made their way to Rock Springs. They found only thirteen bodies that were recognizable; the other remains, many of them just bone fragments, had been wrapped in small bundles for burial. According to Chinese witnesses interviewed by the officials, at least twenty-eight people were killed in the riot. Another fifteen or so had been injured, including some who would likely be maimed for the rest of their lives. A report on the massacre, written by Huang Xiquan, the Chinese consul in New York, contained a litany of the dead. Its function seemed to be one not only of accountability but also of memory.

- The dead body of Leo Kow Boot was found between Mines Nos. 3 and 4, at the foot of the mountain. The neck was shot through crosswise by a bullet, cutting the windpipe in two. I also ascertained that the deceased was 24 years old. His family connections have not yet been clearly made known.

- The dead body of Yii See Yen was found near the creek. The left temple was shot by a bullet, and the skull broken. The age of the deceased was 36 years. He had a mother living at home (in China).

- The dead body of Leo Dye Bah was found at the side of the bridge, near the creek, shot in the middle of the chest by a bullet, breaking the

> breast bone. I also ascertained that the deceased was 56 years old, and had a wife, son and daughter at home.

Huang also catalogued the financial losses sustained by the survivors, ranging from twenty-five dollars to more than two thousand dollars—roughly sixty-five thousand dollars today. “Every one of the surviving Chinese has been rendered penniless by the cruel attack,” Huang wrote. “Since the riot took place it has been impossible for them to secure even a torn sheet or any article of clothing to protect them from the cold.” A Union Pacific official who conducted an internal investigation decided that there had been no formal plot to carry out the massacre—a debatable conclusion—even if many of the white miners had hoped to expel the Chinese. Nevertheless, he called the mob’s actions “deliberate and cold-blooded.”

In early October, a grand jury met in Green River to consider indictments. More than two dozen white residents were called to the stand, but none were willing to implicate any rioters. The surviving record is contradictory about how vigorously prosecutors tried to find Chinese witnesses. The federal prosecutor for the Wyoming Territory reported afterward that local authorities had hoped Frederick Bee, the Chinese consul in San Francisco, would arrange for Chinese testimony, but none materialized. Bee, however, insisted that no one had followed up with him. “They did not want any indictments returned, thanks to the reign of terror,” he later said. The grand-jury hearing took an unexpected turn when the Reverend Timothy Thirloway, the pastor who lived near the Chinese quarter, testified that Chinese residents had set fire to the quarter themselves—a preposterous allegation. On October 7th, the grand jury issued a report announcing that it had voted to return no indictments, and castigating Union Pacific officials for “abuses” in the mines. The rioters returned that night to Rock Springs, where a cheering throng of several hundred residents greeted them.

A week later, Chinese laborers returned to Rock Springs and soon resumed coal production.Photograph from Union Pacific Coal Company Collection at Western Wyoming Community College

In late November, Zheng Zaoru, the Chinese minister in Washington, sent a forceful letter to Thomas Bayard, the Secretary of State, criticizing the judicial proceedings as “a burlesque.” He asked for restitution for the victims, pointing out that the Chinese government had paid more than seven hundred thousand dollars for losses sustained by Americans during violence in China. Bayard, in his response, made no promises, and chided Zheng’s countrymen for venturing to a “community on the outposts of civilization.” The quest to get redress for the victims ground on for months. Finally, on February 24, 1887, Congress awarded $147,748.74 to the Chinese government—a paltry sum, given the scale of the tragedy. Chinese officials in San Francisco were tasked with distributing the award to the victims. By late summer, the process was complete, but Chinese officials discovered that six claims had been inadvertently repeated. Accordingly, they returned $480.75 to the U.S. Treasury.

Chinese survivors of the massacre continued to work for the Union Pacific in Rock Springs for years, guarded by federal troops. The company rebuilt the Chinese quarter, constructing several dozen barnlike dormitories. Racial hostilities still ran through the town. On December 30, 1886, a fire broke out in the quarter. As Chinese residents struggled to extinguish the blaze, a crowd of white residents began pelting them with rocks and cut the fire hose. A contingent of soldiers drove off the white residents and saved the quarter from serious damage. After the fire, the commanding officer of the troops in Rock Springs reported to his superiors that there remained a “rough class” in the town who posed a threat to the Chinese. He said that

Ah Say, the community leader, “seemed anxious about their safety.” Army officials decided that troops were no longer needed in Evanston but concluded that “it will not do” to withdraw them from Rock Springs. Ah Say had been living in Evanston with his wife and children, all American-born, but he decided to take them to China, perhaps for their safety. Several months later, he returned to Wyoming alone.

In 1894, Ah Say arranged to have a hundred-and-thirty-foot ceremonial dragon delivered for the community’s annual New Year celebration. For several years, he marched proudly at the head of the parade, dressed in a Western suit and with a cane in his hand. On the morning of January 27, 1899, he rose, took a bath, shaved off his mustache, and dressed himself in a formal Chinese gown. He summoned several close friends, including the town mayor, and left detailed instructions for who should succeed him in his various functions as the Chinese head man. That evening, he collapsed and died. Less than two months later, Army officials abruptly withdrew from Rock Springs. The decision caught Union Pacific officials off guard. One newspaper account noted, “The presence of troops has prevented any serious demonstrations against the Chinks, although scarcely a day passed without one or more of them having” their queues—traditional long braids—“clipped off or getting a beating.”

Union Pacific officials had been gradually reducing their reliance on Chinese labor. “You cannot operate a railroad successfully in the face of an all pervading public sentiment, no matter how wrong it may be,” the company president had confided to a colleague after the massacre. Yet survivors continued on with the Union Pacific well into their sixties and seventies. In 1913, the company demolished the Rock Springs Chinatown. Most of the remaining Chinese miners could no longer work. Many had become paupers. In 1925, the company decided to cover the cost of sending them home and furnishing them with a payout for their “years of faithful service.” On an evening in November, 1925, a banquet was held to honor the first group to depart. The town band performed. Afterward, the group headed to San Francisco and boarded the S.S. President Taft, bound for Asia. A septuagenarian in the group, Lao Chung, had been shot during the 1885 attack and still carried the bullet in his back.

For a few years, the company issued regular payments to the former workers. But in 1932 it cut them off without informing them. One worker wrote that the men were begging for help “before they starve to death.” In August, 1932, the last three of the company’s “Old Time Chinese” departed. “The good wishes of their many Rock Springs friends will be with them on this long journey home,” an item in the company’s employee magazine said. It went on to imagine them “talking often of Rock Springs and the friends they have left behind.” A photograph showed the men in three-piece suits, their skin weathered and their expressions neutral. A lone Chinese employee of the Union Pacific, a man named Leo Yee Litt, who worked in the No. 4 mine, remained.

In 1943, Congress finally lifted the exclusionary laws that barred Chinese laborers from entering the country. The Second World War had suddenly transformed China, an impoverished nation, into an important ally of the United States in its war against Japan. Even then, however, only a nominal number of Chinese immigrants—a hundred and five—were permitted to enter the country each year. It was not until 1965, when a sweeping new law set aside the quota system that had heavily favored northern and western European immigration, that lawmakers finally placed Chinese immigrants on equal footing with others trying to enter the country.

Historians have labored to document the bigotry and violence that Chinese immigrants endured, seeking to incorporate them into the broader narrative of America’s multiracial democracy. Chinese immigration in the late nineteenth century took place in the period after the Civil War, a time when noble visions of liberty and equality in America were foundering. The Chinese Question followed the Negro Question and coincided with the vanquishing of Reconstruction, the spread of Jim Crow, and the subjugation of Native peoples on the Western frontier. These histories continue to refract through American life today. Nevertheless, the atrocities experienced by Chinese residents of the country remain little known. In 2020, the surge in reports of anti-Asian violence that accompanied the *Covid*-19 pandemic brought new attention to this ugly history. City officials in San Francisco, San Jose, Los Angeles, and Denver have since issued formal apologies for the past treatment of Chinese immigrants. In Los Angeles, civic leaders are planning a memorial to commemorate a Chinese massacre from 1871, in

which eighteen Chinese men were killed, fifteen of them hanged. In Eureka, a campaign is under way to erect a monument memorializing the former Chinatown there.

In Rock Springs, in 1986, Dudley Gardner, the archeologist and historian, helped lead an effort to install a plaque marking the location of the massacre. In 1990, workers digging a trench in the parking lot of the town's Catholic Church discovered bottles, bones, and other traces of the former Chinatown. The following year, a team from the community college excavated the area, collecting several thousand artifacts. But the project stalled, and, last fall, Gardner delivered boxes of the artifacts to Laura Ng, so that she could finish cataloguing them. In 2023, the Rock Springs City Council approved a hundred-and-fifty-four-thousand-dollar grant for the memorial, which will feature a seven-foot statue of Ah Say. Gardner's latest project is putting together an application for the massacre site to be recognized as a National Historic Landmark.

The promise of archeology is that it can offer insight into past lives which would be impossible to glean from historical archives. Excavations of sites in Wyoming have shown that the Chinese population there grew crops as varied as carrots, gooseberries, eggplant, and pumpkin, and raised chickens, pigs, and goats; some even had horses. Ng, in addition to her archeological work, has been searching for descendants of the original Chinese residents of Rock Springs. One evening last September, she was trawling the Internet at home when she found the LinkedIn profile of a retired sales-and-marketing executive in Reno, Nevada, whose name was Jeffrey Yee Litt. She asked if he was a relative of Leo Yee Litt, the lone Chinese miner who had continued working in Rock Springs. He responded, "Leo was my grandfather."

That night and in subsequent conversations, Jeffrey shared the outlines of his story. He was born in New York City and grew up in Queens. His father, George, hailed from Rock Springs, but Jeffrey knew little about the town and had met his grandfather just once. He had only a dim awareness of the massacre. He told Ng, however, that his ninety-one-year-old uncle, John Yee, who also lived in Reno, might be more helpful. He was the youngest son of Leo Yee Litt.

A few weeks later, Ng flew to Nevada to meet John at his home. His caregiver greeted Ng at the door. John was in poor health, and dependent on an oxygen tank. His home was cluttered with Chinese porcelains that he'd collected. He explained to Ng that his father had worked in the tipple for the Union Pacific, helping to tip coal cars into larger rail cars for transportation. (Records suggest that Leo Yee Litt's service with the company dated back to the turn of the century, some years after the massacre.) Around 1930, a coal car struck Leo Yee Litt in the back, injuring him, and he never worked again. John was born several years later, in Rock Springs. He attended the school that was built on top of the razed Chinatown but had no idea of the site's history. "Seems like no one really wanted to talk about it," he said.

John's three older brothers served in the armed services during the Second World War. John spent two years in the Army as well, then went on to attend the University of California at Berkeley. He settled in the Bay Area, where he raised two daughters. He has six grandchildren and four great-grandchildren. As an adult, John became curious about his ancestors. He learned that his grandfather Leo Yee Litt's father, a man named Leo Lung Man, had survived the massacre. He fled Rock Springs on foot and followed the railroad tracks until a train picked him up. He eventually went back to China. In 1983, John typed up the stories he'd collected of Leo Yee Litt's family. Until Ng interviewed him, he'd never shared them with anyone except his relatives. It hadn't occurred to him that others would want to hear them. "It's one of the most important events in Asian American history," Ng told me. "He didn't think anyone cared." In John's typescript, now yellowed and brittle but preserved in a three-ring binder, he writes that the descendants of Leo Yee Litt "have not only survived, but also prevailed and excelled in spite of many trials and tribulations." He might as well have been writing more generally about the Chinese in America. This summer, Ng plans to return to Rock Springs to keep digging. ♦

This is drawn from "Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America."

Michael Luo is an executive editor at The New Yorker. His first book, "Strangers in the Land: Exclusion, Belonging, and the Epic Story of the Chinese in America," will be published in April, 2025.

Takes

- **Ian Frazier on George W. S. Trow's "Eclectic, Reminiscent, Amused, Fickle, Perverse"**
  By Ian Frazier | The writer and his great subject—Ahmet Ertegun, the head of Atlantic Records—shared a deeply American restlessness.

Takes

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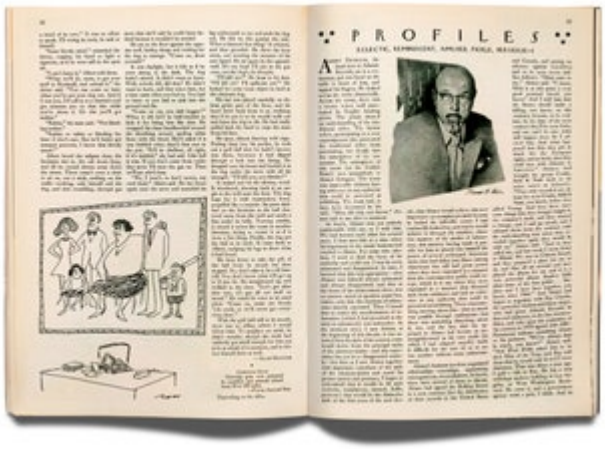
The writer and his great subject—Ahmet Ertegun, the head of Atlantic Records—shared a deeply American restlessness.

By Ian Frazier

March 2, 2025



May 29, 1978

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

George William Swift Trow, Jr.,'s family called him Swift. The name fit his quickness of wit and spirit, and his grace. His friends, of whom I was one, called him George, pronounced in a descending tone as if in reference to his firmly grounded authority on subjects important to the rest of us, or not. The Trows had been in New York City for generations. When I came from Ohio, in 1974, I knew nothing about the city and had no connection to it except as a destination for ambition. In the nineteenth century, an ancestor

of George's had published what was known as "Trow's Guide," an early directory of the city's residents and their addresses. Another ancestor had been on the Hudson River, in 1804, when Alexander Hamilton was being rowed back to Manhattan after his duel with Aaron Burr. George's ancestor looked at the boat through a telescope and said, "My God, they've shot Alex Hamilton!" It's not an exaggeration to say that all my visceral knowledge of old New York derives from that sentence, and from the way George said it (spoken, it doesn't have a comma), and from other things George told me. I wasn't a New Yorker, and George made me one.

He became a staff writer for this magazine in 1966, after Harvard, where he had been president of the *Lampoon*, and after a year in the Coast Guard. At *The New Yorker*, he first wrote Talk of the Town stories, which were unsigned back then. He loved R. & B. music and liked rock and roll mostly as Black music's epigone. His first signed piece was about a promoter who went around to disk jockeys and tried to persuade them to play certain records on the air.

In 1971, George met Ahmet Ertegun, the son of Mehmet Munir Ertegun, who had been the Turkish Ambassador to the U.S. during the Second World War. It was said that the Turks did not join the Germans, as they'd done in the First World War, partly because of Mehmet's influence. The family descended from sheikhs. Ahmet, who had a strong love for neglected American cultural artifacts like R. & B., knew a lot more about the genre than George did, and as the head of Atlantic Records had produced some of George's favorite records. On top of that, Ahmet and Mica, his interior-designer wife, moved in the highly catered, endlessly shifting, almost transient version of high society in the New York City of that time. Nothing and nobody could have interested George more than Ahmet did. Soon, he began to do reporting for a Profile that would take him most of the nineteen-seventies to complete, and would become a portrait of that decade.

William Shawn, then the editor of *The New Yorker*, approved the idea and O.K.'d the expenses George ran up as he followed Ahmet to Cannes and Beverly Hills and elsewhere. Just from hearing George talk about Ahmet and his circle, Shawn probably got the same visceral sense of the guy that "My God, they've shot Alex Hamilton" gave me about old New York.

Shawn had a gift for coming up with titles, and I'm sure that "Eclectic, Reminiscent, Amused, Fickle, Perverse" was his. Shaken together, those words add up to the adjective "restless," which recurs several times in the piece. George and Ahmet were among those pure products of America whose craziness blooms as an intense restlessness.

The plot of the piece is: How will Ahmet and the Rolling Stones adjust to each other in the wake of the ambitious new distribution deal they have signed? He pursues them on two continents. They don't exactly pursue him in return, but they do make themselves available. Ahmet describes his relationship with the band as a "painful, ecstatic courtship." This is the record business of half a century ago; demeaning slurs are tossed around. One elaborate party follows another. Some are sparkly hits, others are flops. Dozens of famous and not-famous characters go rushing past. At first, Ahmet and George like each other a lot, then they like each other less.

When George finished the piece, after seven-plus years of work, he turned it in to Shawn, and he happened to be in my office when Shawn came to tell him what he thought. Shawn knocked on my door, and George stepped into the hall. After a few minutes, he returned to my office and closed the door behind him. His face was bright red beneath his blond hair.

"Shawn says it's brilliant!" George said. "Shawn says it's *Proust!*" ♦

Read the original story.

Eclectic, Reminiscent, Amused, Fickle, Perverse—I

Music executives in the late sixties were often cynical about rock stars—but never about Ahmet Ertegun, the Atlantic Records chairman who practically signed them all.

Ian Frazier, a staff writer at The New Yorker, is the author of "Paradise Bronx: The Life and Times of New York's Greatest Borough."

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Join My Matreon!**
  By Alyssa Brandt | I know what you're thinking: Mom, why should I pay for all the great content I've been enjoying for free all these years?

Shouts & Murmurs

Join My Matreon!

By Alyssa Brandt

March 3, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Family, here’s some big news: I have just launched a Matreon account, and I’m inviting you to be a part of this exciting community!

I know what you’re thinking: Mom, why should I pay for all the great content I’ve been enjoying for free all these years?

Because Matreon puts creators like me first! Matreon is changing the way domestic work is valued. Matreon is where I’m able to unleash my wildest ideas, powered by the people who love what I do, even if they don’t ever say, out loud, that they love it.

What do you get by becoming a paid subscriber?
Fun stuff like daily clues to where I keep the car keys, what the latest streaming passwords are, and the code to the lockbox where I stash the Entenmann’s Crumb Topped Donuts. A paid subscription unlocks the bags of stuff I picked up off the floor of your room in a rage and hid—plus so much more!

Consider one of these membership tiers:

Third-Born
At this level, you'll have access to my official Matreon newsletter and private Facebook group, which are how I'll communicate with you from now on. Stay up to date on my whereabouts and activities so you can be sure to FaceTime me while I'm in the middle of a work meeting. Need a word of encouragement before an algebra test? Your favorite snack added to the grocery list? A hug? Upgrade!

Prodigal
At this level, you'll get all the benefits of the previous level plus bonus content, like attendance at all after-school programs and performances, including those involving stringed instruments, experimental theatre, and sporting events less than ten miles from the house.

Favorite
By becoming a Favorite, you'll enjoy the perks of all previous levels, plus you'll be eligible for priority boarding in the minivan for the morning school run. At the Favorite level, you'll have access to exclusive features like Ask Me Anything. Once a month, you'll join me at the dinner table, set by your own loving hand, and enjoy a non-fried, non-battered protein, a cruciferous side, and a salad. In this intimate forum, you'll have unfettered access to me, Mom, to ask me anything.

Some sample A.M.A. questions from the current Favorite community include: *Have you seen my phone*? *Can I have the car*? *Can I have a sleepover*? *Can you transfer money into my account*? *Can you pick me up after band*? *If I can't have the car, can you drive me to the mall*? *Not the one within walking distance of the house, but the good one, across town*? *Can you bring cupcakes to school for my half birthday*? *What really happened to the very large array of Legos on the living-room floor*? *Did the Lego company really go out of business and stop making all Legos*? No topic is off limits!

At the Favorite level, you'll be automatically entered into a monthly lottery for tickets to exclusive live, in-person meetups such as Conscious Mommy™. Attendees at official Conscious Mommy™ events get a private

audience during the five minutes between me getting into bed with my book and me falling asleep with said book on my face.

As a subscriber, you'll be paying me directly for the value I'm giving you, such as laundry service, late-night homework hand-holding, lunch-packing, bedroom dish collection, and reminder services. Your support through Matreon helps fans like you get more of what you love and helps matrons like me get . . . well, if not the salary I deserve, at least enough to finally quit my day job. It's a win-win model. ♦

Alyssa Brandt has contributed humor writing to The New Yorker since 2023.

Fiction

- **“Five Bridges”**
  By Colm Tóibín | Being undocumented at a time when no one bothered much about illegal Irish people had almost suited him.

Fiction

Five Bridges

By Colm Tóibín

March 2, 2025

Photograph by Todd Hido for The New Yorker

She promised that the climbing would be easy.

“Even for you,” she said.

“How long?”

“An hour. Or maybe two hours. Or maybe three.”

“Give or take?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Read an interview with the author for the story behind the story.

Paul had told her two weeks earlier, on their last outing to Point Reyes Station, that he was leaving, packing up. She would be able to come to Ireland to visit him, he said now, and they should start making plans for that.

“I’ll be at my folks’ house, at least at the beginning, and they really would love to meet you in person. It’ll be great when you come.”

“It’s sad they never came here,” Geraldine said. “They could have visited anytime. They said they would.”

“No money, I suppose, and too far.”

They were still a mile or two from Stinson Beach. If he took the slow way back into the city, they would be late. He had to be careful to drop her off on time. She would grow nervous at the thought of her mother waiting.

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice
Listen to Colm Tóibín read “Five Bridges.”

“Don’t text to say you’ll be late. Just don’t be late.”

This, which had appeared twice on Geraldine’s phone a year earlier, had become a mantra for Paul and his daughter, a way of lightly mocking Geraldine’s mother, during these trips in his car on Saturday afternoons.

As Geraldine fell silent, Paul realized that he should not have said that his parents had no money. Geraldine would worry about this, and it was not even true. She was almost twelve years old now, and he had resolved a while ago never to tell her anything that wasn't true.

"I spoke to Mom about you leaving," Geraldine said, "and she thinks you might be deported if you don't."

Geraldine was using her adult, responsible tone.

"And Stan says," she continued, "that they'll be checking on all sorts of people."

He held back from saying that he hoped someone would check on Stan.

"Would I come to see you on my own?" she asked.

"To Dublin? Yes, I suppose. Yes, you would. It would be a lovely journey. They treat young girls with great respect—"

"You said the last time," she interrupted, "that I could have one wish before you go and I asked Mom and she said yes, I could have one wish, within reason."

"That's just like her, isn't it?"

"To agree, yes. But not really. She didn't actually agree. She said I had to stop asking for so many things. But I just want this. I hate her sometimes."

She folded her arms. If this had been a normal outing, Paul would have told her that she shouldn't hate her mother. Now he could wallow in the luxury of saying nothing.

"But I think she will say yes," Geraldine continued.

He knew that she was waiting for him to ask what the one wish was.

"Mom said if you were arrested, they'd probably come looking for her."

“But they couldn’t! She’s an American!”

“They’d come looking for her to see if she could help. I mean to get lawyers for you.”

“Maybe she would help.”

“In your dreams,” Geraldine replied.

She took out her phone and began to scroll down, her attention focussed. She tried, he knew, not to do this too much when she was with him. She had even asked him to tell her to put the phone away if it annoyed him. He enjoyed leaving her in peace this time. She could do what she wanted.

It was dark by the time they reached Sausalito and made for the bridge. She put her phone back in her pocket.

“What I want is this,” she said. “I want you and me and Mom and Stan to go to Mount Tam. It’s where we often go. There’s a sort of hostel. Do you know the place?”

Once more, she was mimicking an adult voice. He found himself wondering if she did this with Stan, too.

“Not sure.”

“It’s a lodge, a place for hikers to sleep. It’s a climb.”

She told him how long the hike would take.

“To go up or go down?”

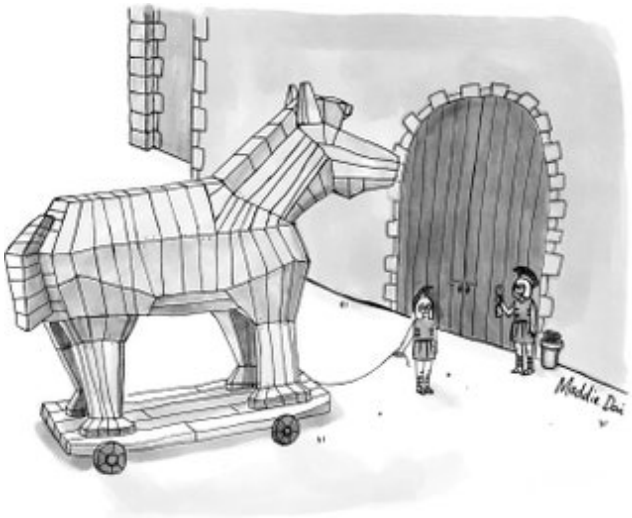
“Both. You can see everything from up there. I bet you can see the bridges.”

“All of them?”

“All five, maybe more. Isn’t there one more?”

“Is your mother going to agree to this?”

“I need your agreement first.”



“Well, after all that, they have a spare key under the flowerpot.”
Cartoon by Maddie Dai

“Why can’t you and me just go?”

“That’s the point. I want all of us to go. Just one night.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Agree.”

“I agree.”

As she reached again for her phone, he thought of something.

“You must make clear to your mother that this is your idea and your idea only and that it took a lot of time to convince me to agree.”

“Well, it did.”

•

As soon as Paul got back to his apartment, he texted Sandra to let her know directly from him that he had decided to go back to Ireland, and sooner rather than later.

Within a minute he got her customary response: “Txt recvd.”

The following day a text came from Geraldine: “Tell mom u really want to go on the hike with us 3.”

And then, almost immediately, another text from Sandra: “Was this your idea?”

He was tempted to reply “No” and leave it at that. And then he wondered if it might be better not to reply at all, to pretend he hadn’t received her text. But he knew he should resolve this now, reply while both Geraldine and Sandra were on their phones. He wondered if Stan was standing over them.

He read the text over before he sent it. He did not want to appear too friendly. “Geraldine said she wants us all to go on this hike. Just one thing we do together before I pack up. I am happy to do it if you and Stan are.”

•

Sunday was his busy day. Although he called himself a plumber, he had never actually got a license and lacked the finer knowledge of the trade. He could, however, fix a leak; he could replace a washer; he could use a soldering iron; he could deal with most types of valves; and he could put in new taps. He had his own way of unblocking pipes. Anything more complicated he left to others. Since he had stopped drinking, he could set out immediately if there was an emergency. He didn’t need to advertise; people he’d worked for passed on his number to others. He could be depended on to respond to a call from anywhere in the Bay Area.

•

He went into his tiny bathroom and looked at himself in the mirror. He should get a haircut before he went home, or even before he went on a hike. And get his eyebrows tidied up. And he should try to shave more often. Almost no one had been in this apartment since he had split up with Nuala Breathnach, who used to sing on Thursday nights at the Greyhound Track, the bar in Oakland that he frequented. At first, Nuala had actually claimed to like this cramped, cluttered space with windows that rattled when buses and trucks went by.

In the end, she told him, and then anyone else in the bar who would listen, that the reason she was returning to Mayo was the state of Paul's apartment —the awful sheets, the flat pillows, the pile of clothes on the old armchair, the smell of stale beer.

"That sort of thing is over," she said. "There isn't one fellow at home who's still living like that."

Soon he would not be living like that, either. He would have to begin clearing out the apartment, put most of what he had in bags and take them somewhere. He liked the idea of travelling back with hardly any luggage, just the cash he had saved hidden in pockets and in socks. He should leave some cash with Sandra to give to Geraldine in the future, but he worried that she might ask him if he was just using his daughter as a way of keeping his money safe.

"Hike bookd for Stday 18th" came from Sandra two days later. And then a text from Geraldine to say that he could collect her at nine, and they would meet Sandra and Stan in the parking lot.

All he needed now, he thought, was a text from Stan to say how much he was looking forward to meeting him.

They had to have realized, even if he had not spelled it out, that, having been in the United States for more than thirty years on a simple tourist visa, once he left he would not be allowed to return, probably not ever. He had made sure to have his passport renewed, but it was his Irish passport. He had asked a few friends if it would make a difference that he had a daughter in America, but everyone thought not.

Once, toward the end of the pandemic, when there was an Irish party in Daly City, he had joined others in asking the Irish consul if there was anything that could be done about their status. She was careful, he saw, not to give them room for hope.

Geraldine would have to come to Ireland if she wanted to see him. She could even get an Irish passport in addition to her American one.

He sometimes blamed Sandra for not including him in Geraldine's life when she was little, but, when he considered it, he knew that that was his fault and only his fault. He should have offered Sandra support, including regular financial support, as soon as he knew she was pregnant—even after she'd made it clear that she didn't want to see him or have him around. He was drinking too much. But maybe that wasn't the problem.

He was always contemplating going home; nothing about him was stable or secure. Being undocumented at a time when no one bothered much about illegal Irish people had almost suited him. But he should have changed as soon as he learned that he was going to be a father. Sandra might even have considered marrying him.

The last night that he had seen Sandra, a month before she was to have the baby, he should have had one aim: to make her believe that he would help her. But, just before he set out to meet her at a restaurant, a job came up that he couldn't ignore, an old client living on her own. And, when he got to the restaurant late, he should not have taken another call from this woman.

In the end, Sandra would not even let him drive her home. She did not reply to texts or messages. He stopped sending them. He did not see her again for four years.

•

He looked around the apartment. In the bathroom, he would begin by throwing out some useless razors and old bottles of shampoo. Maybe he would clean the tiles. Or maybe he wouldn't, he thought. It was fine. He could cross the bathroom off his list. With a black plastic garbage bag in his hand, he began to empty the cupboards in the kitchen. Maybe some plates and cutlery could go to a thrift shop, and some furniture. But who would want any of this rubbish? He should have bought new stuff years before, and he should have had the posters framed, the ones that had not fallen down or faded. It was almost a relief, he felt as he looked around, not to have to make any more plans that he would not carry out. He would clean up what he could, pack the little he needed, and let the landlord know he was leaving when he was on his way to the airport. He would not stick around to get his

deposit back. The landlord could probably charge the next tenant, someone in tech, four times the rent that Paul had paid.

It could be worse, he whispered to himself, and then resolved that he must stop saying this, even though it was true. His parents, who were in good health, would welcome him back home, as would his sisters and their families. He would not stay here until he was helpless when they came to deport him, the oldest living illegal immigrant in America.

It could have been worse, too, had he gone on drinking or found some drug that would have spared him the trouble of sitting in bars. He could, indeed, have continued to pretend that Geraldine didn't exist, even as she got older. He could have been the father living in the same city who had never once been in contact. He could, as an old man, have passed her on the street.

All these things might have happened had he not been saved by Sean F. Kirwan.

He scoffed at the word "saved," as did his friends who had also been rescued in some way by Kirwan.

Kirwan came from outside Wexford town and either owned the Greyhound Track or ran it as though he owned it.

Kirwan watched his customers in the same way that he watched his staff: "I don't hire losers and I don't hire chancers and I don't hire anyone from Swanlinbar."

If a customer had relatives visiting from Ireland, Kirwan made a fuss of them, with drinks on the house and the best table. If a group of people who weren't Irish came in, Kirwan danced attendance on them to emphasize that the Greyhound Track had no prejudices. If a man was drinking alone, Kirwan made sure that he was left in peace.

Paul was surprised one day when Kirwan came and sat beside him on a barstool.

"There's a young fellow from near Ballyshannon was found dead in a flat he had out near the airport in Oakland. He'd been there for a week or so."

He showed Paul a photograph.

“Did you know him?”

“No.”

“I don’t just want to raise money to send the body home. I can do that easily enough. I’d like to know if there are others here still living on their own like that. A lot of fellows went home or settled down. But some are still living on their own, working for themselves. I think we should make sure they’re O.K. Just check in on them.”

“Do you mean me?”

“I could mean you, yes.”

He took out a Biro and wrote six letters on a beer mat: “*SIMIBA*.”

“Single Irish Men in Bay Area.”

“How do you know I’m single?”

“You look single.”

Paul stretched and yawned.

“I’d like to organize a meeting with you,” Kirwan said, showing him the photo again, “and a few other fellows to make sure this sort of thing doesn’t happen again so easily.”

Paul did not respond.

“I’m from Wexford myself,” Kirwan said, moving in close as though to say something confidential, “as you probably know. Your mother is from there, isn’t she?”

“She is. How did you—”

“Don’t bother now,” Kirwan interrupted. “Give me your number and I’ll text you. And can you give me something toward this guy’s funeral? As much as you can.”

Paul ignored the personal texts and group texts he received from Kirwan over the next month, until his phone pinged one night when he was close to the Greyhound Track. He texted Kirwan back and they met at the bar.

“I can’t stay long,” Paul said.

“I’m the same, and that man there is the same, and his friend, too. None of us can stay long,” Kirwan replied.

“My mother,” Paul said, “how do you know where she’s from?”

“I was trying to get your attention. It was an inspired guess. I have no idea where she’s from.”

“You made it up?”

“When the pressure’s on, I have the power.”

Kirwan spread his arms out like someone in show business.

“I’m trying to gather together fellows who are here on their own.”

“Well, that’s me summed up,” Paul said, before realizing that he should have said nothing.

“I need your help,” Kirwan said.

“You sound like a priest.”

“I was nearly a priest, but that’s hardly an accusation. I was hit hard by that young fellow dying, that’s all. I promise that’s all.”

•

A week later, Paul went to a meeting in an upper room at the Greyhound Track to find Kirwan with four or five others, two of whom he vaguely recognized.

“I have to go in a second,” Paul said. “I don’t know what I’m doing here.”

“I thought there’d be more,” Kirwan said. “I was expecting more.”

He began a speech to the group outlining his own feelings about home.

“Would you get to the point,” a man with a Kerry accent interrupted. “If I want a sermon I’ll go to Mass.”

•

Over the next few months, more men came to this weekly meeting, where, despite Kirwan’s inability to get to the point, they organized themselves into groups of four, like cardplayers, as one of them said, and talked, about work and health insurance and the problems with *ICE* and the I.R.S. There were also a few who wanted to start a band, a mixture of country music and Irish traditional. There was even one who wanted to set up five-a-side football games. A few of them mentioned girlfriends, but no one spoke about inviting any women to these meetings.

Kirwan seemed to have won himself the right to move from one group to another, but he tended not to speak. No drinking was allowed. They stayed for two hours, and then they all appeared relieved to get away from one another. Two of them worked in tech and one was an accountant; two were part-time barmen, part-time singers and actors. The rest, it seemed, did anything that paid.

One evening, as the meeting was coming to a conclusion and Kirwan had quietly joined Paul’s group, Paul told his companions that he had a daughter. None of them responded. If one of them had said even a word, or expressed surprise in any way, he was sure he would have said nothing more.

“At least I think I do. They told my girlfriend that she was going to have a girl.”

No one asked him a question. He would leave it at that, he thought. Tell them nothing more. He hadn't even said Sandra's name. But he found himself needing to go on.

"I've never seen the girl. I often think about her. She must be four. She's probably in the Bay Area somewhere."

Kirwan looked up at him and held his gaze. He wished Kirwan would tell him now, in front of the others, what he should do. But Kirwan didn't speak and, before long, the group broke up.

As soon as Paul got home, he went online to see if he could locate Sandra.

When he did find her, he was careful. He had his hair cut and tidied up the apartment even before he e-mailed her at the office where she worked. When he received no reply he called, and when he could not get through to her on the phone he waited. In his e-mail, he had tried to make clear that he was not looking for anything from her.

One evening, from a bar, he called Kirwan.

"You're drinking," Kirwan said. "Can we talk when you are not drinking?"

The next evening, when they met, Kirwan listened to the details.

"Write her a letter," Kirwan said. "Have it typed. Make sure the first paragraph has what you most want to say to her. You need to sound like someone who has your life in order."

"And then?"

"Explain to her that your mother is from Wexford and there's no real harm in you."

Paul laughed.

•

He heard nothing from Sandra for a month. But then a text came that said, “letter recvd.” He showed it to Kirwan, who advised Paul to do nothing hasty.

“You are halfway there,” he said.

At first, Sandra let Paul come to the rambling house she shared with some others in Bernal Heights. For a few hours on Saturdays, he could play with Geraldine and watch games on her screen with her. She was four and a half and seemed to enjoy calling him Dad and telling him what she wanted to do next. Just as she took his arrival as a normal part of her week, she made no fuss at his departure. She was able to take up the conversation, such as it was, or the game they had been playing, a week later, as though very little time had passed.

Sandra avoided him, often letting one of the others who lived in the house welcome him and see him out. Eventually, he began to take Geraldine to the park, and then he was given permission to take her on a trip in his car. He knew that he was being closely observed. If he had once turned up late or failed to bring her back on time, or if there was even a whiff of beer on his breath, Sandra would have intervened. At the end of their last meeting, when she was pregnant, she had told him that she had had enough of him. Perhaps her opinion of him was still the same.

When she moved in with a man called Stan and married him, Paul found out by text, the tone brisk.

Soon, Stan became a figure in Geraldine’s normal conversations.

Paul had a photograph of Geraldine on his cell phone. He wished he could see more of her. But at least she was in the city, just twenty minutes’ drive from him each Saturday. And at least she was happy and had everything she needed to make her comfortable.

Paul stopped going to the weekly meetings, but Kirwan kept in touch with him and spoke to him if he chanced to be at the Greyhound Track. They discussed Kirwan’s search for love and his addiction to Grindr.

“I can’t keep the app on in the bar, but one day I forgot to turn it off and when I looked—it was a Thursday at about seven—there were five guys in the Greyhound Track on Grindr. Can you imagine?”

“I had one of those apps for a while,” Paul said. “The straight one. I didn’t know what sort of photo to put up, so I put one of an Aer Lingus jet. But still I met a few girls. They were nice, some of them.”

“Five guys in an Irish sports bar! I looked at the photos, pretending I had some urgent texting to do behind the bar.”

“And then what did you do?”

“Two of them were on their own, one was working for me, one was with a loud group of fellows from Tipperary, and the other I never found.”

“The long-lost one.”

“Now you’re talking. It’s a hard city if you’re looking for something,” Kirwan said.

“I think I know what you mean,” Paul replied.

•

Around the time that Paul was first given permission to take Geraldine out in his car, a new type of fitting for basins and sinks began to be installed in the bathrooms and kitchens of housing developments in the Bay Area. As those fittings began to leak, Paul’s number circulated, especially once he sourced a good washer that could easily replace the dud. Four or five calls a day came, and then more. Every caller seemed to know the drill. They could expect him within an hour, and he would accept checks but would also be happy if they paid in cash. Because he knew what tools and fittings he would most likely need, in the expectation that the leak came from the usual source, he would generally solve the problem in one visit. No one objected to paying him more than the going rate.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

A few times, he was contacted by one of the large construction companies. They began by calling him out on a job. It felt like a standard call to an area he knew well. But, when he arrived, he saw a group of fellows waiting for him.

“Do you want to see the leak?” one of them asked, to general laughter. He could not tell where they were from.

He was lucky that he had not stepped too far from his car. He got away from them as quickly as he could.

Another time, he grew suspicious when a number came up that had a strange prefix. When he took the call, a woman gave him an address that made no sense. Nonetheless, he told her what he had told all of the others—he would, if she confirmed, be there in an hour and could accept check or cash. She did not call back, but for days urgent messages and texts came from that same number, requests to follow a link. When he clicked on the link the first time, he got a warning from the I.R.S. saying that they were on his case. He was glad that he was using a cheap phone; he could not easily be traced.

When the pandemic came, Stan, who seemed to understand the technology, set up Zoom calls every week for Paul and Geraldine. Only once, half an

hour into an hour-long Zoom, did Paul catch sight of Stan, who was crossing the room and shied out of the frame very quickly. He looked younger than Paul had expected him to be. He was wearing a suit and tie, like someone with a real job.

One morning, after Paul came back from some early calls, putting the cash he had earned inside a new pair of socks that he placed at the back of a drawer with other cash-filled socks, he decided to phone his mother in Dublin and tell her about Geraldine. It might have been wiser, he knew, to have informed one of his sisters first, but he didn't want advice or remonstrations from them.

"It's nice you had a girl," his mother said almost distractedly. "Now, when was she born?"

"She's almost eight."

"And she's American?"

"She lives with her mother, who's American."

He heard his mother gathering her strength.

"I don't suppose you and the girl's mother are, by any chance, married?"

"No, we're not."

"What is her name?"

"The mother or the girl?"

"Now I'm going to put your father on. He's in the other room and he still thinks that you have to wipe down every package that comes into the house. But I know otherwise. It's in the air, this thing. I'd be grateful if you could tell him that I am right and make him believe you."

She made no further reference to his daughter.

In the final months of the pandemic, his mother and his father and he and Geraldine sometimes met on Zoom at ten in the morning California time. Geraldine and his mother took easily to the new medium, Geraldine showing new paintings she had made and his mother showing the pile of books she had read since the pandemic began.

“When all this is over,” his mother said to Geraldine, “we might take a little trip across the Atlantic—sure it’s no distance—and see you in the flesh.”

“ ‘In the flesh’ means ‘in person,’ ” Paul interjected.

“She knows what it means,” his mother said.

“I’d have to ask Mom and Stan,” Geraldine said. “But that would be great.”

•

The night after the election, Paul went to the Greyhound Track, where he found Kirwan, who joined him at the bar.

“They won’t deport me,” Kirwan said. “I got married to a nice local girl as soon as I arrived. I was always grateful to her. But what about you? If they saw you coming along the street, they’d deport you on the spot. You look illegal. There’s nothing can be done about it. Why don’t you get married? Why else do we have Americans, for God’s sake? What else are they for? I could even find you a fellow who would marry you. For your rugged looks and all that.”

“I don’t want to marry anyone.”

“How much money do you have?”

“That’s what I wanted to ask you. Have you ever met anyone who has a load of readies and needs to know what to do with them?”

“Wrapped in socks?”

“How did you know?”

He put out his arms, as though seeking applause.

“Stop talking shite,” Paul said.

Kirwan sipped a coffee and looked around.

“How much in readies?” he asked.

“A lot for me.”

“Do you have a bank account?”

“Just about. I keep enough money in it to pay the bills. And I lodge the checks I get. Otherwise, it’s cash.”

“Your customers must resent you. That cash thing might work at home, but people don’t like it here. It’ll backfire, eventually. The people here prefer to be crooked while pretending to be holy. And if *ICE* or whoever finds you on a job, putting in one of your famous washers, they’ll take you away. And they’ll visit your apartment while you’re being held, and you can say goodbye to your cash.”

“They would steal it?”

“No, not that. But while they were still counting it you would be on your way to the airport or whatever new way they might have of sending a fellow like you home.”

“You think it’s funny?”

“I think you should take the law into your own hands and get out of here, cash in suitcase, before they put you out.”

“You think they’re serious about it?”

“In the first month or so, yeah—they’ll do it for show.”

“If I tried to leave the country, would I be detained on the way out?”

“No. But, once you left, you would never get back in.”

“I came when I was eighteen.”

“You grew up here, so.”

“I have a daughter here. I told you.”

“Maybe some President in the future will soften up on the plight of Irish plumbers and their American daughters, but it will take a while.”

•

When Paul saw Stan accompanying Geraldine to his car on the morning of the planned hike, he was immediately aware of all the rusting tools and leftover pieces of piping on his back seat. He wished he had cleaned out the car. He opened the door and got out to greet them, shaking Stan’s hand as soon as he and Geraldine approached.

“There’s a place to park,” Stan said, “but it’s often full. If you get there first, try to see if you can hold a place for us, or call us if you can’t find a spot.”

He made Paul feel as if he could not entirely be trusted on the matter of parking.

“We’ll do what we can,” Paul said.

“I wanted to see your apartment before you go,” Geraldine said once they were on the road, “but Mom says I can’t.”

“It’s pretty bare,” he said. “I’ve thrown most things out.”

For a second, close to the turnoff for Marin, Paul, in the silence of the car, thought that he was out on a job and tried to remember the address. He had never been with Geraldine this early in the morning.

Just before the overlook for Muir Beach, they found a parking space and secured another spot not far away. Paul got his boots from the trunk and struggled as he changed into them.

“I don’t think you’ve ever gone hiking before,” Geraldine said. “Not a long hike.”

“You’ll have to help me,” he said. “Slow down, maybe, if you see me lagging behind.”

“When are you actually leaving?”

He turned away from her, not prepared for the question. He did not want to say that he was flying to Dublin on Monday. He had two more days in America. On Tuesday night, he would be sleeping in his old bedroom in the family house in Dublin. His apartment, where he had been living for more than twenty years, would be empty; his plan to leave it tidy had been fully abandoned. No one would ever guess why he had left behind so many pairs of socks that looked as though they had never been worn. He must be sure, he resolved, to check every last one in case there were stray banknotes still curled up inside.

•

It was strange, he thought, how often, even after all these years, he expected Americans to behave like Irish people. Thus, he presumed that Stan had been saving his comments on the state of Paul’s car for now, when he and Sandra had arrived and parked. He expected Stan to approach the car, which Paul had already sold to Kirwan as a surprise for his new boyfriend, and peer in at its contents. Stan would then state how urgently this jalopy was in need of cleaning, and Sandra might remark dryly how men never change.

But Stan said nothing at all. He just smiled. And Sandra did not seem to notice his car.

He wondered if insulting each other’s cars was something Irish people still did. Or had it ever been? Was it something he had imagined? He would ask Kirwan when he saw him tomorrow for his final non-drink in America.

They were going to climb using a trail through Muir Woods, Stan explained, even though it would take longer, because the incline was more gradual. All in all, he said, if they took it slowly but not too slowly and stopped only for one short picnic, they would be at the hostel before dark.

“It will be dark at five-thirty,” he said. “I checked that.”

Paul noted how seriously Stan took his duties as guide, and realized that Geraldine had never mentioned what kind of job Stan had. Just now, marching ahead, Stan looked like an official of some sort. It would be just his luck, Paul thought, if this Stan had some connection to *ICE* or the I.R.S. or some even more menacing organization. He was the sort of guy who would stay in the office while others went out to do the tough work of rounding up the offending immigrants.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you,” Geraldine said, “that I have the Limonata you like in my knapsack. Two cans.”

“Gerry, you are the best,” Paul said. “You—”

“Don’t call her Gerry,” Sandra, who was just ahead, interjected. “You know what her name is.”

Geraldine stopped dead. She turned and looked at Paul, raising her eyes to heaven.

“I have a lovely name,” Geraldine said, and then whispered, “or I did, until just now.”

“You guys need to get going,” Stan shouted from a bluff above them.

Geraldine remained close to Paul as they set off up a steep winding path. Soon, Sandra and Stan moved out of sight.

“I think the other way up is much easier,” Geraldine said when she saw Paul out of breath.

He decided not to ask her why, in that case, they had taken this one. As she strode ahead, he noted how strong she was, how long her legs were becoming, and how confidently she moved. He wished he had taken a different jacket as the air became colder the higher they climbed.

“Are you a complete illegal in America?” Geraldine asked.

“Yes, I am. That is a good description of me.”

“Do you have health insurance?”

“Kind of.”

“What would you do if you got really sick?”

“I would go back to Ireland.”

“But that’s not why you are going back now?”

“What an adult you are!”

“And you can’t just go to Ireland now and then come back in the summer for a vacation?”

“That’s right.”

She set out their lunch picnic in a flat area that had a view of the ocean below.

“I like coming here with Mom and Stan,” Geraldine said. “But I prefer going to Point Reyes with you.”

•

Kirwan had advised him that when he got home he should move out of Dublin, away from his parents’ house, as soon as he could.

“Going home is shell shock. Don’t take it out on your mother and your father. Get out of Dublin. The midlands would be a good place. Plenty of leaks there, God knows. They need plumbers.”

“I’m not really a plumber,” Paul said.

“Why don’t you train as one the minute you go home?”

“I’m nearly fifty.”

•

“Stan is good,” Geraldine said as she tidied up after their picnic. “You mustn’t worry about him.”

He wondered if Geraldine used this tone with Sandra and Stan, too, sounding middle-aged.

“Stan seems nice,” Paul said.

“He plays weird music sometimes. And it’s all vinyl, so it takes up lots of space.”

“No one is perfect.”

“Do you really think that?”

It seemed to him that Geraldine wanted him to say something more about Stan. He would have to be careful.

“And, Jimmy, you can play goalie.”
Cartoon by Maggie Larson

“I think you and Stan and Sandra are great together.”

She looked dreamily down at the water.

“Problem is, if your mother ever came over from Ireland, I mean if she ever decided she should, I don’t know where she would stay.”

“Well, maybe you’ll come to Ireland first.”

“Would I need an Irish passport?”

“You could get one if you wanted. But an American passport would do.”

•

By the time Paul and Geraldine reached the hostel, Stan and Sandra had opened a bottle of white wine and were sitting at the lookout spot.

“You want the good news or the bad news?” Stan asked.

“What’s the bad news?” Geraldine asked.

“The good news is that this place is as beautiful as ever. I can’t believe you didn’t know it, Paul. We have our time in the kitchen reserved in an hour. And I remembered to bring everything we need for a great spaghetti with my own homemade pesto. I get the pine nuts—”

“They only booked two rooms for us,” Sandra interrupted. “That is the bad news.”

“No way!” Geraldine said.

“One has a full bed,” Stan said, “and the other has twin beds. That one has a balcony, but you can hardly sleep on a balcony in the middle of January.”

Stan sounded like a client listing what he wanted fixed. But what he was saying, Paul understood, was that there wasn’t a room for Paul. He also knew that he could not let Geraldine down. He would have to stay somewhere.

They sat and watched the last rays of sunshine fold out on the calm, glassy ocean as the shadows deepened in the tall trees. When Paul went to look around, he noted a second vista that seemed to open toward the city. There was a haze over what might be the Golden Gate Bridge. It was hard to be sure. He was tempted to go back and get Geraldine so they could find a map

on his phone with the bridges firmly identified and then work out if one of them, maybe even the Bay Bridge, might be visible from up here.

But he would leave the three of them alone. Stan or Sandra had made the booking. They could sort it out. He would not offer to find another place to sleep. It occurred to him that it might make sense for him and Stan to use the room with the twin beds. He hoped that Stan viewed the prospect with the same revulsion as he did.

When he returned, Stan was alone on the deck with his feet up on the wooden railing. He turned around and pointed to the wine and a spare glass.

Paul didn't bother telling him that he didn't touch the stuff. He stood and looked at the back of Stan's head. It was always the same, he thought, in every house whose call he answered. If he was greeted by a guy like Stan, then there would be some difficulty. The job he did would be criticized; the payment would not be ready. And there would be an undercurrent of how-much-better-off-I-am-than-you.

"It's paradise here," Stan said.

"Yes, it's great, it's nice."

When Sandra and Geraldine reappeared, Sandra leaned against the railing, facing them.

"Geraldine says she wants to share a room with Paul," Sandra said.

"Really?" Stan asked.

"This is my special outing," Geraldine said. "So I can decide. You and Mom are in one room, the room with one bed. And Dad and I are in the other, the room with two beds."

Paul wondered if Sandra had ever heard Geraldine call him Dad before as confidently as this.

•

When it grew cold on the deck, they moved inside. Soon, Stan was busy boiling a large saucepan of water for the pasta. Sandra and Geraldine found a backgammon board and began to play. He tried to follow the game, but it was too fast.

Stan came to say that he needed help to chop the lettuce for the salad, but Paul ignored him. Eventually, Sandra, having won a game, went to the kitchen, leaving Geraldine to explain to Paul how to guess the odds in backgammon and when it was best not to take a chance.

They shared a table with another group. Once they had finished the pasta, Sandra stood up and said she would go and ask one more time if an extra room had become available, but she quickly came back to say that there was no change. Stan began to talk to the group beside him, finding that the daughter of one of the couples had gone to the same high school as he did.

“You go out for a walk,” he said, “and you meet someone you know.”

“But you don’t really know them,” Geraldine said.

“We do now,” Sandra interjected.

It was agreed that Paul and Geraldine would clean up the table and do the dishes. When that was done, having put their coats on, they went out to join the others and take in the waning moon over the ocean. Stan had his phone focussed on the night sky and, with a man who had been at the table, was trying to identify certain stars.

“I’m cold and I’m tired,” Geraldine said to Paul in a low voice. “Can we go in?”

He accompanied Sandra and Geraldine to the room with the twin beds. Geraldine rummaged through her bag to find her toothbrush and toothpaste and went to the bathroom down the corridor. Now, for the first time in all the years, Paul found himself alone with Sandra, who made herself busy smoothing out the blanket on Geraldine’s bed.

When she eventually stood and faced him, she smiled as though there had never been any problem between them.

“Geraldine normally goes to sleep fast,” she said. “She’s great like that.”

Paul hoped that Geraldine would hurry back.

“This is a nice place,” he said. “I didn’t know it existed.”

“We love coming here.”

He was happy to say nothing more. Neither of them, he saw, wanted to begin a big discussion. But the room was small and he felt awkward. He found himself smiling weakly and then scratching his head. Sandra sat down on Geraldine’s bed.

Paul went out and stood on the small balcony, sorry that he could not think of a way to make things less strained between them.

When Geraldine came back, Sandra kissed her, wished them good night, and left the room. Paul slipped out, too, so that Geraldine could change into her nightclothes, returning to the deck, which was now emptied of guests. Stan must have gone to bed.

He took in the scene below, the ocean all bright and glistening in the moonlight and then everything dark beyond, but, when he heard sounds, he worried that Stan or even Sandra might be about to join him. He edged down a corridor and into one of the bathrooms.

Geraldine appeared to be sleeping when he came into the room, and he closed the door as quietly as he could. Nonetheless, she turned when she heard him.

“Sorry if I woke you,” he whispered.

“I wanted to say good night, but I didn’t know where you’d gone.”

“I wasn’t far away.”

“Make sure you wake me in the morning as soon as you’re awake,” she said.

Almost immediately, she was asleep again. Paul felt tired. When Geraldine made a soft, sighing sound in her sleep, he went to turn off the lamp in case it was disturbing her. He stood and looked at her. How perfect she was now, he thought, as he had when she had walked ahead of him on the trail.

He would probably never see her again in America; he would miss her life here. But she would come to Ireland—he was sure she would want to do that—and perhaps she would make visits in years to come when she had a real life of her own, her own children, a husband, even.

He removed his shoes and put his coat back on and tiptoed to the balcony, closing the door tightly behind him. At first, since the balcony was facing away from the ocean, he could see nothing, but then a cloud cleared and he thought he could make out some stars, and even farther down below some lights in the distance, but he had no idea what they were.

In the morning, they would be able to see one or two of the bridges, if not from here then from one of the other decks or balconies. They might have to wait until the fog cleared. He would show Geraldine from this vantage point some of the places where he had worked, tell her about the journeys in his car down leafy avenues to new condos or old bungalows or bigger suburban houses. And the people waiting for him, desperate to have a leaking tap fixed. He would describe some of these people to her. He knew she loved that.

More images of the world below came into his mind. He smiled at the thought of how many houses he had visited over thirty years, how many taps, how many washers. It hardly mattered, he supposed. Someone had to do it. He would not put a thought into it once he got home. And, if he could sleep for a while now, he would think about something else in the morning and make sure to wake Geraldine once he himself had woken up, as she had asked him to do. ♦

Colm Tóibín is the author of books including "Long Island."

The Critics

- **Do Democrats Need to Learn How to Build?**
  By Benjamin Wallace-Wells | Liberals have long emphasized protections over progress. Champions of the “abundance agenda” think it’s high time to speed things up.
- **Briefly Noted**
  “The Many Lives of Anne Frank,” by Ruth Franklin; “Ends of the Earth,” by Neil Shubin; “A Gorgeous Excitement,” by Cynthia Weiner; and “Stone Yard Devotional,” by Charlotte Wood.
- **The Classic Mystery That Prefigured the Los Angeles Wildfires**
  By Anthony Lane | Ross Macdonald’s “The Underground Man” is exquisitely attuned to the Californian landscape—how it rises, falls, smells, and, most indelible of all, how it burns.
- **A Crowning Moment for the New Orleans King Cake**
  By Hannah Goldfield | During Carnival, the ingenuity of the city’s bakers is on full display.
- **“Grangeville” and “Curse of the Starving Class” Try to Go Home Again**
  By Helen Shaw | Fifty years apart, the playwrights Samuel D. Hunter and Sam Shepard examine our national obsession with family inheritance.
- **“Mickey 17” Is a Science-Fiction Adventure of Multiple Unwieldy Thrills**
  By Justin Chang | In Bong Joon-ho’s latest film, Robert Pattinson plays a space traveller facing a succession of death sentences.

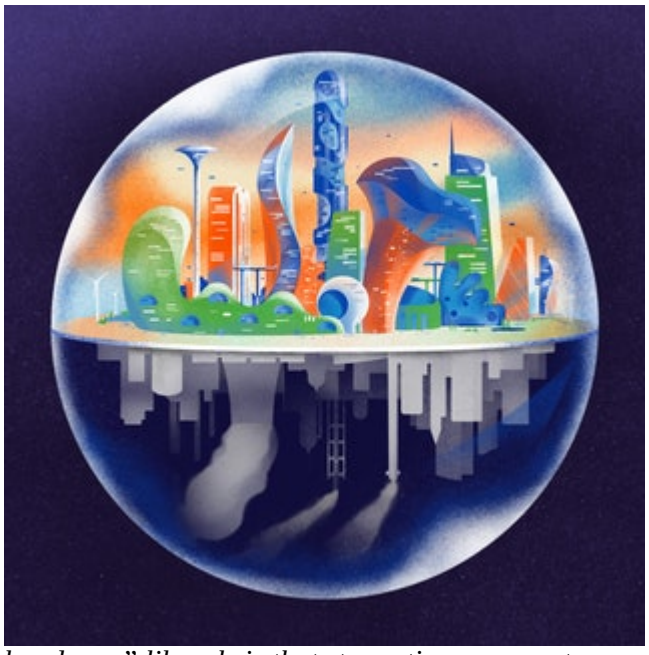
A Critic at Large

Do Democrats Need to Learn How to Build?

Liberals have long emphasized protections over progress. Champions of the “abundance agenda” think it’s high time to speed things up.

By Benjamin Wallace-Wells

March 3, 2025



A basic conviction of “abundance” liberals is that stagnation represents something like a national emergency.Illustration by Golden Cosmos

I grew up in the late eighties and early nineties in a pair of functional redbrick postwar apartments on the fringes of New York City—first in a two-bedroom in an eight-story building in Inwood, on the northern tip of Manhattan, and then in a three-bedroom in a twelve-story building in Riverdale, in the West Bronx. Each had a coin-operated laundry in the basement. The Gordons, friends of my parents, lived on the nineteenth floor of a taller building a few blocks away in Riverdale, and from their little balcony you could look east across the borough and see low-rise brick

buildings much like mine, in which hundreds of thousands of people lived, little yellow windows against the gray Bronx sky. “They were basic,” Samuel J. LeFrak, who built hundreds of such structures in Brooklyn and Queens, said of these apartments. “The windows opened and closed. You opened them in the summer and you closed them in the winter.”

At the time, the city’s population wasn’t quite eight million, but to my mother it was an article of faith that this was an undercount—that census-takers were too nervous to fully explore the poorest neighborhoods, that illegal immigrants hid from the survey, that the true figure must be at least nine. She taught in public schools in Washington Heights and East Harlem, and each fall immigrants from new countries enrolled in her class: Cuba, then the Dominican Republic, then Ecuador. The world was vast, and we had so many affordable apartment buildings. Surely New York City would grow.

What has happened since then has been a sort of rupture in the laws of supply and demand. First, New York got safe, in the nineties, and then it got almost unfathomably rich. I still remember a conversation in the mid-aughts in which my friend Will, who had gone into real estate, told me confidently that Russian oligarchs were now buying property not just in lower Manhattan but in Brooklyn. This seemed impossible in the moment but within a few months was very clearly true. In a way that hadn’t been the case in my childhood, the city had become an obviously desirable place to live. And yet it didn’t get any bigger. Newcomers continued to arrive—according to official statistics, the city has become considerably less white—but they were balanced by departures. The view from the Gordons’ balcony has not changed very much. In 2000, New York City’s population was 8,008,278. In 2023, the Census Bureau estimated that it was 8,258,035. In a safe and prosperous quarter century, the most important city in the country has scarcely grown at all.

What We’re Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

For some liberal journalists and researchers of my generation, the stagnation of American cities has become a fixation. The progressive metropolises we love the most, and where the highest-paying jobs are increasingly found, seem to be having the most trouble growing, perhaps because they have the most trouble building. In 2023, seventy thousand housing permits were issued in red-state metro Houston, and just forty thousand in metro New York, which has three times as many people. (In the San Francisco and Boston metro areas, there were even fewer.) When urbanists looked into why that was, they tended to find not a single cause but a constellation. The idealistic progressive laws of the seventies—those mandating environmental review, safety and anti-corruption standards, historic preservation, prevailing wages, and, most important, local power over zoning—had meant to protect small communities against moneyed interests. But they had been manipulated by homeowners and businesses, and used to block all kinds of new construction. Good intentions had paved the way to what the political scientist Francis Fukuyama termed a "vetocracy." As the *Times*' Ezra Klein and *The Atlantic's* Derek Thompson write of this regulatory pattern in their book "Abundance" (Avid Reader), "Each individual decision is rational. The collective consequences are maddening."

Sometimes even the individual decisions are maddening. In San Francisco, anti-abortion activists stopped a clinic from being built by arguing that it would violate local standards for noise and traffic—because of the protests they themselves intended to organize. Residents also managed to obtain historic-preservation status for a laundromat in an effort to prevent its demolition. (Twenty-seven per cent of Manhattan is shielded from developers because of various preservation covenants.) A Los Angeles

project to convert a polluted aircraft factory into apartments and shops was sued twenty times in twenty years, under the same law. In Maryland, homeowners organized a petition to stall construction on an apartment building in order to develop a parking lot.

Even public projects tend to get snarled in the same vetocracy. Adding a kilometre of subway track in the United States now costs twice what it does in Japan or Canada, and six times what it does in Portugal; in the past fifty years, the inflation-adjusted cost of a mile of interstate highway has tripled. A forthcoming academic paper detailing the long-arc history of urban development and its opponents, by the law professors Roderick M. Hills, Jr., of N.Y.U., and David Schleicher, of Yale, is titled "How the Gentry Won."

These urbanists have been inching toward the political center, seeing the logic in development and turning against some progressive icons. In "Stuck" (Random House), by Yoni Appelbaum, of *The Atlantic*, a chief villain is Jane Jacobs, the standard-bearer of Greenwich Village and a left-wing theorist of neighborhood living. But the need to build remained a niche obsession until the Biden Administration, when some of the same intellectuals noticed that efforts to construct a green-energy infrastructure were foundering on the same opposition. Three years after Congress authorized $7.5 billion to create a nationwide E.V. charging network, only two hundred and fourteen individual chargers were ready. In the mid-aughts, an entrepreneur named Michael Skelly conceived a plan to build a vast wind farm in the barren Oklahoma panhandle and sell the energy to the federal government's Tennessee Valley Authority. Skelly secured the Obama Administration's commitment to buy his energy, but in the course of a decade the project slowly collapsed, as state powers dawdled and eventually refused to issue the necessary permits. Anyone who had been politically invested in the attempts to build high-rises in West Harlem would have noticed a familiar pattern. "We are at a moment of history," Skelly is quoted as saying in "Why Nothing Works: Who Killed Progress—and How to Bring It Back" (Public Affairs), by Marc J. Dunkelman, a research fellow at Brown. "Robert Moses could come back from the dead and he wouldn't be able to do shit."

These three new books explore such decelerations, and seek to move from urbanism toward a more general political philosophy. Klein and Thompson are perhaps the most ambitious. “For decades, American liberalism has measured its success in how close it could come to the social welfare system of Denmark,” they write, but those efforts have been complicated by the difficulty of supplying enough housing, enough solar panels, enough of what people need. They’re aiming for a “change in political culture” through which liberalism, which has long acted to pump the brakes on building things, now works to “speed up the system.” Klein and Thompson want a “liberalism that builds,” not just in housing and green energy but in artificial intelligence and in drug development, too, areas where they see similar patterns of stagnation. Their goals are broad. This group of policies, which they call the abundance agenda, offers, Klein and Thompson believe, “a path out of the morass we’re in. A new political order.”

It is an interesting time for so many prominent liberal thinkers to focus on dynamism, since the Republicans who hold power in Washington are in an accelerationist mood, too. In many ways, the conservative argument is more straightforward. Abundance liberals might hope to turn the federal government into a weapon against local vetocracies; Trump’s Republicans simply want to destroy it, so business can flourish. The *DOGE* blitz of the past month has already led to mass and scattershot layoffs and threatened agency closures at U.S.A.I.D., the F.A.A., the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, and the Department of Education, and, though some of these efforts are being contested in court, more are in the offing. Even people within Trump’s orbit who had been skeptical of Big Tech when he was out of power now see a future in it. In Paris this February, just a few weeks after being sworn in, Vice-President J. D. Vance addressed a summit on artificial intelligence. “I’m not here this morning to talk about A.I. safety,” Vance said. “I’m here to talk about A.I. opportunity.” America’s response, he went on, could no longer be “self-conscious” or “risk-averse.”

Abundance, for elected Democrats who have embraced it, has offered a politics of growth, and perhaps even risk, that they can get behind, since it centers on an energetic hands-on government rather than an unfettered free market. These causes have moved quickly toward the core of the Party’s self-conception, and its plans. The top item on the Harris campaign’s policy

agenda was an expansion of housing. Ritchie Torres, a centrist Democratic congressman from the Bronx and a likely candidate for New York governor in 2026, said in January that “the abundance agenda is the best framework that I’ve heard for reimagining Democratic governance.” In California, Governor Gavin Newsom struck a similar theme. “People are losing trust and confidence in our ability to build new things,” he said. It isn’t just the urbanists who blame liberals for the problems with building; some leading Democrats do, too. According to John Podesta, the White House chief of staff under Bill Clinton and a senior adviser to both Barack Obama and Joe Biden, “We got so good at stopping projects that we forgot how to build things in America.”

These Democrats might, like Appelbaum, be thinking about the consequences for working people of being stuck in place. Appelbaum is a lovely storyteller, and in this gentle book he emphasizes how much the historical ability of Americans to change their circumstances has depended on moving somewhere else, from John Winthrop to Hang Kie, the immigrant small businessman who fought the efforts of the citizens of Modesto to confine his laundry to the Chinese part of town through zoning. Appelbaum reserves a special animus for the conservative sentimentality over the small town, and he is disturbed by how many progressives, like Jacobs, sought to re-create it in the middle of cities. He thinks that Americans were once such great belongers—to the Tocquevillian bouquet of churches, civic leagues, bowling clubs—because we were newcomers, seeking to ingratiate ourselves, and that, as we’ve stopped moving, “these structures have atrophied, leaving Americans alienated and alone.” Appelbaum is clear about where the fault lies: one study he notes found that, as a city’s voters grew ten per cent more liberal, it issued thirty per cent fewer housing permits.

Cartoon by Liam Francis Walsh

Dunkelman supplies the political theory behind this phenomenon—“Why Nothing Works” is effectively a history of twentieth-century progressive policymaking. The high point, he thinks, was the ambitious conception of governance inscribed in Franklin D. Roosevelt’s second Inaugural Address: “We are fashioning an instrument of unimagined power for the establishment of a morally better world.” Dunkelman celebrates the creation of the Social Security Administration, the Federal Communications Commission, the National Labor Relations Board, and the Securities and Exchange Commission (what a run!), and he sees the same “Hamiltonian” spirit in Dwight D. Eisenhower’s interstate-highway system. Cracks appeared in the sixties, Dunkelman thinks, as liberalism started to reflect the baby boomers’ distrust of the establishment. He deftly maps how anti-poverty and then environmental policy were designed to empower local communities to resist outside forces, putting liberalism at the service of stymieing grand plans. (He also castigates Robert Caro’s classic, critical book on Robert Moses for giving a generation of readers the misapprehension that aggressive building was a political vice rather than a virtue.) “Why Nothing Works” is blunt and exhortative—the word “Hamiltonian” appears on a hundred and twenty-five pages—but Dunkelman is making a subtle point about the interplay between cultural emotion and social design. He writes, “Progressivism’s cultural aversion to power has turned the Democratic Party—purportedly the ‘party of government’—into an institution drawn almost instinctively to cut government down.”

Part of the political charge these three books carry comes from the clarity of their disavowals. The natural move for political writers is to blame the other side; the abundance faction says, “This one’s on us.” But somewhere deep in their combined thousand pages I began to wonder whether the liberal self-blame isn’t a little overstated. That so many leading Democrats are enthusiastic about their arguments somewhat undercuts the case. The pattern these writers identify is that wealthy or powerful interests hire lawyers to contest a new project, by using a mechanism designed by liberals in the seventies. The abundance advocates emphasize the problem of ideology, because of who usually wrote the rules, but what’s happening is also, more simply, about wealth and power. When it comes to the expense of New York’s subways, the latest studies identify some specific culprits: the city builds many more mezzanine levels in its stations than is the case in stations overseas, and it hires more consultants. How much of that is really about liberalism?

The situation is starker when it comes to climate policy. Klein and Thompson note that infrastructure projects have to navigate more than sixty separate review processes from federal authorities alone, and that does sound unnecessarily challenging—probably the Migratory Bird Treaty Act could be downshifted. But it’s flatly ahistorical to think that liberals are mainly to blame for the halting progress of American climate policy. As Klein and Thompson acknowledge, Jimmy Carter put solar hot-water panels on the White House; Ronald Reagan took them down. Book deadlines being what they are, these works all to a degree reflect the Biden years, when the questions were about whether we’d get faster solar or slower solar, and whether the transition would be led by China or by us. But the 2024 election was a reminder of why it has been so hard for liberals to re-create the conditions of Roosevelt’s second term, which he won in a 523–8 electoral-vote landslide. Our far more divided country disagrees about basic goals. Right now, half of it—the part in power—doesn’t seem to want solar or wind energy on almost any timetable. It would prefer to burn more coal.

On June 11, 2023, a truck driver named Nathan Moody lost control on the Cottman Avenue exit off I-95 in northeast Philadelphia, overturning the eighty-five hundred gallons of gasoline his vehicle was carrying. It ignited, killing Moody and generating so much heat that the bridge beneath

collapsed. The accident took place in an especially important spot in the highway system of the Northeast. (On drive-time traffic reports, “backup at Cottman Avenue” is something like “delays on the Cross Bronx Expressway.”) Pennsylvania’s newly elected Democratic governor, Josh Shapiro, staked his reputation on a quick rebuild; he gave nightly updates to the press and on TikTok, and got a camera rigged at the site so the public could follow along.

As Klein and Thompson tell the story, the key action happened within the state’s Department of Transportation, whose secretary, Michael Carroll, took advantage of the Governor’s emergency declaration to suspend rules he otherwise would have had to follow. Carroll picked contractors to do the work and agreed on a price without waiting for competing bids, authorized them to pave at night when rain forecasts would normally have halted work, and generally gave speed priority over the usual prudence. When he came across a team of workers disassembling a roadway sign by screwdriver so that it could be reused later, Carroll recalled, “I said turn the machine on and knock the goddamn thing over.” In twelve days, astonishingly, the bridge was rebuilt, and traffic resumed.

In their day jobs, as columnists and podcasters who began their careers online, Klein and Thompson have advanced a wonky tendency in political journalism: an interest in the details about how government programs work. As they have grown in prominence—during the Biden years, Klein’s podcast became one of the main places in which the aims and judgments of liberalism were evaluated—they have helped impose a technocratic sensibility and seriousness on the political conversation, along with a particular interest in different forms of futurism. Klein and Thompson’s influence is one good reason to see these books as blueprints for a political movement. “Abundance” is a fair-minded book, and it recognizes some of the trade-offs that come with redesigning government for dynamism. “These were risks,” Klein and Thompson acknowledge, of the choices Shapiro made to set aside safety and anti-corruption rules, and they quote Carroll: “It could’ve gone badly, but it didn’t.” They write, “The process Shapiro used would typically be illegal. Yet national Democrats and Pennsylvania voters alike loved it. What does that say about the typical process?”

A basic conviction of the abundance movement is that stagnation represents something like a national emergency, which may require the government to take risks and liberals to sideline their quest for a Scandinavian-style social democracy. Much of the second half of Klein and Thompson's book focusses on supercharging American science, and here the authors edge toward a more ideologically nebulous futurism. They envisage "a new kind of entrepreneurial state," namely, "the government as a bottleneck detective." They hope to ease the immigration of talented scientists, limit the paperwork required of federally funded investigators, and use government money a bit more like a venture fund does, coaxing along potentially ground-shifting ideas by setting up prizes and helping to guarantee markets. The discussion of artificial intelligence is brief; there's a much longer one on the N.I.H. "The U.S. has thrown tens of billions of dollars annually into scientific discovery," Klein and Thompson write. "But it hasn't brought as much progress as we'd expect." Of course, the past half decade has delivered the *COVID* vaccine, breakthroughs in immuno-oncology, and a new class of obesity drugs so effective that they seem to lower all-cause mortality. This is a disappointing level of progress? Compared with what?

The obvious candidate is China. It is China that has twenty-seven nuclear reactors under construction, compared with zero in the U.S., China whose artificial-intelligence and drug-development infrastructures have begun to rival our own and whose production of solar panels puts ours to shame. Perhaps, Klein and Thompson suggest, we should learn from the ways that Beijing's model is more efficient than ours. "China can build hundreds of thousands of miles of high-speed rail in the time it takes California to fail to build hundreds of miles of high-speed rail," they write. "China does not spend years debating with judges whether to move a storage facility. That power leads to abuse and imperiousness. It also leads to high-speed rail." There are ways in which the comparison with China makes sense and ways in which it doesn't—given that Americans, on average, are seven times as rich as their Chinese counterparts, it's not surprising that China might still be in more of a Robert Moses phase. But thrumming in the background of the abundance books is an almost rhythmic impatience with the pace of change and technology. The real question these authors pose for liberals is whether we feel it, too.

“The year is 2050,” Klein and Thompson write, in the introduction to “Abundance,” imagining a scene. “You open your eyes at dawn and turn in the cool bed sheets. A few feet above your head, affixed to the top of the roof, a layer of solar panels blinks in the morning sun.” They conjure a tech-enabled green future: inside your refrigerator are apples, tomatoes, and eggplants, grown on a vertical farm “mere miles away.” There is chicken and pork in the fridge, but no live animals were needed to make it. An autonomous drone “drops off the latest shipment of star pills”—medicines that slow cellular aging and reduce overeating. “Thanks to higher productivity from AI,” workweeks shorten and weekends extend. “How different this era is,” Klein and Thompson write, “from the opening decades of the twenty-first century, which unspooled a string of braided crises. A housing crisis. A financial crisis. A pandemic. A climate crisis. Political crises. . . . We knew what we needed to build to alleviate the scarcities so many faced and we simply didn’t build it.” They ask, “Why?”

Choose to build, Klein and Thompson say, and liberals can have this future. Of course, Elon Musk’s Republicans want to build something similar, and so do the technocrats in Beijing: we may well get lives like those they imagine, and yet a less liberal or equitable society. In their evocation of a leisurely utopia a quarter century away, Klein and Thompson stray from the pragmatic matter with which the abundance movement began, of affordable housing in the middle-class parts of big, expensive cities—the orienting geography of the Democratic Party, the LeFrak City of the mind. It’s good to ask how fast we will get a transformative future. But another question, one that has more traditionally preoccupied liberal politics, is whether we will get it in the Bronx. ♦

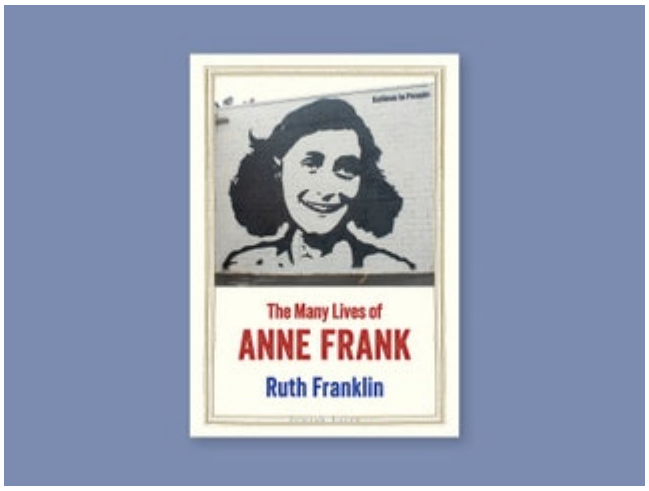
Benjamin Wallace-Wells began contributing to The New Yorker in 2006 and joined the magazine as a staff writer in 2015. He writes about American politics and society.

Books

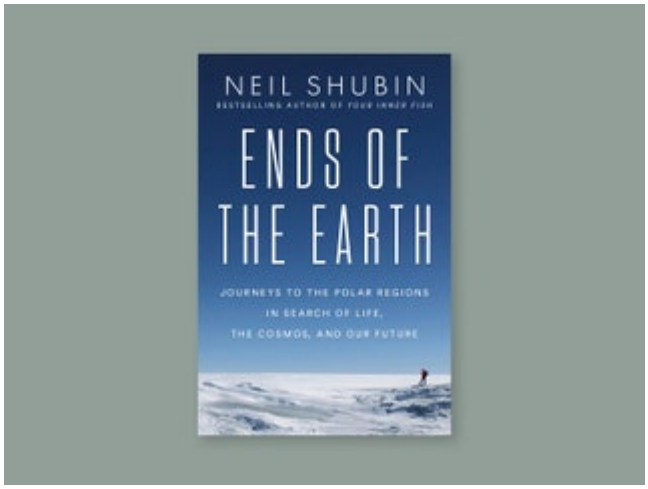
Briefly Noted

“The Many Lives of Anne Frank,” “Ends of the Earth,” “A Gorgeous Excitement,” and “Stone Yard Devotional.”

March 3, 2025



The Many Lives of Anne Frank, *by Ruth Franklin (Yale)*. This book depicts the rich texture of Frank’s life, and the “complicated genesis” of her published diary, while also exploring her afterlife as a “figurehead against prejudice,” one whose story has been edited, censored, commodified, and appropriated. Franklin, an award-winning biographer, details how Frank’s legacy was formed, and sometimes deformed, by her father, Otto, who survived her. Otto’s role as the keeper of Frank’s memory is “perhaps the most confusing—and most contested—aspect of Anne’s story,” Franklin writes. With sensitivity and assiduous research, she constructs a vivid cultural history that advocates for a reëvaluation of Frank, not as a symbol or a saint but as a human being and a literary artist.



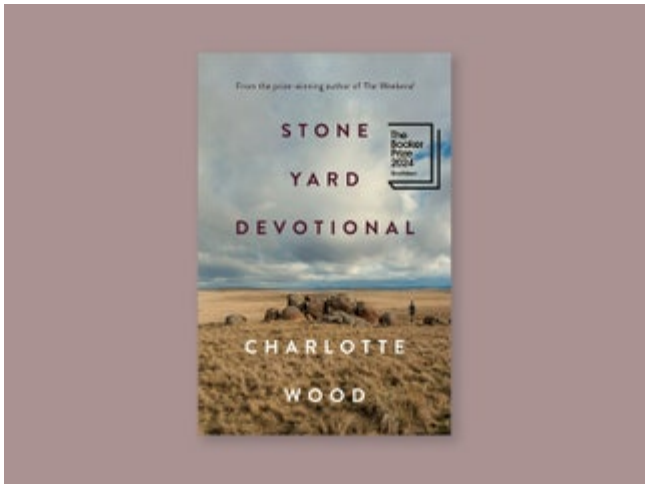
Ends of the Earth, *by Neil Shubin (Dutton)*. In this comprehensive yet concise history of modern polar exploration, Shubin, a professor of evolutionary biology, mixes urgent scientific findings about glaciers and sea-level rise with prescient geopolitical histories of Arctic territorial disputes. Throughout, Shubin relates stories from his own field expeditions: a pilot lands a propeller plane in an icy valley; a crew member stumbles on kaleidoscopic hues of blue while spelunking in Antarctic crevasses; Shubin's team discovers a field of dinosaur footprints that had been miraculously preserved under layers of ice. Such descriptions enliven the book, and capture Shubin's reverence for both the beauty and the mysteries hidden in the cold, barren tundra.

What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction and nonfiction.

A Gorgeous Excitement, *by Cynthia Weiner (Crown)*. The title of this assured début novel is taken from Freud's description of cocaine's effects. That drug, combined with prescription medications, sex, and alcohol, fuels the narrative, which is closely modelled on the real-life death of a Manhattan teen-ager in 1986—the so-called Preppy Murder case. The summer before the protagonist, Nina, leaves the Upper East Side for Vanderbilt, she is searching for someone to "please God take her virginity." She soon meets Gardner, a devious and charming troublemaker who fills her with a "buzzy euphoria." Nina follows him on a series of dangerous outings that lead her to grow disenchanted and wary. "Everything's too big to get my head around," she says, as she begins to reckon with the compromises of adulthood.



Stone Yard Devotional, *by Charlotte Wood (Riverhead)*. Short-listed for the Booker Prize, this quiet, probing novel follows a middle-aged woman as

she moves into a cloistered religious community near the town where she grew up. The narrator has left her marriage and her job without announcement, and this sudden abstention is also thrust upon the reader; details from the woman's former life filter in slowly, but much of the past remains obscure. Instead, the narrator documents her trials at the convent—a plague of mice, the arrival of a murdered nun's bones—where the ordinary and the extraordinary collide. Here, faith is more than foolishness but less than sacrosanct, and one woman's disappearance becomes a rumination on what it means to exist.

Books

The Classic Mystery That Prefigured the Los Angeles Wildfires

Ross Macdonald’s “The Underground Man” is exquisitely attuned to the Californian landscape—how it rises, falls, smells, and, most indelible of all, how it burns.

By Anthony Lane

March 3, 2025

In eighteen novels, written from 1949 to 1976, Macdonald’s sleuth Lew Archer strayed only occasionally from his beat, on the country’s western edge.Illustration by Till Lauer

There are certain books that bide their time, like plants, waiting decades to flower. If you’re lucky enough to have an *Agave americana* on your land, wary enough to stay clear of its sharp-toothed leaves, and patient enough to hang around for anything from eight to thirty years, you will be rewarded, at last, with the sight of its butter-yellow blossoms. Likewise, if a copy of

“The Underground Man,” a novel from 1971, by Ross Macdonald, has been sitting on your shelf for ages, unread and barely noticed, try opening it now. Suddenly, it’s a book in full bloom.

The cause of that flowering is not hard to find. You hear a hint of it in the opening sentences: “A rattle of leaves woke me some time before dawn. A hot wind was breathing in at the bedroom window.” At once, we are on our guard; since when did the weather become an intruder, stalking us while we sleep? Further down the page, a few hours later, we get a wider prospect:

> It was a bright September morning. The edges of the sky had a yellowish tinge like cheap paper darkening in the sunlight. There was no wind at all now, but I could smell the inland desert and feel its heat.

What We’re Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Something, we realize, is ready to catch fire. The man we’re listening to is Lew Archer, the private eye who appeared in eighteen novels by Macdonald. The earliest was “The Moving Target,” from 1949. The last was “The Blue Hammer,” which came out in 1976. (Eleven of them are available in a three-volume boxed set, hefty and handsome, from the Library of America.) “The Underground Man” is the sixteenth in the series and one of the best. As a reader, you can spend a lot of time in Archer’s company, tracking him as he unravels case upon case, and still feel that he eludes you, being the kind of fellow who holds things in reserve. He’s an ex-cop, with an ex-wife. In “The Underground Man,” he tells us, “I had no

children, but I had given up envying people who had." The grimness of his adventures should grind him down, and yet, from book to book, he perseveres. Here he is, staring into a mirror to check for damage:

> It was wonderful how much a pair of eyes could see without being changed by what they saw. The human animal was almost too adaptable for its own good.

What matters most about Archer, as with any cat, is not who he is but where he prowls. His basic beat is Southern California. In "The Way Some People Die" (1951), he covers Santa Monica, somewhere called Pacific Point (most likely a stand-in for La Jolla), and Palm Springs. The preceding book, "The Drowning Pool" (1950), offers a sardonic overview of the state—"They had jerrybuilt the beaches from San Diego to the Golden Gate, bulldozed super-highways through the mountains, cut down a thousand years of redwood growth, and built an urban wilderness in the desert"—before zooming in on an oil-rich town north of Los Angeles, which Archer compares to a tumor. In 1975, when the novel was adapted into a movie starring Paul Newman, the action was redirected to Louisiana, and the result fell predictably flat. It was like sending Madame Bovary to Marseille.

Now and then, Archer heads farther afield. "The Chill" (1964) takes him as far as Chicago. But his heart, or his busy brain, remains on the country's western edge. He can't stop examining the kinds of people who live there, within different pockets of the land, and the sharp shifts of texture and light which greet him as he goes from one pocket to the next. In "The Instant Enemy" (1968), he takes a punch and a tumble, smacking the back of his skull against concrete—just another day in Pacific Palisades, where a couple's emotional rapport gives off "a faint wrong smoky odor," and where "purple princess flowers glowed among the leaves." Arriving in Malibu, in "The Barbarous Coast" (1956), he drives first to a club with a fifty-yard swimming pool and then to a cottage that resembles "a discarded container." With him is an anxious young man named George:

> "This is practically a slum," George said. "I thought that Malibu was a famous resort."
>
> "Part of it is. This is the other part."

The walls of the cottage, Archer reports, “had been scoured bare and grained by blowing sands.” You can all but rub the tips of your fingers against the grain. That’s how grit gets into a private eye. You might say the same of Philip Marlowe, who moseys through the masterworks of Raymond Chandler, but what’s extraordinary—and I sense this ever more keenly, after years of immersion in Chandler—is how those works amount, in the end, to one long prose poem.

On a map, Marlowe’s hunting grounds abut or overlap with Archer’s, yet the moods of their investigations are quite distinct. Chandler haunts you and makes you laugh; Macdonald keeps you posted, although his Californian evocations are not without a quick lyrical toughness of their own. Through the medium of Archer, he tells us how the skin of the landscape rises, falls, and smells; how it looks through the windshield of a car (“the leaping road, the blue sky streaming backward”) or from the window of a plane; and, most indelible of all, thanks to “The Underground Man,” how it burns.

The Los Angeles wildfires that started on January 7th of this year were remarkable for a number of reasons. Among these was, first, their geographical spread, across half a dozen counties of the metropolitan area. According to California’s Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, more than fifty-seven thousand acres were burned and more than sixteen thousand structures destroyed. Second, there was the longevity: on the last day of January, the Palisades Fire and the Eaton Fire were yet to be quenched. And, third, there was the unearthly rush of the conflagrations. Between midmorning and midafternoon on January 7th, the fire that began around Pacific Palisades swelled from ten acres to more than twelve hundred.

Needless to say, among the countless aspects of this disaster, the fact that it was partly foretold in a fifty-four-year-old mystery story is, by any reckoning, the most trivial and the least consoling. If you approached a family in Altadena, as they stood in front of their scorched home, and informed them that a guy called Ross Macdonald saw it all coming, they would quite rightly tell you to go to the place where the fires are never snuffed out. Nonetheless, there is something creepy and compelling in the prophetic strength that is harbored, and slowly revealed, by particular

books. (Or by a particular author: in Kafka's case, the foresight is terrifying.) What is caught most acutely in "The Underground Man," and what came to mind as I watched the footage from L.A., is the sheer velocity with which such catastrophes can unfold. Hell comes on fast.

Archer first gets word of fire, indirectly, from a radio report. Then he sees a veil of smoke, with "glimpses of fire like the flashes of heavy guns too far away to be heard." Up closer, he tries another tack: "The flames that from a distance had looked like artillery flashes were crashing through the thick chaparral like cavalry." The military likeness lingers ("outriders of flame were leaping down the slope to the left") before giving way to other images—the fire, we are told, resembles "a displaced sunset," "fuming acid," or "a loose volcano," and the air is like "hot animal breath." Later, as the day fades, the illusion of being at war returns:

> I glanced up at the mountains, and was shocked by what I saw. The fire had grown and spread as if it fed on darkness. It hung around like the bivouacs of a besieging army.

What's going on here? One could argue that Macdonald is stuck in a mixture of similes. The more charitable view is that he's thinking dramatically through the eyes, ears, and nostrils of his hero, and that, if Archer struggles to pin down what he encounters, it's because the fire is, truly, indescribable. (He's too wise for cracks.) That's what most of us—laconic sleuths included—tend to do when we find ourselves on the verge of being overwhelmed. Trying to articulate what strikes us, we fail, fall short, and try again.

Yet something else is going on in "The Underground Man." What Archer observes is not just the haste of the fires, or their ever-changing shape, but whom they attack. At one point, he goes to the imperilled home of a woman named Mrs. Armistead. Cleaving instinctively to the principle that you protect what you love, she has saved her mink coat from the inferno. It lies at the bottom of her swimming pool, out of harm's way, weighted down by what look like jewelry boxes. She and Archer leave, pause at a curve in the road, and gaze upon her house:

The fire bent around it like the fingers of a hand, squeezing smoke out of the windows and then flame. We got back into our cars and turned downhill. It was my second evacuation of the day, and it made me feel slightly paranoid until I thought of the reason. The people I was getting involved with could afford to live in the open outside the city, right up against nature.

Cartoon by Lynn Hsu and Carol Lasky

In other words, the wild is wreaking revenge on the rich. Not that the rich seem to care. In Archer's day, apparently, you could show your class—or, at least, brandish your success—by electing to live on the border where the city and the country rubbed against each other. If friction ensued, too bad. In one startling exchange, a homeowner, languid with affluence, responds to a local fire official's warning about the oncoming threat:

"There's never been fire in this canyon in my lifetime."

"That means it's ripe," he said. "The brush up above is fifteen and twenty feet deep, and as dry as a chip. This is a fifty-year fire. It could take your house unless the wind changes again."

"Then let it."

Half a century later, things are demographically different. In places like Altadena, the brunt was endured by low-income households, many inhabited by renters rather than owners—not the sort of folk who could pay for ample insurance coverage, let alone for private detectives. Livelihoods have been reduced to cinders. In an instructive piece in the *Times*, published on January 15th, Mira Rojanasakul and Brad Plumer wrote that a major factor in the L.A. fires was "the growth in housing in and around the city's fire-prone hills over the past few decades." They also drew attention to what is known as the wildland-urban interface, or *WUI*, defining it as "developments on the outskirts of cities that bump up against forests, grasslands and shrub lands." There has been an alarming rise in the number of properties that have been built along the *WUI*—all in all, reportedly, more than sixteen million homes across the West. That's an awful lot of tinderboxes. The people who dwell in them, as a rule, don't have mink coats to drown.

The best piece of literary criticism regarding "The Underground Man" came in an item of fan mail that Macdonald received from Morton G. Wurtele, in April, 1972. Wurtele was the chairman of the U.C.L.A. meteorology department, and he wrote:

> It is fascinating to see the interplay of Santa Ana and sea breeze. The growing intensity of the fire naturally tends to accelerate the sea breeze; so the fire, like your other characters, is working toward its own destruction.

No doubt Macdonald found it reassuring to be lauded for his precision. But who was he, exactly, and how come the treacherous conditions of life kept wafting into his books? The more you discover about him—and I would steer you briskly toward an excellent biography by Tom Nolan, which came out in 1999—the more he seems like the sort of person who would end up patrolling the *WUI*. For a start, his real name was not Ross Macdonald; it was Kenneth Millar. And although he was born in Los Gatos, near San Francisco, in 1915, and died in Santa Barbara, in 1983, he wasn't Californian through and through. His parents, who separated when he was a small child, were both Canadian, and it was in various parts of Canada—his childhood and adolescence were all over the place—that he grew up. Asked

once where he'd learned so much about America, Macdonald replied, "In Ontario."

According to Nolan, the young Kenneth was "bowled over" when he first read "Oliver Twist," and you can see why. His early existence was Dickensian in the extreme, with its desperate troughs and lurching reversals of fortune. His father took off, and so bowed down was the boy's mother that she applied to have him accepted by an orphanage. At the last minute, a relative rode to the rescue—as, later, did a wealthy aunt, who plucked him out of poverty and sent him to private school. Education was not the making of him, but it was the broadening and the tempering. He studied at the University of Michigan, under W. H. Auden, no less, who taught a class called Fate and the Individual in European Literature. Macdonald wrote a doctoral dissertation on Coleridge (which he considered naming "The Way Some People Die, Part Two," in tribute to academia), and, when chasing a title for a new novel, he stole a resonant phrase from a poem by Thomas Hardy: "The Doomsters."

In 1938, Macdonald married Margaret Sturm, who also wrote mystery novels, and for a while she was the more heralded half of the couple. Strange to say, they wrote in consort, not in competition, and the marriage lasted until he died, of Alzheimer's. By all accounts, he was courteous, dapper, and pensive, liable to mull over a question rather than risk a heedless response, yet somehow closed off, as if the twists and turns of his youth had left him incapable of trusting the road ahead. In Santa Barbara, he befriended Hugh Kenner, the great Canadian critic of modernism, who said of him, "Even though I saw him a lot, I never felt I knew him very well. I don't know anyone who did." There are people who bear a burden of guilt, despite not having committed the original sin, and Macdonald, I suspect, was one of those unenviable souls. Archer goes further still: "Men and women were their own doomsters, the secret authors of their own destruction. You had to be very careful what you dreamed."

Macdonald and his wife had one child, Linda, who was seldom untroubled. The most bewildering parts of Nolan's book tell of Linda's arrest, in 1956, after she killed a thirteen-year-old boy in a hit-and-run accident, and then of her vanishing, in 1959, when she was a student at U.C. Davis. Macdonald

spent ten exhausting days on her trail, in California and Nevada, and the story made unsavory headlines: “Mystery Writer Disappears, Adds to Confusion Over Missing Girl.” Requiring assistance, he hired a private eye. Linda was finally found, alive, in Reno—a place that shows up in “The Galton Case,” another saga of a child gone astray, which had been published earlier that year. The ironies were dense and bitter. “As a man writes his fiction, his fiction is writing him,” Macdonald once remarked. No seer, from Cassandra onward, has ever been happy to be proved correct.

Few could have blamed Macdonald if, with so much hazardous history behind him, he had turned sour or struck a reactionary stance. What happened, instead, is that the trauma of precariousness (and here you get another whiff of Dickens) stoked a liberal conscience. It fuelled Macdonald’s politics, and a letter that he wrote in 1952 to Adlai Stevenson, who had lost to Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Presidential election two days earlier, was candid in its angry solace: “If a majority of our people turned their backs on you and the future, they did it out of simple childishness and fear.”

Some, though not all, of that sensibility gets under the hard shell of his hero. One sentence on the first page of the first Archer novel sets the moral tone: “The light-blue haze in the lower canyon was like a thin smoke from slowly burning money.” What follows is a quest for somebody named Ralph Sampson, recently on the lam—born poor, grown rich, and, according to his daughter, wholly oblivious to the needs of the Mexican workers on his ranch, not far from Bakersfield, who are now on strike. Archer is unsurprised: “It makes it easier to gouge people if you don’t admit they’re human.”

That is a note rarely heard in Chandler. Marlowe is intent on criminal justice, and on how easily it is rusted and bent, but social justice, by and large, leaves him unperturbed. What you gather from Archer, on the other hand, is that economic and environmental matters will, inevitably, get snarled up in crime after crime. An offshore oil platform, in “Sleeping Beauty” (1973), reminds Archer of “a dagger that had stabbed the world and made it spill black blood.” In “The Galton Case,” seeking an absent father, he visits Luna Bay, a short drive from San Francisco, and inspects a

new development, Marvista Manor—a hundred or more houses near the edge of a bluff. “They stood along the hillside on raw earth terraces which were only just beginning to sprout grass,” he says. It is typical of Archer, who is alert to novelty but unfooled by its promise, that he delves into what was there before and talks to an elderly doctor who knew the missing man’s son. “I brought him into the world,” the doctor says.

Again, we are veering away from Chandler, who was more of a poet than a plotter, and whose narratives are strewn across the pages like chaff. For Macdonald, the plot of a tale is more like a plot of land. It invites you to dig deep and to sift through the soil. The working title of “The Underground Man” was, indeed, “Digger,” and there are uncanny passages in which the corpse of a murder victim, lately buried, is disinterred, buried again in a hurry to shelter it from the fire, and then brought to light once more. (“The digging man was almost out of sight in the hole. Like a man growing laboriously out of the earth, he stood up with Stanley’s body clasped in his arms.”) The killer, in most of the Archer books, turns out to be the family tree, which gradually traps fathers, mothers, and children alike in its gnarled branches and the mesh of its roots.

From a distance, Macdonald’s own life has the shudder of a dark fairy tale, answered by the quaking in his books. Now and then, though, it was interrupted by blessings, as fairy tales must be, and none was more unexpected than the front page of the *Times Book Review* on Valentine’s Day, 1971—more than twenty-five hundred words by Eudora Welty in praise of “The Underground Man.” To receive commendation from such a fairy godmother was not just a joy but a serious professional boost, and Macdonald’s reputation soared. The novel, Welty claimed, was “written so close to the nerve of today as to expose most of the apprehensions we live with.”

How does the today of 1971 measure up against the today of 2025? Well, the most resilient citizens might feel that their nerves are now being tested to a degree that was unimaginable back then, even if “the low-life subplots,” in Macdonald’s words, are “taking over the tragedies.” His imagination *did* leap ahead, I think, in a kind of exultant dread, across the firebreak. He sensed which way the wind was blowing and what blazes it

might bring, and he cautioned us that the dousing of the flames would not mark the end of our plight. Fresh upheavals would always lie ahead. Hence the last chapters of “The Underground Man,” in which the menace comes from flooding, not combustion. Rain transforms the burned land into mud, and the mud begins to slide from on high. “I could hear boulders rolling down the creekbed in the upper canyon,” Archer says. “They made noises like bowling balls in an alley.” Picture him still on the job, smiling in gloomy recognition at a headline in the *Times*, on February 19th, less than a month after the extinction of the recent fires: “A Slow-Moving California Landslide Suddenly Speeds Up.”

It’s difficult to say what the current residents of Los Angeles, whether or not they have homes to return to, and whether they are doomsters or hopefuls, would make of “The Underground Man.” Would its premonitions amaze them, or would they fling it aside in disgust, having no need for such cold comfort? Either way, as Macdonald wrote, in 1968, “there’s no retreat from the ‘California experience.’ ” He added, “It’s like a furnace which uses you up, leaving nothing but a spoonful of fine ash and the record of enormous fantasies.” Earth to embers, fact to fiction, dust to dust. ♦

Anthony Lane is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “Nobody’s Perfect.”

On and Off the Menu

A Crowning Moment for the New Orleans King Cake

During Carnival, the ingenuity of the city’s bakers is on full display.

By Hannah Goldfield

March 3, 2025

For New Orleans natives, finding the fève in a king cake can be a source of delight or dread.Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

For bakeries in New Orleans, the first few months of the year are among the busiest. As the rest of the country stares down the barrel of January, sobered by New Year’s resolutions, the city is just easing into Carnival, the season of revelry and indulgence that lasts from Three Kings Day (also known as Epiphany) to Fat Tuesday, which immediately precedes the start of Lent.

The weeks are marked by parties, by parades, and by pastry, most specifically king cake: a wreath-shaped confection made with a yeasted dough—the kind you'd use for brioche or sticky buns—and finished with white icing and a shower of crystallized sugar that's dyed purple, green, and gold.

King cake is rooted in religious tradition—it's a Catholic custom that's believed to have been adapted from an ancient Roman one—but in New Orleans it's also a "huge economic boon," Bronwen Wyatt, a baker and a recipe developer, told me recently. "Typically, Thanksgiving through Christmas is a busy time—and then, in other parts of the country, it dies," she said. It's considered sacrilege, even among the secular, to make or eat a king cake before or after Carnival. In the past decade or so, the season has become a frenzied pageant of baking innovation.

"Even the larger king-cake bakeries are pushing the boundaries now," Wyatt said as she stood in the kitchen of her shotgun-style Treme house. She poked at a mass of dough that had been proofing in a pan, deeming it more than ready to go into the oven. For several years, Wyatt sold king cakes through a small business called Bayou Saint Cake. Now she offers a king-cake-making class online, adding a new flavor—Funfetti, honey-wheat pretzel, sweet potato with cardamom meringue—to her repertoire each season.

Half an hour later, we cut into slices so hot that I burned the roof of my mouth, and so luscious with sour cream, butter, and cinnamon that I didn't mind. Among Wyatt's mise en place was a quart container full of tiny gold plastic babies. In ancient Rome, the antecedent to the king cake was baked with a dried bean inside it; whoever found it in their slice would be crowned king or queen for the day. In France, the bean in a *gâteau* or a *galette des rois* (the latter made with puff pastry) is known as a *fève*, meaning "fava." The word has become a catchall for any tiny trinket hidden in a cake. In New Orleans, the most common féve is a pink plastic baby, popularized by a bygone chain called McKenzie's Pastry Shoppes and often assumed to represent the infant Jesus—though, in 1990, the company's former president claimed otherwise. "Why we picked this, I don't know, it was cute," he told the *Times-Picayune*.

Per local tradition, the person who gets the fève is responsible for bringing a king cake to the next party, or to the office, or to school, where it's served as a weekly Carnival treat. "Everyone hoped they didn't get the baby, because it meant you had to get the next king cake, and we were always broke," a New Orleans native named Bryan Wilson told me. "When I share a king cake outside of *NOLA*, everyone wants the baby—and nobody ever gets the next cake."

The February days I spent in the city were mostly muggy and gray, punctuated by downpours, but my spirit couldn't be dampened as I zigzagged all over town. King cake found me even when I wasn't looking: at a kiosk at the airport, which sold individually wrapped slices and nips of king-cake-flavored rum; at dinner at Brigtsen's, a Creole restaurant uptown, where king-cake bread pudding was a dessert special. Upon waking at Hotel Peter and Paul, on the grounds of a refurbished Catholic church in the Marigny, I stumbled over to the Elysian Bar, a restaurant in the old rectory. As the young resident baker, Curtis Litwiller, plaited ropes of dough, he explained that his king-cake recipe was inspired by coffee cake but also by East Asian milk breads, which use a water roux to insure an extra-fluffy crumb.

At Ayu Bakehouse, I enjoyed a king-cake latte, topped with colored sugar, and a wedge of "Croissant City" king cake, made from a laminated dough. I sampled a savory variety at Bywater Bakery, made by stuffing a garlic-bread dough with a creamy mixture of shrimp and crawfish. (The Parmesan cheese on top was dyed in the Mardi Gras colors.) At King Cake Hub, a pop-up in a Mid-City brewery which carries cakes from dozens of bakeries, old and new, accessories for sale included copies of "The Big Book of King Cake," a 2021 compendium by a local writer named Matt Haines, and a knife with a sparkly acrylic handle that read "*STAYS IN BOX*." It's a point of pride among king-cake devotees that someone will want another slice soon.

If I had to choose a favorite king cake, it would be the one at Lagniappe Bakehouse (the name is the Cajun word for "a little something extra"), which was opened last year, in Central City, by Kaitlin Guerin, a New Orleans-born former dancer, and Lino Asana, a Cameroonian-born

filmmaker. Theirs had a rich and flaky exterior that brought to mind the tenderest strudel, with squiggles of condensed-milk icing and a soft but structured crumb that Guerin modelled in part on her favorite panettone. Most compelling was a subtle touch of heat: in addition to cinnamon, she uses ground grains of paradise, a spicier cousin of cardamom that's native to West Africa.

A particularly tiny brown-skinned plastic baby tumbled out of a crevice in my slice—my first fève of the trip. "I've had people come back and tell me, 'Oh, I'm so happy that I got this little Black baby in my king cake,' " Guerin said. "Representation matters." It was one of several ways I observed bakers getting creative with their fèves. The bronzed *galette des reines* ("queen cake") at Levee Baking Co., filled with pecan frangipane and candied satsuma, comes with a ceramic moon face made by a local artist named Jackie Brown. Jamboree Jams, a preserves company, commissions fèves for its cakes from Panacea Theriac, better known as Miss Pussycat, a beloved musician, ceramicist, and puppeteer who lives and works in the Bywater with her partner and bandmate, who goes by Quintron.

Theriac is a member of a Carnival krewe that organizes a miniature-themed parade called tit Rex, known for its shoebox floats and tiny "throws"—the objects, including beads, that are handed out to spectators. Over the years, Theriac has made thousands of ceramic throws, including a coin-size king cake, and a few seasons ago it occurred to her that they would work as fèves, too. This year's batch included a red devil and a sculpted tableau of a house with a tree, each no bigger than an acorn.

"Part of my pay is I get a king cake," Theriac told me. Last year's was ill-fated. "Every year, Quintron and I have this special party called the Maritime Ball. Everybody dresses up in underwater wear. I put the cake up in our kitchen. And then a friend of mine—I won't say her name, she was dressed as the evil twin sister of Julie McCoy, from 'The Love Boat'—just picked the whole cake up." Theriac showed me a photo of a cake that looked as if it had been attacked by a wild animal. "She was, like, I'm trying to find the fève! It was a strawberry chocolate. I had one little bite of it," Theriac said. "This year, I'm hiding the king cake."

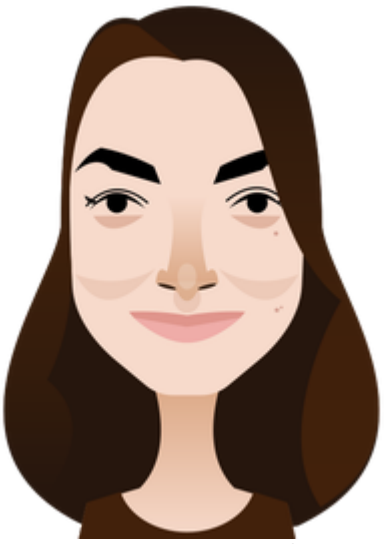
On my last morning in New Orleans, I woke up early to drive to Dong Phuong, a Vietnamese bakery on the eastern edge of the city, before it opened, at 8 *A.M.* Among the many people who had recommended it was Bryan Ford, a New Orleans-raised baker and the author of a 2024 cookbook called “Pan y Dulce,” featuring recipes for Latin American breads and pastries, including a *rosca de reyes*. “It’s all about technique, and their technique is flawless,” Ford said of Dong Phuong, which was founded by a family of refugees in 1982 and has been selling king cakes since 2008.

By the time I pulled into the parking lot, directly off the highway, at about seven-thirty, dozens of people were already lined up. According to Mimi Ducombs, the manager, the bakery makes between seventeen hundred and two thousand king cakes a day, and they usually sell out before lunchtime. At the head of the line I found a slim, bearded, middle-aged man named Ramon Doucette. “The goal was to be here for six,” he said. “I only ran one red light.” Doucette had given up king cake himself, owing to heartburn, but was there at his daughter’s behest—a far cry from his own childhood, during which, he claimed, he’d swallowed more than one plastic baby to avoid telling his father, a cop, that he was on the hook for the next cake. “My intestines are still messed up,” he said.

The line began to move, quickly. A woman dressed in a sweatshirt emblazoned with a sequinned king cake, her hair pulled back with a plastic king-cake clip, told me, convincingly, “Mardi Gras is my life.” Another woman asked if she could show me a TikTok she’d made, under the handle Sapphic Southerner, set to TLC’s “No Scrubs.” “Some of y’all wanna be treated like a Dong Phuong king cake so badly, but you walk around acting like a Rouses king cake,” she says, referring to a chain of Louisiana supermarkets whose owner was photographed among Trump supporters in D.C. on January 6th—Three Kings Day—in 2021. “People are not gonna stand in line for your bullshit.”

I bought a variety of cakes—pecan, durian, coconut—and brought them to a friend’s house for a taste test. Each was shaped like a snugly closed horseshoe with scalloped golden edges, and slathered thickly in cream-cheese frosting. I’d eaten enough king cake for a lifetime, yet I couldn’t stop shaving slice after buttery slice and scraping extra frosting off the side

of the box. Even the durian was irresistible, its distinctive, divisive flavor tamed by sugar and fat. I left my friends with large slabs to bring to parties over the weekend, and packed up the rest to take home. At the airport, I got a taste of celebrity. More than one traveller took note of my giant labelled paper bag. Near security, I bumped Dong Phuong boxes with a woman heading home from a conference and compared notes on how we'd obtained our stashes. As I sat at my gate, a man passing by widened his eyes. "Oh, my goodness," he said. "Good job." ♦



Hannah Goldfield, a staff writer covering restaurants and food culture, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her Profile of the chef Kwame Onwuachi.

The Theatre

“Grangeville” and “Curse of the Starving Class” Try to Go Home Again

Fifty years apart, the playwrights Samuel D. Hunter and Sam Shepard examine our national obsession with family inheritance.

By Helen Shaw

February 28, 2025

Two middle-aged half brothers try to connect in Samuel D. Hunter’s new drama.Illustration by Roland High

The first moments of Samuel D. Hunter’s new play, “Grangeville,” now at the Signature, take place in the pitch dark. Out of the blackness, a man’s voice—nasal, strongly Midwestern, a little plaintive—asks what seems like a silly question: “Is it late over there?” He doesn’t really get an answer. The pause crackles; we hear the glottal static of an international phone call. The

response, when it finally comes, is clipped. “This bill isn’t itemized,” a different voice says.

After some time, pale light dawns on the two men talking: Jerry (Paul Sparks) and Arnold (Brian J. Smith), estranged middle-aged half brothers from tiny Grangeville, Idaho. Jerry, a down-home, aw-shucks guy, has never left Grangeville, and now, with his marriage falling apart, he’s returned to the trailer where he and his younger brother grew up in near-total abandonment. Their mother is dying, and, as various paperwork issues pile up, Jerry keeps calling, trying to reconnect with Arnold, who decades earlier fled neglect and homophobic violence for a life in the Netherlands with a kind Dutch husband, a serious art career—and an emotionally stultifying hatred for his family.

The actors, speaking to each other across a dark limbo, don’t hold cell phones or, when they shift to video calls, laptops. (The sound designer, Christopher Darbassie, subtly warps their voices so that we feel the thousands of miles between them.) The black, low-ceilinged letterbox set is by the collective called dots, and, for a long time, the only realistic touch is a ragged trailer door. Sparks stays near that door, as if Jerry’s been tethered to it.

Hunter has a genius for the distressed American landscape. He charts it by writing small, deft plays, many of them set in and named for towns in his home state of Idaho. (To list just a few: “Pocatello,” “Lewiston/Clarkston,” “A Bright New Boise.”) His dramas arrive in a steady, sermon-every-Sunday rhythm, nineteen of them to date. The social and financial economies of these places are bleak. Religion often tears groups apart—though it also sometimes stitches individuals back together—and parents and children might barely know one another: in “A Bright New Boise,” a man gets a job at a big-box store to be close to the son he hasn’t met; in “A Case for the Existence of God,” two men lose custody of the children they love.

Hunter writes fast, which you sense in the naturalism and ease of his language, but the plays themselves move with courteous deliberation. He composed his best-known drama, “The Whale,” from 2012, while teaching expository writing at Rutgers. (It was made into a film starring Brendan

Fraser, who won an Oscar for his role as an overweight shut-in who tries to buy his daughter's attention.) More than a decade later, there's still an essayist's economy in Hunter's writing. Seemingly unstructured dialogue reveals itself, in retrospect, as a thesis statement. That first exchange in "Grangeville," for instance, contains all the play's subsequent argument: Jerry is constantly asking Arnold about the time—is it time to be forgiven?—and Arnold always responds by itemizing his spiritual bill.

Fraser was originally announced, with some fanfare, as Jerry, but he left the project because of "unforeseen circumstances" two months before the opening. The result is a blessing. Fraser's celebrity might have destabilized the play's delicate teeter-totter between well-matched actors, and it's impossible to imagine a better Jerry than Sparks, a foxlike comic presence with a wheedling drawl. Sparks specializes in being the slippery partner in an existential double act: onstage in New York, he has been a sneaky, superb Vladimir (to a bewildered Estragon) in Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot"; a chaotic Jerry (to a staid Peter) in Edward Albee's two-hander "The Zoo Story"; and a serial criminal (who might be the protagonist's psychic projection) in Eugène Ionesco's "The Killer." Here he connects Hunter's neorealist work to that catalogue of older absurdist plays about man's division from himself.

Hunter is a master of Western miniatures, but he's even more restrained than usual in "Grangeville": one brother asks for connection, the other withholds it, and grace tips the balance. Happily, the director of the Signature production, Jack Serio, excels at restraint—he directed a compact "Uncle Vanya," in 2023, in a loft where one scene was lit by a couple of candles. The character Arnold is a miniaturist, too: his early art work, and his most successful, was a series of tiny Grangeville dioramas. His husband, Bram (played soulfully by Sparks, with just a shift of accent), wonders why Arnold, who is experiencing artist's block, won't make a model of his mother's trailer. Arnold refuses—he resents how well such a piece might be received. "Making fun of America, it's the one theme in modern European art that is consistently evergreen," he says.

One can be tempted to take "Grangeville" as autobiography: Hunter, much like Arnold, came out and then left a fundamentalist upbringing in Idaho

behind. But it's this aesthetic ambivalence that's perhaps particularly relevant. *Should* Arnold keep making these perfect little portraits of Idaho? Is he making them for the right reasons? In the end, he—and Hunter—can't resist. With a diorama, the artist's hand can always come down into the shoebox, to move and adjust the figures inside. He can put people where he wants them, every time.

Across the Pershing Square Signature Center's lobby and down the hall, the New Group is reviving the late Sam Shepard's "Curse of the Starving Class," from 1977. "Curse" was the opening salvo in Shepard's great cycle of dysfunctional-family plays of the nineteen-seventies and early eighties, which includes "Buried Child" and "True West." It's a little odd that this play—a record of Shepard's flourishing talent, but never his finest work—is back so soon. The Signature itself produced a sturdy revival, in 2019, with a ferocious David Warshofsky as Weston, an alcoholic father who terrorizes his family, especially his grown son, Wesley, who learns to mimic him.

This production, which collapses in its first few instants and then drags itself painfully along for two hours and forty-five minutes, is a cautionary tale about relying on stardom. Its director, Scott Elliott, has cast Christian Slater as Weston, Calista Flockhart as Weston's wife, Ella, and Cooper Hoffman—the son of the much missed Philip Seymour Hoffman—as the poor, traumatized Wesley. Despite their capacities on film, none of them demonstrate the stage flexibility for material this challenging, and Elliott's directorial and design choices don't help. (He has them deliver some of Shepard's weightier language directly to the audience, and, in what's meant to be the squalor of a failing avocado farm's kitchen, characters often turn up in pristine, off-the-rack clothes.) Since their environment lacks reality, the actors freeze (Flockhart), turn glumly inward (Hoffman), or mime their way through things. If Weston is tired, Slater rubs his face. When Weston's hungry, Slater rubs his stomach. Tonally, too, Elliott exerts no control. Wesley brings a sick "lamb" onstage, but the lamb is played by a full-sized ewe so immaculately fluffy and confidently vocal that she keeps the audience chuckling in admiration. (Her name is Lois, and she is a *diva!*)

There's something to learn here, though. Watching the two plays back to back made me realize that Sam Hunter is, in many ways, our contemporary

Sam Shepard: both use self-portraiture to represent the ruptures between generations; both draw on their small-town, Western backgrounds; both argue that men must abandon ruinous models of masculinity. Their differences in scope and tone stem from Shepard's epic sensibility—he steered his work toward tragic, almost Wagnerian conclusions. Hunter, on the other hand, keeps his gaze locked on the near-at-hand, and, defiantly optimistic, offers the possibility of repair. Almost fifty years apart, the playwrights look out at the West and assess the toll of life in a predatory America. At the Pershing Square complex, we can see our national obsession with family inheritance being worked out side by side, theatre by theatre, man by man. ♦

Helen Shaw, The New Yorker's theatre critic, joined the magazine in 2022.

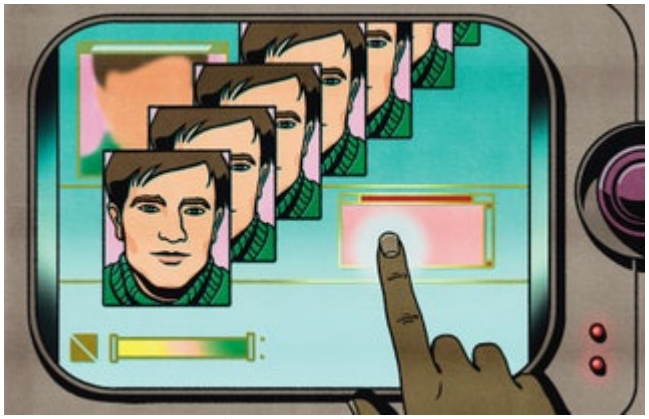
The Current Cinema

“Mickey 17” Is a Science-Fiction Adventure of Multiple Unwieldy Thrills

In Bong Joon-ho’s latest film, Robert Pattinson plays a space traveller facing a succession of death sentences.

By Justin Chang

February 28, 2025



Robert Pattinson stars in Bong Joon-ho’s futuristic farce.Illustration by Maxime Mouysset

The last time someone groped Robert Pattinson aboard a spaceship, to the best of my knowledge, was in Claire Denis’s 2018 movie, “High Life.” The groper was a lowlife—a deranged doctor, bent on harvesting astronaut semen for pernicious procreative ends. Pattinson’s character, a self-declared celibate, was unconscious and unconsenting. The assault took place on the grottiest of vessels, manned by violent criminals who had been banished into deep space. The movie was a hell of a dark trip, but Pattinson, among the most consistently adventurous actors of his generation, kept you tethered to the story with an almost gravitational force. His unswerving conviction powered the film’s own.

“High Life” might one day make a nifty, nasty double bill with the loopy futuristic farce “Mickey 17,” the new film from the South Korean director and screenwriter Bong Joon-ho. Here is another gloomy spaceship, abounding in grim experiments and hostile personalities, with Pattinson once more playing a reluctant space traveller. Correction: he plays at least seventeen reluctant space travellers, all of whom are named Mickey Barnes, and none of whom are unduly bothered about celibacy. When one Mickey is playfully fondled by his girlfriend, Nasha (Naomi Ackie), a shock of ribald energy courses through the movie. He’s in capable hands, and so, in another sense, are we. In the often sterile cosmos of the Hollywood space opera, the mere acknowledgment of human horniness is a sign of intelligent life.

Elsewhere, alas, Mickey has little bodily autonomy. He is an Expendable, by which I do not mean a fist-bumping associate of Sylvester Stallone but, rather, a human guinea pig, contractually obligated to die and live again (and again and again) through the dubious miracle of human-printing technology. The deaths are at once spasmodically grisly—there will be bloody vomit—and agonizingly protracted. A team of scientists watch, with more interest than concern, as the Mickeys are exposed to skin-burning radiation, lung-melting viruses, and lethal nerve gas. Down into an incinerator, or “cycler,” tumbles Mickey’s fresh corpse; out of a printer rolls a living, breathing Mickey, reconstituted from chunks of organic waste and ready to be implanted with an up-to-date memory bank. Such is the peril of donating one’s bodies to science.

The outlandish premise comes straight from Edward Ashton’s 2022 science-fiction novel, “Mickey7,” but it’s typical of Bong, a merry maximalist, that he has added ten dead Mickeys to the title. The seventeenth Mickey is the one we encounter at the start, and he quickly catches us up to speed. It’s the year 2054, and we are on a snowbound planet called Niflheim, more than four years’ journey from Earth. The spaceship is now a compound, the home of a new human colony, and Mickey is its first line of defense. He joined the voyage as an Expendable out of desperation, hoping to escape a murderous loan shark back on Earth and figuring that multiple reversible deaths would be preferable to a single permanent one. He figured wrong.

“I really hate dying,” Mickey tells us, and something in the jaundiced but friendly rasp in his voice—he’s part film-noir gumshoe, part good-natured goofball—immediately gets you on his side. Pattinson, looking shabbier than any actor between stints as Bruce Wayne should, sports a dopey grin and an even dopier haircut, which he sometimes tucks under a floppy-eared aviator hat. Mickey is racked with guilt over a fateful childhood mistake, and so his purgatorial existence, in which he is denied the pleasures of life *and* the closure of death, becomes a demented search for grace. He’s a fuckup, but endearingly so; there’s real pathos in his paroxysms of self-pity. In an early scene, he is set upon by a shrieking, skittering swarm of creepers—imagine giant, whitish pill bugs with huge mandibles—and expects to be devoured (and resurrected) within seconds. When the creepers instead set Mickey free, without so much as a nibble, he wonders if his poor flesh has been recycled once too often. The relief of survival cannot quite dispel the sting of rejection, and he cries out in protest, “I’m still good meat!”

Faithful Bong-heads will hear those words and recall the filmmaker’s 2017 thriller, “Okja,” about a young girl and a gargantuan genetically modified pig she rescues from an abattoir. The movie was by turns deadly serious and gaudily out-there—a familiar Bong formulation—and its glimpse into the bowels of industrialized meat production was horrific enough, I suspect, to put some off bacon for life. It nearly made a vegetarian out of Bong himself, whose animal-rights advocacy has, if anything, grown only more pronounced; the creepers of Niflheim, though hardly as cute as Okja, are about as cuddly as a bunch of computer-generated isopods could be. Count the number of times you find yourself murmuring “aww” instead of “yuck,” and you will have a new appreciation of Bong’s mastery of visual-effects technologies. You emerge from “Mickey 17” reminded that the real terrors walk among us, on two legs and with nary a mandible in sight.

With the exception of the loving, loyal Nasha, whom Ackie invests with romantic ardor and action-hero intensity, Mickey’s fellow-travellers prove a rotten lot. His so-called best friend, Timo (a wily Steven Yeun), is an opportunist who relentlessly exploits and mistreats Mickey. Infinitely worse is Kenneth Marshall, the leader of the expedition and the wannabe conqueror of Niflheim. He’s played by Mark Ruffalo, who, perhaps still high on the comic fumes of “Poor Things,” goes full fascist here, merging

Musky delusions with Trumpian mannerisms—he's all sneers, jeers, and garish veneers. Marshall's wife, Ylfa (a diabolically chirpy Toni Collette), is also a nasty piece of work; she spends her days whipping up sinister sauces of unknown provenance, like a Food Network Lady Macbeth.

Marshall, we're told, is a failed politician, a two-time election loser who commands an army of cultish supporters in red hats. He preaches a foul doctrine of interplanetary manifest destiny, full of warmongering rhetoric and freak-show hymns about "the Promised Land." Bong clearly has America in his satirical sights—but which America? An alternate-universe one that rejected Trumpism, and where "Mickey 17" might have landed with a sigh of relief? (The movie wrapped in January, 2023.) Or the constitutional dystopia in which we are now caught, beside which even the ugliest onscreen villainy pales into insignificance? Either way, the Marshalls, over-the-top fun for a while, soon veer into uncharted realms of ham-fisted cartoonery. Ruffalo and Collette can be actors of exacting subtlety, but only, apparently, in a solar system that "Mickey 17" leaves firmly behind.

A spirit of political provocation has long pervaded Bong's work, certainly as far back as "The Host" (2006), an exhilarating monster movie that, amid giddy bursts of Seoul-shaking mayhem, jabbed furiously at environmental decay and governmental negligence. His most recent and resonant success, the Oscar-winning "Parasite" (2019), was a family tragedy so intricately drawn that you couldn't tell where the heist machinations ended and the economic-inequality subtexts began. In between those movies, which were filmed in Korea, came two impressive but unwieldy adventures, both of which were mostly in English and embraced their causes with a distinctly un-Hollywood forthrightness. The post-apocalyptic railway thriller "Snowpiercer" (2013) fused class revolt and climate change; "Okja" blasted away at the greed of corporations and carnivores alike.

"Mickey 17" picks up where these films left off, to the point of sometimes seeming like its own batch of recycled goods. As in "Snowpiercer," the characters are trapped in a world of ice, forced to subsist on bland, gelatinous rations, and desperate for a hit of an illegal substance. (The pull of addiction is a sly, understated constant in Bong's cinematic universe.)

And, as in “Okja,” an elaborate genetic experiment, designed for the ostensible benefit of humanity, is exposed as grossly inhumane. In all three movies, Bong’s skills as an action filmmaker are marvellously evident: even a fairly simple sequence involving a cell phone and a chainsaw snaps together with virtuoso precision. But there is also something in the shift to a broader big-budget canvas that persistently defeats him. His meticulous craftsmanship takes on narrative bloat, his fluid juggling of characters and subplots turns mechanistic, and his customarily perfect pitch with actors gets lost, or at least scrambled, in translation.

Pattinson deftly dodges this latter trap, and he doesn’t just save the film but deepens it. There’s a neat trick to his performance that I won’t divulge; suffice to say that the movie slips us a Mickey we didn’t expect, a Mickey who *isn’t* a genial pushover. Pattinson, a putty-limbed stooge one minute and a vicious nihilist the next, has fun challenging Mickey’s preconceptions of himself—or, rather, himselves. Even if DNA and memories could be duplicated at will, Bong suggests, individual morality would remain a glorious uncertainty principle, too human and singular to be nailed down. There’s a strange comfort in that idea, and in the movie’s sweetly hopeful finale. Mickey, at long last, gets the end he deserves. ♦

Justin Chang is a film critic at The New Yorker. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

Poems

- **“The Eulogy I Didn’t Give (XXIV)”**
  By Bob Hicok | “My younger brother was afraid of thunder, / lightning.”
- **“What Am I Afraid Of?”**
  By Sasha Debevec-McKenney | “The silence, the thoughts / that come with it.”

Poems

The Eulogy I Didn’t Give (XXIV)

By Bob Hicok

March 3, 2025

My younger brother was afraid of thunder,
lightning. My father bought a recording of storms,
put it on the stereo, and rocked on the love seat
with my brother over and over,
until the sound meant comfort, warmth.
Much later, my brother became obsessed with meteorology
and dreamed of becoming a weatherman.
When I finally connected the early fear
with the later passion,
we were looking down at my father in his coffin.
Not my father but his body. More like an echo
of his flesh. No weather on his face.
I’d seen him often in a suit but never wearing a vest.
Pajamas would have made more sense.
The soft rain of the talking all around us
was a cocoon I wanted to live inside.
I heard the metronome of my heart
and thought of Quakers waiting for silence
to open its mouth. Of the hope
just below the surface of the phrase, keeping time.

Bob Hicok is the author of poetry collections including “Water Look Away,” “Red Rover Red Rover,” and “Hold.”

Poems

What Am I Afraid Of?

By Sasha Debevec-McKenney

March 3, 2025

The silence, the thoughts
that come with it, the sinking
suspicion that something more
is wrong with me than anyone
knows, including myself, including
the doctor who hooked me up
to the EKG machine and said
that though my heartbeat was irregular,
the irregularity was normal.
It was nothing to worry about.
The doctor told me there are two kinds
of people: unhealthy people who refuse
to get help, and healthy people
who always think they're dying.
Nobody's in between. But I've met
so many kinds of people:
people who stretch before
they get out of bed, people
who walk through life unstretched,
people who think their body
is a house and people who don't
think of their body at all.
People who peel their carrots,
people who don't. People who
stand on the roof and let the wind
make them cry. People who are afraid
to cry. People who step on all the leaves

on the sidewalk, people who look
straight ahead. There are people
who aren’t like me, they
don’t know the names
of all the different apples.
Once when I was cashiering
a woman said to me, “Wow,
you really know your kale.”
And once, at the butcher shop,
a man said to his dog, “That’s
the nice lady who smells like meat.”
I’m afraid I don’t know
what kind of person I am.
I thought I would get a chance
to do my life over in all the ways
anyone could think of: dying
would be like changing the channel.
I hate that you can’t hold on
to anything. I was washing an apple
and then I was coring it
and then it was cut—
and that was weeks ago now.
It was a Honeycrisp, and it lived up
to its name.

This is drawn from “Joy Is My Middle Name.”

Sasha Debevec-McKenney is the author of the poetry collection “Joy Is My Middle Name.”

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the March 10, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Monday, March 3, 2025**
  By Kameron Austin Collins | A challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, March 3, 2025

A challenging puzzle.

By Kameron Austin Collins

March 3, 2025

Kameron Austin Collins is a film critic who has written for Rolling Stone and Vanity Fair. His puzzles have appeared in the New York Times and the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.