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# Goings On

- **John Singer Sargent’s Scandalous “Madame X”**
  By Rachel Syme, Hilton Als, Helen Shaw, Sheldon Pearce, Brian Seibert, Richard Brody, Taran Dugal, and Jia Tolentino | Also: the skateboarding play “Bowl EP,” the off-kilter divas Grace Jones and Janelle Monae; Jamie Lee Curtis’s early “Love Letters,” and more.
- **Times Square’s Revolving Restaurant Comes Around Again**
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**Goings On**

# John Singer Sargent’s Scandalous “Madame X”

*Also: the skateboarding play “Bowl EP,” the off-kilter divas Grace Jones and Janelle Monae; Jamie Lee Curtis’s early “Love Letters,” and more.*

***By Rachel Syme, Hilton Als, Helen Shaw, Sheldon Pearce, Brian Seibert, Richard Brody, Taran Dugal, and Jia Tolentino***

*May 30, 2025*

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

**Summer is a season** ripe for scandal; people tend to be overheated and understimulated, looking to mist their crisping minds with idle gossip. Minor controversies can boil over, given the right temperature, into full-on imbroglios; such was the case in Paris in 1884, when the twenty-eight-year-old painter John Singer Sargent débuted a new large-scale portrait at the Salon, then the world’s most influential summer art show. Sargent had every reason to feel confident going into the Salon; since he’d arrived in Paris, at eighteen (from Italy, where he was born to American parents), to study at the École de Beaux Arts, Sargent had blazed an ambitious path through the art ranks to become one of the city’s most in-demand portraitists.

*"The Birthday Party," 1885.*

*Art work by John Singer Sargent / Courtesy Minneapolis Institute of Art*

Sargent's early work had a more Impressionistic bent—as a student, he travelled through Spain and Morocco painting mystics, courtyards, and beach scenes—but he honed his professional niche in painting portraits of Belle Époque aristocrats, who found Sargent's sumptuous style (rich, saturated colors, glowy lighting, fastidious attention to little details like fingertips and fabrics) to be immensely flattering. Sargent became famous for making women look beautiful, so it made sense that for years he actively pursued the most famously beautiful woman in Paris to sit for him. Virginie Amélie Avegno Gautreau—then Paris's leading It Girl—was, like Sargent, an American arriviste (she was born in New Orleans and moved to Paris at eight); she married rich, and became notorious among the haut monde for her sportive personality and striking looks. (She had a distinctive Roman nose, thick russet hair, a preference for heavy makeup, and a complexion so pale it was nearly translucent.) Sargent expected his portrait of Gautreau (the painting now known as "Madame X") to be a sensation at the Salon—and it was, but not in the way he hoped. The public *hated* it. They thought Gautreau looked sickly, bored, and awkward. Sargent painted Gautreau in profile to highlight her regal bone structure; crowds thought it made her look diffident and snotty. He'd painted one dress strap slipping off her shoulder, a move the critics considered profane. (Sargent later edited the strap back into place.) All summer long, the press brayed about the fiasco, to the point where Sargent fled Paris for London.

In 1915, Gautreau died, at only fifty-six, never having quite recovered from her "Madame X" summer. She became so self-conscious about her own image that she had all the mirrors removed from her home. The next year, Sargent sold "Madame X" to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, along with a note calling it "the best thing I have done." The painting has been a jewel of the Met's collection ever since—the winds of time have shifted its reputation from disgrace to masterpiece—and it is now the focus of a new Met exhibition called **"Sargent & Paris"** (through Aug. 3), which explores Sargent's brief, industrious decade in the city. The show is a perfect summer escape, full of popsicle-saturated colors in cool dark rooms, all leading up to the blockbuster event: "Madame X" comes late in the exhibition, but you can see the painting shining like a beacon from several rooms away. ("The Birthday Party," from 1885, is pictured above.) And if you need even more refreshing fizziness, you can hit the gift shop to buy a copy of Deborah Davis's dishy Gautreau biography, "Strapless," which will allow you to keep chattering about scandále all summer long.—*Rachel Syme*

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# This Week With: Jia Tolentino

*Our writers on their current obsessions.*

**This week, I loved** texting my friends about "On the Calculation of Volume (Book II)," the second in a seven-book series by Solvej Balle, translated by Barbara J. Haveland. These are the word-of-mouth books of the spring, I think, and it's been fun to figure out who has been harboring a personal relationship to which specific parts in them.

**This week, I cringed at** "White Genocide Grok," the phenomenon where Elon Musk's built-in X chatbot started replying to many user questions by debunking the idea of "white genocide" and referring to the anti-apartheid song "Kill the Boer." Actually, I'm kidding, this was the funniest thing I've seen on that platform all year.

**This week, I'm consuming** "Fish Tales," by Nettie Jones, originally acquired by Toni Morrison before its 1984 publication, and reissued by F.S.G. this year. This book is a party-girl novel like I'd never read before—

funny in such a particular register, and so unbelievably full of violence, tenderness, drugs, group sex, exploitation, genuine eroticism, fumbling toward freedom, and some sort of love.

**This week, I'm stuck on** "Short Story," the bridge track between "SABLE" and "fABLE," the two halves of Bon Iver's new album. Because I listened to the three "SABLE" tracks probably nine thousand times when they were released in 2024, and was trying to transition from my Bone-Deep Melancholy Era into my Searching Complex Bliss Era, I always skipped straight to "Everything Is Peaceful Love," the happy song I *thought* started "fABLE." It is indicative of the fact that I am too stupid to be working at *The New Yorker* that I somehow did not register, until now, that there is this tiny little bridge track in between—a song that sounds like a rainbow erupting from a handheld prism in a flash of sudden sunlight, a transient perfect epiphany on a walk on a beautiful day.

**Next week, I'm looking forward to** two shows—Mk.gee at the Stone Pony in Asbury Park, and Perfume Genius at Brooklyn Paramount. I've never seen Mk.gee live, despite spending much of last year listening to his album on repeat, and I'll go see Perfume Genius anytime he's in New York. It's impossible to hear 2:00-2:25 of "Left For Tomorrow," one of my favorite tracks on his new album "Glory," and not be moved.

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# About Town

Dance

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the founder of Urban Bush Women, recently handed over leadership of that pathbreaking company to younger hands so that she might focus on independent choreography. Now she is starting a term as artist in residence for **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre,** and Ailey's summer season at the Brooklyn Academy of Music features the first première of that tenure. Made in collaboration with the company members

Samantha Figgins and Chalvar Monteiro, “The Holy Blues” looks at the crossover between sacred and secular, the juke joint and the church. It shares a program with two of the hardest works to match: Ronald K. Brown’s transcendent “Grace” and Ailey’s “Revelations.”—*Brian Seibert (BAM; June 5-8.)*

**For more:** read Als on how Ailey created a home for Black dancers.

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Experimental Pop

A style icon turned dance-music keystone, **Grace Jones** transitioned from Midtown disco darling to New Wave aficionado in the eighties, settling into an identity as a club visionary. **Janelle Monáe** emerged in the twenty-tens with her own inspired vision of a humanoid wonderland, on the albums “The ArchAndroid” (2010) and “The Electric Lady” (2013). Her 2023 LP, “The Age of Pleasure,” revelled in the sashaying sensuality of reggae and Afrobeat to create a paradise destination, with Jones as an honored guest. Both artists are masters of the avant-garde, Black futurists, and off-kilter divas. The two join forces for a co-headlining benefit concert supporting BRIC Celebrate Brooklyn!’s free programming.—*Sheldon Pearce (Lena Horne Bandshell; June 9.)*

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Off Broadway

*Essence Lotus in “Bowl EP.”*

*Photograph by Carol Rosegg*

For Nazareth Hassan’s zonked-out erotic dream-play **“Bowl EP,”** the Vineyard has built an entire kidney-shaped pool, a makeshift half-pipe where two lovers-on-the-brink, Kelly K Klarkson (Essence Lotus) and Quentavius da Quitter (Oghenero Gbaje), can skateboard together while getting high and brainstorming songs. Scenes, described album-style, are brief (“Track 4 is tasting fingers,” reads a projection), but small units build: flirtation becomes love; idly proposed lyrics become explosive musical collaboration. The pool is a chain-link paradise, which is to say there’s a devil there (Felicia Curry), with eerie knowledge about what’s to come. The demon’s overlong, high-octane narration of future damage interrupts Hassan’s better flow, though—the EP’s best when it’s a playthrough, laid out track by track, of life in Eden.—*Helen Shaw (Vineyard; through June 15.)*

Art

The three artists in the show **“The Human Situation”**—Marcia Marcus, Alice Neel, and Sylvia Sleigh—weren’t friends but colleagues, who painted some of the same models throughout the sixties, seventies, and eighties. The show underlines the importance of portraiture to these artists who bucked trends by staying committed to the human form. Indeed, the strongest work by each of these women concentrates with great psychological acuity on what it means to live in a particular body during a particular time. The wonderful Sleigh, who died in 2010, at the age of ninety-four, and Marcus are more narrative based; Neel digs deep into her sitters’ surfaces to get at what they mean to express behind (in one picture) a heavily made-up face that’s steely, off-putting, and completely unforgettable.—*Hilton Als (Lévy Gorvy Dayan; through June 21.)*

**For more:** read Als on how Neel captures our collective humanity.

Movies

*Jamie Lee Curtis in “Love Letters.”*

*Photograph courtesy Criterion Collection*

Amy Holden Jones’s romantic melodrama **“Love Letters,”** from 1983, fittingly enters the modern canon with its streaming release on the Criterion Channel. Jamie Lee Curtis stars, in her first major dramatic role, as Anna Winter, a twenty-two-year-old Los Angeles d.j. who discovers a trove of passionate letters written to her late mother by a man who isn’t her father. The discovery inspires Anna to have an affair with a married photographer (James Keach), leading to inner turmoil and open conflict. Curtis dominates

the action with her tightly focussed energy, and Jones, who wrote and directed the film in her twenties, unfolds the tale with a distinctive, daringly original blend of local realism, sharp-edged observation, and narrative fragmentation.—*Richard Brody (Streaming on Criterion Channel.)*

**For more:** read Jamie Lee Curtis, in conversation with Rachel Syme, on addiction, beauty standards, and encounters with Bette Davis.

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Off Broadway

In Jack Cummings III's revival of William Inge's 1955 drama **"Bus Stop,"** a snowed-in Midwestern diner hosts a busload of stranded passengers for a night. The owner of the diner, Grace (Cindy Cheung), is somewhat laissez-faire: she barely notices when an old scoundrel (Rajesh Bose) woos her teen-age waitress (Delphi Borich), and she rather enjoys the cowboy Bo (Michael Hsu Rosen), who has kidnapped a night-club singer, Cherie (Midori Francis), to drag her off to Montana. Cheung and Francis are superb, as is Moses Villarama as Bo's buddy, Virgil, who sees his own sorrow bearing down on him, inevitable and enveloping, like the blizzard outside. As ever, Inge's understatement is heartbreaking. When Bo finally repents, Cherie shrugs. "I been treated worse," she says.—*H.S. (Classic Stage Company; through June 8.)*

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# Bar Tab

*Taran Dugal checks out the dance scene in Ridgewood.*

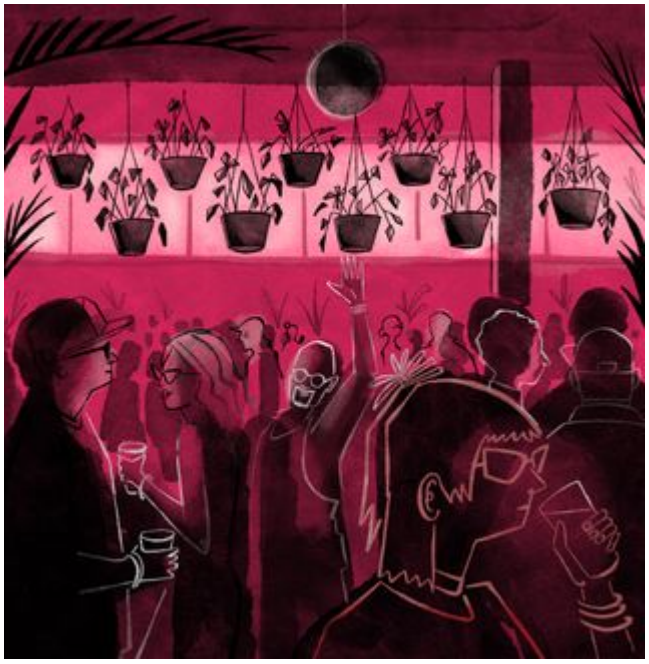

*Illustration by Patricia Bolaños*

Between 1920 and 1947, the Wolff-Alport Chemical Company extracted rare-earth minerals from a site in Ridgewood, Queens, and dumped the by-product of those efforts—radioactive thorium—into its grounds, thereby contaminating the soil and the surrounding sewer system. The company's old headquarters sit directly next to **Nowadays**, a bar and night club that occupies a warehouse and an adjacent, tree-laden lot. There was nothing distinctly nuclear about the venue when a group of friends visited recently, though they soon found themselves in a lurid neon throng on the dance floor. Detroit house boomed from ten-foot-tall speakers framed by an abundance of hanging plants, and patrons swung their bodies to and fro as steam collected on the windows behind the d.j. Phones were notably absent (club policy), and the visitors found themselves keeping time in terms of songs, rather than taps of a screen. After a particularly fast-paced number, they retreated to the bar, where they encountered a white-rum-spiked yerba-mate cocktail, which made for a rejuvenating reprieve. The Zumbador, a Mexican restaurant, served finger foods far more elevated than your typical club fare. Standouts included the birria tacos (shredded goat slow-cooked in chiles, served with a side of consommé) and the tres leches cake, a perfectly sugary chaser. The visitors took their food to the back yard, where, out of the warehouse's darkness, they emerged into a brightly lit haven. Tired dancers swayed in hammocks; others gathered around contained campfires.

As they sauntered toward a picnic table, the guests passed an elderly couple sitting under some string lights. “What do you think?” one asked the other. “Should we get up and dance again?”

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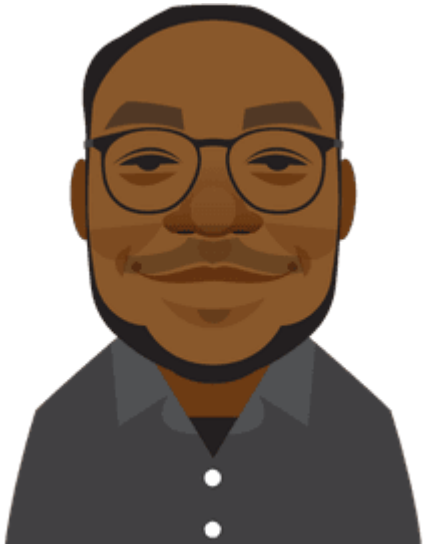
**P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:**

- A Coppola collaboration
- David Attenborough’s most moving marine encounters
- How Matt Wolf makes a documentary

*Rachel Syme is a staff writer at The New Yorker. She has covered Hollywood, style, and other cultural subjects since 2012. She is the author of “Syme’s Letter Writer,” about the joys of handwritten correspondence.*

*Hilton Als, a staff writer at The New Yorker, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of “God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin.”*

*Helen Shaw joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.*



*Sheldon Pearce is a music writer for The New Yorker's Goings On newsletter.*
*Brian Seibert has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2002. He is the author of "What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing," which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the New York Times and the New York Review of Books. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.*

*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."*
*Taran Dugal is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff.*

*Jia Tolentino is a staff writer at The New Yorker. In 2023, she won a National Magazine Award for her columns and essays on abortion. Her first book, the essay collection "Trick Mirror," was published in 2019.*

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**The Food Scene**

# Times Square's Revolving Restaurant Comes Around Again

*Can Danny Meyer make the View transcend its touristy gimmick?*

***By Helen Rosner***

*May 18, 2025*

*In a vast glass-encased aerie atop the Marriott Marquis hotel, the View is part dining establishment and part observation deck.Videos by Sam Wolson / Photographs by Victor Llorente for The New Yorker*

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

Seeing New York City from above—from the upper deck of the Empire State Building, or from the window of an airplane making an up-the-Hudson approach to LaGuardia Airport—is always a disorienting rush. There are the vast arcs of the avenues, the great green slashes of parks and cemeteries, the jagged field of skyscrapers, steepled and spiked like iron filings pulled up toward the great magnet of the sky. On the ground, too, the city is a spectacle: sit on any stoop, or at any sidewalk café, and take in the sounds of man and machine, the polychromatics of the auto garages and the shoppy shops, the endless side scroll of cars and foot traffic. It's a twenty-four-hour show whose run never closes. The View, a newly opened restaurant taking over the top of the New York Marriott Marquis, a concrete hulk of a hotel in Times Square, belongs to neither stratum. In the decades since the hotel opened, in 1985, new structures have risen around and above it. Today, the view from the View is mostly of office towers and hotels. You look out of the windows and see other windows, eye to eye.

But, wait, it revolves! Set inside a vast glass-encased aerie, the restaurant comprises two stories—a lounge above and a dining room below—each resting atop an enormous rotating platform, whose mechanisms are effectively the same as those of train-yard turntables. Few touristy

gimmicks are more touristy or more gimmicky than a spinning restaurant, which efficiently combines observation-deck gawking with the mundane necessity of eating dinner. The View opened in February, reinvigorating a space that had sat empty for a few years. Before that, it contained a buffet-based situation that catered to a stupendous volume of customers and had no culinary or cultural impact on the city whatsoever. (It closed in the early months of the pandemic.) Now, operated by the famed restaurateur Danny Meyer's Union Square Hospitality Group, the View is making a bid for something beyond travel-guidebook oblivion. It is a touristy restaurant that isn't a tourist trap—a place that even the most jaded local might actually want to swing by (swing up to?) for a pre-theatre drink or a special-occasion meal.

*Cocktails are served in the lounge, a floor above the dining room.*

The tourist in New York City faces dining needs that may or may not align with those of the local population. Where to eat lunch before a weekend matinée at Lincoln Center? Brunch on a Tuesday? A wee-hours half-meal to prevent a pleasant buzz from levelling up to the spins? If you *really* want to live like a local, the answer to all three might be scarfing leftover couscous straight out of Tupperware, in your apartment, in your underwear. It's left to the out-of-towners to breathe the real-New York air at Café Fiorello, Breakfast by Salt's Cure, and Prince St. Pizza—places that aren't necessarily very good, but which specialize in what the academic and social theorist Dean MacCannell, in his seminal 1976 work on tourism as a social phenomenon, called "staged authenticity."

There are a few clues—besides the big, shticky, rotating one—that the View might be another such restaurant. The menu has instances of “New York” theming, with cocktails inspired by Magnolia Bakery’s banana pudding and the pastrami sandwich at Katz’s Deli. The background music, pleasantly tinkled nightly by a real person sitting at a real piano, mixes in pop melodies alongside the Broadway classics and jazz standards. But there are also a few tells that the View is a place catering to locals—or, at least, a place where locals might not have their anti-touristic allergies triggered. The muted, elegant interiors, for instance, are designed by David Rockwell, whose burgundies and golds evoke the dramatics of the theatre district without overtly caricaturing it. The wine list is strikingly good and (also strikingly) not terribly expensive. The establishment’s subtle sense of dual purpose is something of a Danny Meyer signature. In 2005, when he opened the Modern, a fine-dining restaurant inside the then newly renovated Museum of Modern Art, one of the most notable details was that it had its own street entrance, which allowed patrons to come in for dinner without the touristy indignity of patronizing the museum.

No matter where you call home, entering the View is a laborious affair. Once you’ve escaped the rugby-like scrum of Times Square for the hotel lobby, you’ll navigate a confusing tangle of entrances, escalators, lobbies, and sub-lobbies. At last, a glass-walled elevator to the restaurant will shoot you upward at thrill-ride speed, hurtling through the hotel’s vertiginous atrium, past the open-plan gym and seemingly endless hotel-room floors, before opening onto the smiling faces of hosts behind a reception desk. (The effect is somehow even more jarring in reverse: the labyrinthine null-space of the hotel’s downstairs lobbies tarnishes the pleasures of the restaurant in precisely the same way that waiting in the passport-control line at J.F.K. kills the beta-blocking effects of a beachside vacation.)

The movement of the restaurant is subtle, and only very marginally vertigo-inducing. According to the View’s official metrics, the upstairs lounge takes forty-five minutes to complete a rotation, and the dining room takes an hour and a half. By my own calculations, things move a bit more leisurely, and if you’re not paying attention to landmarks out the window you might forget that you’re moving entirely—though you might, as I did, get completely disoriented both searching for and returning from the restroom, which is

housed in a nonrotating central column that also contains the kitchen. Marjorie Meek-Bradley, the executive chef, previously consulted on the opening menu at the Corner Store, the impenetrably trendy SoHo restaurant that I might describe as a celebrity Applebee's. At the View, she similarly specializes in American comfort food, this time of a retro, ritzified sort—an approach that feels philosophically correct for what the View is trying to do, and for the various categories of diner to whom it's trying to speak. There's a burger and several steaks, a shrimp cocktail and a tuna carpaccio, a Waldorf-ish salad and potatoes au gratin. Certain dishes are stronger than others. You might observe your companion's luscious crab-cake appetizer, golden and plump, positioned just so on a circle of rémoulade sauce, and regret your comparatively blah Caesar salad. You might order the Katz's Martini (with brisket-washed gin and a pastrami-spiced rim, though you can't really taste either) and wish you'd instead had the vivacious Shirley Temple, made with a proprietary grenadine that has a surprisingly sophisticated, fruity depth. (Ask for a shot of vodka if you must.)

Generally speaking, though, even the most obvious or simple dishes feel as though they have been made with impressive consideration. The signature dessert, a towering slice of night-dark chocolate cake, is drizzled tableside with an entirely unnecessary salted caramel, but it's delicious nonetheless. The cherries jubilee, an Escoffier classic that seems to be on the edge of a well-deserved comeback, are, tragically, flambéed offstage, in the kitchen, for reasons a server indicated had to do with fire hazards, but it doesn't fail to delight. The best dish I had, one I have since tried to re-create at home, is a side of peas and carrots that evokes frozen TV dinners but tastes flawlessly fresh: the vegetables cooked just to tenderness, and glazed silkily in butter, with tendrils of pea shoots adding a layer of floral green to all the starchy garden sweetness.

During a recent phone conversation, Meyer told me that, when Marriott first approached him about taking over the odd, dated, uncool space, he thought it was "insane," and knew instantly that he had to do it. As a teen-ager, in St. Louis, he'd had a formatively terrible experience visiting a rotating restaurant on top of the now closed Stouffer's Riverfront Inn. "You didn't need to go more than once, because it wasn't very good," he said. The food was bad, the service lacklustre, and even the view failed to deliver, with the

drama of the nearby Gateway Arch undermined by the charmless vistas of East St. Louis. There are at least seventeen currently operational rotating restaurants in the United States, the closest being the Skydome Restaurant in Arlington, Virginia, but the disappointing memory of Stouffer's was Meyer's only benchmark. "I said, 'I bet we can do better,' and I think we did."

*Dining on the move.*

That might sound like a low bar to clear, but part of the fun of the View lies in how handily it transcends its teetering proximity to both kitsch and terribleness. The restaurant, by the way, is not Union Square Hospitality Group's only establishment atop a skyscraper. Manhatta, open since 2018, is situated on the sixtieth floor of a building in the financial district. There, again, the name and location signal "tourist trap," but the experience delivers something different. Somehow, despite the formidable verticality of its elevator ride, Manhatta has become a viable date-night spot, or a place to grab (admittedly fancy) after-work drinks. In subtle, intentional ways—through the aesthetic austerity of its interior, and the cheffy ambition of its menu—the restaurant communicates that the view out the window belongs to you. It's a perch from which to take in the sights of your own city, rather than to marvel at a city you've come to see.

**Helen, Help Me!**
E-mail your questions about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

The View, burdened as it is by its chaotic location and its horrible entrance, and by the absurdity of its slow gyration, is unlikely to shed its touristic vibes quite so easily (or at all). It exists today only because it seemed glamorous, in 1985, to put an engineering novelty at the top of a newly built hotel, and it would now be next to impossible to remove it. But there's something interesting there: something about the durability of what we build, the hubris of trend-driven architecture, the virtues of nimble adaptation. You make the most of what you've got. You look out the windows, and if you don't like what you see, don't worry. The promise of the revolving restaurant is that, soon enough, something better is certain to come into view. ♦

*Helen Rosner, a staff writer at The New Yorker, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, The Food Scene.*

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# The Talk of the Town

- **Trump Makes America's Refugee Program a Tool of White Racial Grievance**
  By Jonathan Blitzer | The President's interest in the plight of Afrikaners seems to have begun with—what else?—segments on Fox News.
- **Chicken, Egg, Sharpie, Handcuffs**
  By Ben McGrath | A subway-platform poster for the School of Visual Arts was trying to stimulate discussion about A.I. One commuter engaged, and got locked up.
- **Tusks Up for the Utah Mammoth**
  By Sarah Larson | The N.H.L.'s newest hockey team unveiled its official name and mascot: an extinct behemoth with fossils at the American Museum of Natural History. Two players made a pilgrimage.
- **Stephen Malkmus's New, Er, Supergroup**
  By Nick Paumgarten | The Pavement front man passed through town with his latest project, the Hard Quartet, and showed off his one-handed backhand.
- **Is the "Mission: Impossible" Series Tom Cruise's "Blank Check"?**
  By Luis A. Gómez | The movie podcast, which examines the crazy passion projects that directors pursue after their first big hit ("Aloha" or "Speed Racer," anyone?) celebrates its tenth birthday with a trip to a "Mission: Impossible" exhibition.

**Comment**

# Trump Makes America’s Refugee Program a Tool of White Racial Grievance

The President’s interest in the plight of Afrikaners seems to have begun with—what else?—segments on Fox News.

**By Jonathan Blitzer**

June 1, 2025

*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photograph by Julius Reque / Getty*

The chaos of Donald Trump’s Presidency often obscures its rank consistency. Only a few hours into his second term, Trump signed an executive order suspending the admission of refugees to the United States, something that he’d tried to do his first time in office. Twelve thousand people who had been cleared to come were stranded, their flights cancelled. A hundred and eighteen thousand others had been approved but didn’t yet have plane tickets. Some, including Iraqis and Afghans who had been

targeted in their home countries for helping the U.S. military, filed a lawsuit, alongside a group of resettlement organizations. Eventually, a federal appeals court instructed the Administration to admit anyone whose flight had been scheduled on or before January 20th; it has shown no sign that it will comply. In 2017, when Trump banned refugees from certain Muslim-majority countries, the legal challenges they filed took almost all his first term to sort out. Many of them were still waiting abroad to learn their fate when he returned to the White House this year.

In the meantime, according to the executive order, the U.S. will "admit only those refugees who can fully and appropriately assimilate into the United States." Less than a month later, the Administration made clear who that might be. A February executive order, called "Addressing Egregious Actions of the Republic of South Africa," blamed that nation's government for perpetrating racism against white people. In May, fifty-nine Afrikaners were flown to the U.S. Stephen Miller, the President's top immigration adviser in both terms, hailed their case as "the textbook definition of why the refugee program was created." They were, he said, the victims of "race-based persecution."

The U.S. Congress hasn't passed legislation to reform the immigration system in thirty-five years, and one consequence has been a steady perversion of how lawmakers address the issue of who belongs here. Which people deserve our protection, in the form of asylum or refugee status, has become a kind of proxy fight, waged by successive Presidents operating on the margins of congressional inaction. The Refugee Act of 1980, which codified legal protections for those fleeing persecution, was supposed to be insulated from domestic identity politics. It had largely bipartisan support until Trump's first term, when Miller and his allies went to work. In a series of technical moves, they rewrote government guidelines for identifying and processing refugees. Resettlement agencies were starved of resources, leading many to shut down. In the final year of that term, the government resettled some eleven thousand refugees, the lowest amount, by a wide margin, in the program's history. Between 2023 and 2024, the Biden Administration resettled more than a hundred thousand. No one doubted that Trump would attempt to reverse such progress, yet he went further: his

Administration has now turned the system into a tool of white racial grievance.

Trump's interest in the plight of Afrikaners seems to have begun in 2018 with—what else?—segments on Fox News. Interviewing an Afrikaner activist, Tucker Carlson focussed on a policy that permitted the South African government to redistribute land owned by white farmers. "Racism is what our élites say they dislike most," Carlson later said. " 'Donald Trump is a racist,' they say. But they pay no attention to this." The policy, while inevitably controversial, was meant to correct for the nearly fifty years of brutal privations that Black South Africans endured under apartheid. Trump went on to claim, falsely, that the South African government was engaged in the "large scale killing" of white farmers, and he ordered the State Department to investigate. Top officials, as they did with many of the President's most fervid obsessions, appeared to slow-walk the inquiry.

This time, Trump took issue with a new law by which the government could expropriate white farmers' unused property. The fact that South Africa brought a genocide case against Israel before the International Court of Justice, in 2023, is a separate point of contention. There are others. In February, Trump's Secretary of State, Marco Rubio, refused to attend a G-20 summit in South Africa because the country supported what he summarized, on X, as "DEI and climate change."

On May 21st, Trump staged a diplomatic mugging of the sort that's become common in the Oval Office, assailing the South African President, Cyril Ramaphosa, with more false claims of a "genocide." (The nation's murder rate is high, but the available evidence suggests that white farmers make up a tiny fraction of the victims.) Aides played a propaganda video, and Trump held up a photograph of body bags which, according to Reuters, actually showed aid workers burying corpses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. This term, Trump is surrounded entirely by enablers. One of them was the South African-born billionaire Elon Musk, who has subscribed to conspiracy theories about antiwhite violence and spread them on social media. Musk has also sought to operate Starlink, his satellite-internet company, in South Africa, but has balked at a law requiring foreign tech

firms to sell a portion of their local subsidiaries to shareholders who are Black or historically disadvantaged.

Trump's refugee gambit comes just as his Administration is eviscerating a range of other protections for immigrants. A decade after the passage of the Refugee Act, Congress created a designation called Temporary Protected Status, to allow foreigners in the U.S. to remain here, on a provisional basis, if they face security concerns—from political strife to environmental disaster—at home. Some nine hundred thousand people from seventeen nations currently have T.P.S. But Trump has begun revoking it, country by country, including for some eight thousand Afghans and as many as half a million Haitians. In May, the Supreme Court allowed the Administration to proceed with its plan to cancel T.P.S. for three hundred and fifty thousand Venezuelans. Days later, the Justices temporarily lifted a lower-court order that had blocked the President from ending humanitarian parole for another half a million migrants from Venezuela, Haiti, Cuba, and Nicaragua.

Last week, the State Department sent a formal notification to Congress with a long list of bureaucratic changes, including substantial job cuts and a new emphasis on promoting "western values." The bureau in charge of refugee resettlement will have a new section: the Office of Remigration. The thrust of its mission will be to "return illegal aliens to their country of origin." "Remigration" is the preferred term of right-wing European populists, and it carries a host of white-nationalist associations. Trump had used the word only once before, in a social-media post during the 2024 campaign. It was a fringe concept then—not anymore. ♦

*Jonathan Blitzer is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His first book, "Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here," was published in January, 2024.*

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**First Things First Dept.**

# Chicken, Egg, Sharpie, Handcuffs

A subway-platform poster for the School of Visual Arts was trying to stimulate discussion about A.I. One commuter engaged, and got locked up.

**By Ben McGrath**

June 2, 2025

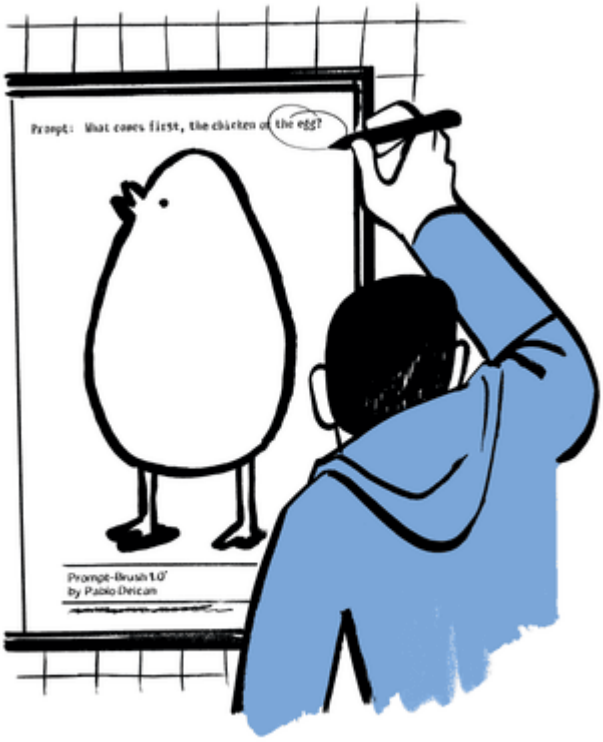


*Illustration by João Fazenda*

At four o’clock on a recent Friday, Kevin McCullough found himself staring at a line of text on a poster in the Graham Avenue subway station, in Williamsburg. “Prompt: What comes first, the chicken or the egg?” The poster was an ad for the School of Visual Arts. Beneath the prompt was a crude painting—of an oval-shaped chick, or was it an egg with feet and a beak?—that seemed agnostic on the issue. McCullough shook his head. Something of a literalist, he had always disliked the question, believing it

unworthy of endless debate. “The whole reason why a chicken exists is because of the evolution inside the egg,” he explained the other day.

McCullough is not a biologist. He works as an art handler. He often carries a Sharpie in his pocket, for labelling packages. That day, as the L train arrived, he uncapped his Sharpie and added a flourish to the poster, circling the words “the egg.” Then he stepped forward to board the train, feeling somewhat smug at having asserted a bit of clarity amid the existential dread of rush hour.

“Excuse me, sir!” Another would-be commuter flashed a badge in McCullough’s direction. *Chicken police*?

McCullough’s mind skipped back to 2006, when he’d spent a night in the Tombs, for pissing between two parked cars with a bag of weed in his pocket. (“I had a friend who was supposed to be my lookout, but he had no street smarts at all,” McCullough recalled.) He was in his twenties then, a transplant from Dubuque. He is forty-six now, a jaded New Yorker: “I mean, you see the mustaches and the black eyes and the stupid penises—stuff that people draw on those signs all the time.” The undercover cop on the subway platform was in his early thirties, McCullough guessed, and evidently humorless, or, more likely, fulfilling a quota. In a few days, it would be the end of the month.

Handcuffs, fingerprints, mug shot. “I was, like, ‘Wow, O.K., my white privilege is over,’ ” McCullough said. He was put in a holding cell at Broadway Junction. Another perp called out, “New guy, what did you do?” McCullough’s explanation didn’t impress: “That’s weak, man!”

Pablo Delcan, the S.V.A. faculty member who designed the poster, was inclined to agree. “That’s fucked up,” he said, when informed of McCullough’s ordeal, which had finally ended at 1:38 *A.M.*, when he was released with a Desk Appearance Ticket. (It then took him nearly two hours to reach his apartment, in Borough Park.)

The image on the poster is part of a project called Prompt-Brush, which Delcan conceived as a running commentary on the rise of artificial intelligence. People submit questions or requests—prompts—and Delcan

produces sketches, using a paintbrush and black ink, as quickly as possible, as though imitating a bot. “It started as a little bit of a joke about what a human adds to the interpretation of a prompt, versus what a computer does,” Delcan said. The art lies in the ambiguity. On Instagram, celebrating the installation of the ad campaign, Delcan revealed some of the other prompts the school had considered for its poster: “A large nose man with scissors cutting it”; “An artistic cockroach”; “What AI can’t teach.” For the last of those, Delcan had depicted two people embracing. He ended his post with the comment “Can’t wait to see how these posters get slowly covered in graffiti.” He now has a collection of photos he’s been sent of the poster with additional human embellishments. McCullough’s handiwork is not among them, but inside one of the oval-chick sketches someone scrawled,“Welcome2Idiopolis. Pop5.3 B.”

The chicken-or-egg prompt was submitted by an S.V.A. alumnus named Daniel Guillermo Rodriguez. Asked recently whether he had an opinion on the matter, Rodriguez replied, “The egg for sure,” though he noted that he had run the question through a couple of A.I. interfaces and received conflicting answers. It may also be worth noting that an e-mail containing a summary of this story elicited the following suggested response from Gmail: “Yum!”

McCullough, for his part, received an offer in the mail from the prosecutor’s office within a week of his arrest. He could attend a seminar run by social workers in exchange for having the incident wiped from his record: no chicken, no egg. He accepted and took off from work on the appointed date. “It was kind of weird,” he said. The attendees looked at murals and talked about art and were given sheets of paper on which to express themselves pictorially. McCullough drew shark teeth around the border, which he said were meant to reflect the menace of the police, and he added a shamrock, “for better luck in the future.” ♦

*Ben McGrath has been a staff writer since 2003. His first book, "Riverman: An American Odyssey," was released in 2022.*

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**Continuing Education Dept.**

# Tusks Up for the Utah Mammoth

The N.H.L.’s newest hockey team unveiled its official name and mascot: an extinct behemoth with fossils at the American Museum of Natural History. Two players made a pilgrimage.

**By Sarah Larson**

June 2, 2025


*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In early May, the N.H.L.’s newest team, a year-old Salt Lake City-based franchise provisionally known as the Utah Hockey Club, unveiled its official name and mascot, after considering such options as Black Diamonds, Blast, Blizzard, Canyons, Caribou, Freeze, Frost, Fury, Glaciers, Hive, Ice, Mountaineers, Outlaws, Powder, Squall, Swarm, Venom, and Yeti. Behold: the Utah Mammoth. Skepticism ensued in some quarters

(“Are they collectively one mammoth? Like imagine if it was Pittsburgh Penguin,” a Tampa Bay Lightning fan, Chef Boyardipshit, posted on X), but excitement abounded elsewhere, including among paleontologists and mammalogists. (Utah is rich with mammoth fossils.) After the announcement, the Mammoth forward Alex Kerfoot, age thirty, and defenseman Sean Durzi, age twenty-six, travelled to New York City. They showed off their new Mammoth gear on the NHL Network, at a Knicks playoff game, and at the American Museum of Natural History, where they communed with the fossils of their new namesake. Durzi and Kerfoot are both dark-haired, affable, and Canadian. En route to the mammoth exhibit, after getting lightly heckled by a museumgoer in a *NASA* hat, they were wowed in the Hall of Saurischian Dinosaurs. “I love the museum!” Durzi said, taking a picture of a T. rex skull. “So cool.”

Kerfoot admired a sixty-four-foot skeleton of an Apatosaurus—what laypeople might call a Brontosaurus. “This thing’s huge, eh?” he said.

Durzi turned around. “This was *walking the earth* at one point,” he said. “Are you *kidding* me?”

“How many humans, do you think, to take down one of those guys?” Kerfoot asked.

“I don’t even want to—I like these guys,” Durzi said. Hypothetically? “Uh, depends. If it was me? Probably just me.”

“If it was me, it would be probably ten thousand,” Kerfoot said.

“*Thirty* thousand,” Durzi said.

At the Paul and Irma Milstein Hall of Advanced Mammals, Durzi and Kerfoot met Ross MacPhee, an A.M.N.H. mammalogist emeritus originally from Edmonton. “You didn’t like the dinosaurs, did you?” MacPhee asked, with a specialist’s disdain for other specialties.

“No, no, of course not,” Durzi said. “We’re ready to see the mammoth.”

*“I can Photoshop the other brides out.”*
*Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen*

“The dinosaurs are smaller than I thought, eh?” Kerfoot said.

The *Mammuthus* skeleton was mighty, too: nearly fourteen feet tall, flamboyantly curved tusks, femurs the size of hockey sticks. Durzi and Kerfoot beheld it. “In hockey, you want to have a little bit of fierceness as your emblem,” Kerfoot said. *Mammuthus* fit the bill: “That is what you want in a mascot.” We might imagine big mammals like the mammoth as “being a little bit of a slower animal, which isn’t great for hockey,” he went on. “But we learned yesterday that they can run up to about twenty-five miles per hour, which is almost as fast as Durz.”

“A little bit quicker than me, I would say,” Durz demurred.

MacPhee had a quibble. “That’s over a very short distance,” he said. But N.H.L. players, it was pointed out, take quick shifts, averaging forty seconds.

Since the Trump Administration’s fifty-first-state hullabaloo began, many Canadians, including Mike Myers and Prime Minister Mark Carney, have adopted a hockey term, “Elbows up”—basically, “Back off, buster”—as a rallying cry. The Utah Mammoth, in an unrelated development, chose “Tusks Up” as its slogan. When would *Mammuthus* have put its tusks up? “In breeding season,” MacPhee said. “Males undergo—these guys wouldn’t know anything about this—there’s hormonal changes. They go nuts, basically. And fighting is part of it.” Quite fitting. He added, “The tusks are

also used for digging for water—anything that a shovel at the front of your face could be good for."

Some hockey teams have incorporated sound effects into their celebratory goal-horn noise—a cannon blast for the Columbus Blue Jackets, a cat's yowl for the Florida Panthers. Whether trumpeting mammoth noises might join them is "above our pay grade," Durzi said. MacPhee added that elephants, surely including these extinct varieties, have a huge repertoire of noises, such as "chirp-like sounds"—also fitting for hockey, in which chirping, a.k.a. insulting one's opponent, is a sport in itself.

Unlike most hockey players, *Mammuthus* was an herbivore. Dentally, MacPhee said, the mammal grew replacement teeth, back to front, throughout its life. Modern elephants can live sixty or seventy years this way, he said: "They never run out of tooth."

"We could use that," Durzi said.

Durzi and Kerfoot had arrived in New York knowing little about mammoths, but that had changed. "Kerf just gave you 'Mammoths for Really, Really Dumb Dummies,' " Durzi chirped. Before they left, he looked up at *Mammuthus* one more time. "It's what we are, and, when we're explaining it to people, we have knowledge about it now," he said. "Now it's kind of a part of us."♦

*Sarah Larson, a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2007.*

| Section menu | Main menu |

**Sound Check Dept.**

# Stephen Malkmus's New, Er, Supergroup

The Pavement front man passed through town with his latest project, the Hard Quartet, and showed off his one-handed backhand.

**By Nick Paumgarten**

June 2, 2025

*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Stephen Malkmus likes tennis. He recently moved to Chicago, with his wife, Jessica Jackson Hutchins, and tries to play at least once a week. Not long ago, he passed through New York while on tour—not with Pavement, his longtime band, or with the Jicks, his other longtime band, but with the

Hard Quartet, his latest project, which is almost always described, with indeterminate irony, as an underground supergroup.

The supergroup convened beneath the bubble at the McCarren Park tennis courts, in Brooklyn, where Malkmus, fifty-nine, was finishing up an hour-long hitting session with Hutchins and a few old friends. His three bandmates, arriving for lunch, not tennis, milled around by a net post amid discarded layers and spare gear. They looked out of place on the court: Matt Sweeney, in a biker jacket and a bucket hat; Jim White, wild-haired, in a tattered suit coat; Emmett Kelly, with slicked-back hair and shades.

Malkmus, stroking one-handed backhands with a studiously exaggerated follow-through (he's a fan of the Swiss player Stan Wawrinka), seemed to be working as hard to tolerate the courtside commotion as to make clean contact. He had on a black T-shirt and coral-colored Adidas track pants, rolled up above the knees. A rusty visitor, subbing in for a few rallies from the opposing baseline, can testify that his ball has bite.

At noon sharp, the next group of players arrived and briskly shooed everyone away. The Quartet made their way to a nearby restaurant. Over the din of "Stayin' Alive," they gave a waiter their orders: yogurt with fruit, veggie burger, greens with grilled shrimp, French dip.

Malkmus, attuned to the rusty visitor, said, "Each band member ordered something indicative of his personality."

"You are what you eat," Kelly said.

"French Dip was my reform-school nickname," Sweeney said.

"You went to an all-boys Catholic school, right?" Malkmus asked. "That's basically reform school."

Right. Seton Hall Prep: Sweeney's father had been a professor of medieval English at Seton Hall University. "John Barrymore went to my high school," Sweeney said.

Malkmus said that the actor who played Schultz in “Hogan’s Heroes” went to his: “Not Klink, the other Nazi.” (This seems unlikely.)

“The Catholic school I went to in L.A. had a lot of people who were eventual celebrities,” Kelly said. “Kirsten Dunst was in my class. She’d been in one movie, ‘Interview with the Vampire,’ so everyone was, like, Dude, ‘Interview with the Vampire’ chick.”

Amid the clatter, they exchanged earthy anecdotes. Michelle Phillips, Peter Green, Baby Dee. Music, art, dissipation. White, the drummer, maintained a mischievous Keith Moon grin but said little. The supergroup hang seemed legit.

“Yeah, we’re hanging out some,” Kelly said. “But, you know, we’re adult people.”

Adult people go city to city in a bus but often scatter between gigs. “Bus saves money, because no hotels,” Sweeney said. “But most of us are non-bus types, I would say.”

“I don’t like it,” Kelly said.

“I’m sleeping pretty good on this bus,” Malkmus said.

“It’s Lucinda Williams’s bus,” Sweeney said. “The driver and the vibe is cool.” He noted that three of them had places of their own in New York: “The fact that Jim bought a *building* playing the kind of music that he plays, that’s crazy. Steve having a place playing the music that he plays. Me and my girlfriend getting to buy an apartment, despite being weirdos: it’s pretty fucking sick.”

The night before, Kelly, who has a cassette micro-label called HAHA, had posted a farewell-to-social-media rant on Instagram: “This thing sucks. Instagram sucks. Transacting sucks. Identity sucks. Posturing sucks. Everyone’s lying. Everything seems like it sucks! But LO! It DOESN’T!”

Yet here he was, promoting a gig (that night, at a club called Warsaw) in support of an album from last fall.

“It’s more the thing of the band being pressured to market ourselves on social media,” Sweeney said. “I used to be a publicist, and I swim in that toilet. We made the record on our own. My girlfriend and I paid for it. And then the label’s, like, ‘So, can you post childhood pictures of yourself?’ ”

“My general impression is that no one really knows how to sell anything,” Kelly said. “On Sunday, Steve’s daughter was talking about how you post a thing of a guy in the band, like, chopping a cucumber, and everyone’s, like, Oh, my God. *Like*, *like*, *like*, *like*. But then you have some footage of this band performing a piece of music they made and everyone’s, *Meh*, *whatever*.”

Sweeney: “The label says, ‘Well, people have to know that this is a real band.’ Well, fuck, can’t you hear it?”

Malkmus: “They don’t want it to be, like, dads in a room, or a couple of guys fucking around in the studio.”

“You have to cut through the noise,” Kelly said. “So, fine, supergroup.” ♦

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

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**The Pictures**

# Is the “Mission: Impossible” Series Tom Cruise’s “Blank Check”?

The movie podcast, which examines the crazy passion projects that directors pursue after their first big hit (“Aloha” or “Speed Racer,” anyone?) celebrates its tenth birthday with a trip to a “Mission: Impossible” exhibition.

**By Luis A. Gómez**

June 2, 2025

*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Griffin Newman, a host of the podcast “Blank Check,” stood in the Museum of the Moving Image, in Astoria. Above his head hung a black motorbike, made for Tom Cruise’s climactic cliff-jumping scene in the 2023

movie “Mission: Impossible—Dead Reckoning.” “I had several childhood birthday parties here,” Newman said fondly. The thirty-six-year-old actor and comedian was visiting a “Mission: Impossible” exhibition, together with his co-host, the *Atlantic* film critic David Sims, and a few colleagues. Their podcast, now in its tenth year, discusses directors who had a big success early in their careers and were then given a “blank check” to make a passion project.

“When we started, we were focussing on directors who started out with beloved hits and then made reviled flops,” Newman said. Examples: M. Night Shyamalan’s “The Sixth Sense” gave him the clout to make “Lady in the Water” (Michael Medved: “A work of nearly unparalleled arrogance and vapidity”); the Wachowskis’ “Matrix” films begat “Speed Racer” (*Première*: “Heretofore undreamed of levels of narrative incoherence”); and Cameron Crowe’s “Jerry Maguire” led to “Aloha”(*Variety*: “Unbalanced, unwieldy, and at times nearly unintelligible”).

Few of Cruise’s movies qualify as blank-check projects, apart from “Mission: Impossible”—he’s “more franchise-minded,” Newman said—but he looms large for the podcasters. Newman, wearing a blue Skywalker Ranch Fire Brigade sweatshirt, wandered over to some 3-D-printed mannequins dressed in Cruise’s actual costumes.

“These clothes look like they would fit me, right?” Newman said. As a teen-ager in the Village, he’d let his hair grow and worn sunglasses indoors, to match Cruise’s “Mission: Impossible 2” look. “I didn’t understand that my hair was curly,” he said. “So I kept being, like, ‘If it keeps growing, eventually I’ll get the cool, windswept look.’ And it just turned into a brunet Carrot Top thing.”

“Blank Check” began as part of the Upright Citizens Brigade’s nascent podcast network, recording in a tiny studio with the Kaufmanesque (Andy, not Charlie) premise of critiquing “The Phantom Menace” as if the original “Star Wars” films didn’t exist. Ben Hosley, the podcast’s executive producer, said, “At the time, I lived in a windowless closet, then I would go to work in a windowless closet.”

The team eventually ditched the “Star Wars” premise for the current format and hired a staff of nine, including a dedicated researcher. Their unabashed movie nerddom is part and parcel of the show’s success—Sims and Newman first connected with their other producer, Marie Bardi-Salinas, when they competed against her in a movie-trivia league at Videology, a now defunct bar and video store in Williamsburg. Newman said, “So many of our friends, who also are our most popular, most recurring guests, we met there.” He listed the directors Alex Ross Perry and Leslye Headland, and the *IndieWire* film critic David Ehrlich, who have appeared on “Blank Check” a combined twenty-four times. The director Chris Weitz, who has been on six times, said, “It’s honestly better than getting invited to the *Vanity Fair* parties.” Kogonada is a fan. Stephen Colbert was introduced to the podcast by his daughter, during a drive from Charleston to New York; he now binge-listens on weekends. (“My idea of cleansing my brain is to put on a good six to eight hours of podcasts while I reorganize my sock drawer,” he’s said.)

To mark the show’s tenth anniversary, Newman and Sims are taping a special episode at Town Hall, on June 6th. “We’re doing a really serious film,” Hosley said. “We’re covering ‘King Ralph,’ ” directed by David S. Ward. (*Vice:* “*King Ralph* is its own Stanford Prison Experiment.”)

Conversation turned to more recent blank-check movies. “Ryan Coogler’s ‘Sinners’ is one,” Sims, who was dressed all in black, said. After the success of “Black Panther: Wakanda Forever,” Coogler “gets to go to the studio and be, like, ‘Hey! I have an original thing.’ ”

Newman said, “ ‘Sinners’ is the only old-school big-budget blank-check project off of a Marvel movie. Most of them have been smaller and more personal, like ‘Jojo Rabbit’ ”—Taika Waititi’s follow-up to “Thor: Ragnarok”—“or ‘Hedda’ ”—which Nia DaCosta made after “Candyman” and “The Marvels.”

“Oscar-y projects,” Sims added.

In the old days, Newman said, the deal with the studios was “if you do one for them, you will get one for you.” Referring to Marvel, he continued,

“Now if the movies succeed they go, ‘Well, that wasn’t really because of you. That was because of the I.P.’ ”

A curator appeared. Hosley gestured toward a stained pair of pants on one of the Cruise mannequins. “Is this authentic dirt?” he asked. It was. ♦

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# Reporting & Essays

- **How a Hazelnut Spread Became a Sticking Point in Franco-Algerian Relations**
  By Lauren Collins | The wildly popular Nutella competitor El Mordjene has been banned by the European Union, a move some see as politically motivated.
- **Amelia Earhart’s Reckless Final Flights**
  By Laurie Gwen Shapiro | The aviator’s publicity-mad husband, George Palmer Putnam, kept pushing her to risk her life for the sake of fame.
- **Curtis Yarvin’s Plot Against America**
  By Ava Kofman | The reactionary blogger’s call for a monarch to rule the country once seemed like a joke. Now the right is ready to bend the knee.
- **Green-Wood Cemetery’s Living Dead**
  By Paige Williams | How the “forever business” is changing at New York City’s biggest graveyard.

**Letter from France**

# How a Hazelnut Spread Became a Sticking Point in Franco-Algerian Relations

The wildly popular Nutella competitor El Mordjene has been banned by the European Union, a move some see as politically motivated.

**By Lauren Collins**

June 2, 2025

*Some speculate that a European Union ban on the product was designed to protect Nutella.Photo illustration by Jack Smyth; Source photograph by Miguel Medina / Getty*

Every summer in France, an exodus takes place. It invariably begins in early July, when public school lets out, kicking off *les grandes vacances*. This year, the last day of school is July 4th. On July 5th, the country's airports, highways, and ferry terminals will swell with outbound travellers. Among them will be many of France's 7.3 million immigrants, who constitute some ten per cent of the population, and the descendants of immigrants, who account for many millions more. Nearly a third of children born in France in 2023 had at least one parent born abroad.

The exodus is a charged moment, an annual transmigration of people, money, goods, gifts, expectations, and yearnings nurtured through the long European winter. The ritual is colloquially known as *le retour au bled*, "the return to the homeland" or "the return to the village," a combination of the French word for "return" and the Arabic word for "country." *Le retour au bled:* Two parts of you stretching over a preposition and a sea. Going home with yawning kids, a fresh haircut, and a suitcase full of cheese and chocolate.

Weeks pass, and the diasporas return. What's in the suitcases now? Every community has its informal imports, lovingly swaddled in socks and ziplocks, and made to last until the next trip to the motherland. From Cameroon, there's shea butter and Moringa powder. From Turkey, ketchup, sweeter and smoother than the French version. People with roots in the United States load up on gel caps, extra-strength deodorant, and tooth-whitening strips. (Peanut butter, an emulsion, is considered a liquid by the Transportation Security Administration—as I learned when, seven months pregnant, I was forced to surrender a much longed for jar of Jif.) Travellers coming back from Algeria have long stuffed their bags with dates, olive oil, Bimo biscuits, and grenadine soda. Last summer, they made space for another item: a hazelnut spread called El Mordjene.

El Mordjene is produced by Cebon, a baking-products company based in Tipaza, near Algiers. It comes in two main varieties: cocoa hazelnut, colloquially known as "brown," and hazelnut cream, colloquially known as "white." (There is also *rocher*, a crunchy version of each color.) The spread débuted in 2021 on the Algerian market, where it retails for roughly five euros a jar. El Mordjene is not widely sold in France, but it has long been

procurable in small quantities at slightly elevated prices, mostly in independent shops offering products from North Africa. The white kind is the most popular, for its silky texture and intensely sweet flavor, which is said to resemble the filling of a Kinder Bueno candy bar.

Last summer, as traffic between France and Algeria underwent its annual spike, influencers, many of them with Algerian connections, started touting the spread. “This thing, it’s sick!” one TikToker raved; another swore that it was “better than Nutella!” Yet another simply plunged an entire baguette into a jar and shoved it, dripping, into his gob. Soon, the presenters of the morning show on BFMTV—one of France’s most watched news channels—were conducting a live tasting, licking El Mordjene straight off the spoon. On playgrounds, a new chant rang out: “Who wants El Mordjene? Woop woop!”

A shopkeeper in Cholet, a midsize town, reported that he had sold a thousand jars of El Mordjene in five hours. In most cities, it became almost impossible to find. The grocery giant Carrefour announced its intention to stock El Mordjene, and Cebon vowed to keep its factories running twenty-four hours a day. Prices soared to ten euros, as word circulated of “Soviet-style rations.” Now people were posting videos of “El Mordjene hunts,” crisscrossing cities for hours in search of a jar. The comedian Youness Hanifi joked, “Is it a hazelnut spread, or is it coke?”

One rainy afternoon in Paris, I met with Johan Papz, a popular content creator, in the hope of understanding the craze. He had chosen a fancy café in the Eighth Arrondissement, and he arrived accompanied by his sister, Lisa. Last August, the siblings helped kick off the obsession with El Mordjene by sampling the brand’s spreads in a TikTok “crash test.” In the video, they sit side by side, their hoard arrayed on a table in front of them. “*Le jour de gloire est arrivé*,” Johan declares, quoting from the opening lines of the French national anthem, while Lisa begins to ululate.

As we waited for tea and crêpes, I asked Johan how he’d first heard about “beige gold,” as one commentator has dubbed El Mordjene. “What I saw was Algerian guys and girls posting about it,” he recalled. “And as an Algerian myself—actually, I was born and raised in France, but my parents are Algerian—I wanted to try it, because why not?” Johan had a track

record of turning food novelties into social-media sensations. One of his best-known videos, about a Parisian bakery's crookie—a croissant stuffed with cookie dough—has been viewed more than three million times. For him, El Mordjene's appeal was as much outside the jar as inside it. "It's the first time that an Algerian product went viral in France," he said. "And we have such a complex history, right?"

The crêpes arrived. The Papzes, it turned out, had brought a surprise. Lisa reached into an enormous Dior tote and felt around. Eventually, her hand emerged, gripping an ovoid glass jar with a pale-yellow label. It was illustrated with a cross-section of a gooey candy bar; a dollop of beige cream, spiralling up into a wavelike crest; and a few free-floating hazelnuts and leaves. In the center was a red-lipped woman wrapped in a white haik. The words "El Mordjene" hovered over her chest in Arabic and French, accompanied by "toasted hazelnut cream."

"Lisa's got the gold!" Johan said, readying a knife to dip.

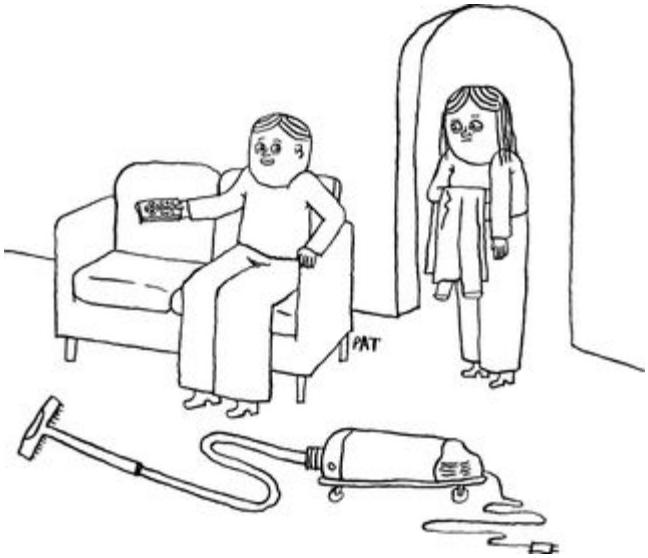
In early September, customs authorities at the port of Marseille and at Charles de Gaulle Airport, outside Paris, refused to allow two separate shipments of El Mordjene to enter French territory. Both lots—about a dozen pallets total, of eight hundred and forty jars each—belonged to independent importers, who had never before run into trouble. The rationale for the goods' rejection wasn't clear. On one form, customs officials wrote that the spread appeared "to infringe the trademark, designs, and model of the Ferrero Group," the makers of Nutella, who sell tens of millions of jars in France each year.

For several days, the pallets remained in limbo. Then a decision came down from the French Ministry of Agriculture, which insures food safety, formalizing the ban. Apparently, trademark infringement wasn't the issue; the problem was powdered milk and whey—ingredients in El Mordjene, alongside sugar, hazelnuts, vegetable fat, and emulsifiers. E.U. law limits the importation of products that contain even a small amount of dairy; Algeria does not appear on a list of approved countries. The offending jars of El Mordjene would therefore have to be repatriated or sent elsewhere. A ministry spokesman vowed that it would open an investigation "to determine the mechanisms of circumvention that until now have allowed

this product to be placed on the market." (When I inquired about the promised investigation, ministry officials were vague, responding only that it had been "carried out in conjunction with the Customs services" and had "revealed that erroneous customs declarations of these goods led to their being placed on the market.")

If El Mordjene was in short supply before, now it became mythically scarce. Prices climbed to twenty, even thirty euros a jar. I scared one up on Vinted, a Lithuanian resale site, transferring forty euros to an Algerian woman living in France, who had just been home for her grandfather's funeral. (She explained, "Since I bake a lot, I stocked up ☺.") Marmiton, the French cooking site, published a D.I.Y. recipe for suffering fans. "Don't panic," the piece read. Meanwhile, in Marseille, police were investigating an El Mordjene ambush. When a shopkeeper sent a young employee to pick up a pallet for sale on the internet, the employee was robbed at gunpoint of six thousand dollars.

Executives at Cebon found the French authorities' reasoning suspicious. "Clearly, they were looking for a loophole," Amine Ouzlifi, a company spokesman, told me. "They considered a bunch of options and finally settled on dairy products as the most viable." The timing also seemed fishy. El Mordjene, Ouzlifi pointed out, had been available in France for years, but "overnight, as soon as there was a buzz, they blocked it," trotting out legislation that previously had not been enforced.



*"You're home! I'll put the vacuum away now that you've seen I used it."*

*Cartoon by Patrick McKelvie*

On social media, pride curdled into exasperation: “You’re jealous because this brand is 100% Algerian, the production is 100% Algerian, and seeing Algeria succeed really pisses you off,” one user said. Memes circulated, likening El Mordjene to Imane Khelif, the Algerian boxer who was the subject of so much hateful speculation about her gender during the 2024 Paris Olympics that she eventually filed a cyber-harassment lawsuit. The implication was that El Mordjene would ultimately knock out Nutella, just as Khelif had dominated her Italian opponent and gone on to win the gold medal. Another meme hinted at the colonial legacy of immigration headaches and administrative asymmetries between the countries. It depicted El Mordjene as a bride, marrying Nutella to get its papers. “The only solution for getting El Mordjene back in France,” the caption read. “Congratulations, newlyweds!”

In Algeria, the reaction was indignant. Mustapha Zebdi, of the Algerian Organization for the Protection of Consumers and Their Environment (*APOCE*), denounced “an abusive decision,” arguing that it established a precedent for the E.U. to bar competitive products from Algeria under dubious pretexts. “El Mordjene started to pose a problem the second it became a star,” Habib Merouane Hadj Bekkouche, an *APOCE* spokesman, told me. Other commentators decried “disguised protectionism” and the “flagrant injustice” of the prohibition. The website *Maghreb Émergent* observed, “The El Mordjene affair perfectly illustrates the contradictions of a globalized economy where borders are disappearing for capital but are rising up against innovative products from emerging countries.”

Obviously, there was far more at stake than the question of which hazelnut spread French consumers would apply to their afternoon tartines. “This spread affirms a freedom—to be us, here,” Farah Keram, the author of “Cuisines d’Afrique du Nord” (“North African Cuisines”), told me. “And it is precisely for this reason that the announcement to pull the product from the market was so violent for many. This goes beyond a commercial or legal framework. It touches on belonging, on the intimate, on the right to exist in public space as we are, with our tastes, our origins, our attachments.”

Still, Cebon executives tried to stay calm. “Why open the gates of Hell?” Ouzlifi said, when I asked whether Cebon planned to contest the ban directly. He explained that the company was founded in 1997 by two brothers, Youcef and Korichi Foura. Their first creation, a sugar syrup called Assila, caught on with bakers. Eventually, they began manufacturing *smen*, a fermented butter, and became interested in the applications of vegetable fats, resolving to develop a dessert spread.

The project coincided with a push by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune to lessen the country’s dependence on extractive industries and to encourage entrepreneurs to develop goods for export. Demand for *smen* was limited largely to the Maghreb, but, the Fouras figured, there was hardly a market on earth that wouldn’t welcome sugary treats in unctuous, affordable form. “They wanted to make something that could go anywhere in the world,” Ouzlifi recalled.

Cebon, which now employs eight hundred people, has three factories. The one that manufactures El Mordjene is only a few miles from the Mediterranean. The sea inspired the Fouras to give the product its name, which means “red coral” in Arabic. The woman on the label was intended to conjure both national pride and domestic aptitude. “In Algerian tradition, the woman wears white garments,” Ouzlifi told me. “The El Mordjene woman, we don’t know if she’s veiled or if she’s wearing something for cooking.”

Not long after the Ministry of Agriculture blocked El Mordjene, a twist emerged: the objectionable powdered milk was, in fact, French. As documents that Cebon furnished attested, the company had recently imported a hundred tons of powdered milk from a dairy firm in Brittany. The disclosure seemed to present an easy resolution to the dispute—if France sent the milk to Algeria, surely Algeria could send the milk back to France—but, bizarrely, it didn’t have much of an impact. The ban stood. Ouzlifi, hinting that he believed that Ferrero had influenced what was an essentially political decision, told me, “European corporations will always protect themselves.” (A spokesperson for Ferrero would only say that “the European Union authorizes the marketing of consumer products in France or elsewhere on the continent.”)

Was a Nutella conspiracy behind the strangest quarrel in Franco-Algerian memory? In January, I flew to Rome to learn more about the storied brand. I knew from reading “Nutella World,” an adulatory book by Gigi Padovani, that “Napoleon is the ‘real’ father of Nutella,” because he provoked an 1806 blockade that caused a severe cane-sugar shortage in Europe, leading to the development of beet sugar, which would later be used in the spread. I knew that World Nutella Day is observed every February 5th. I knew that in 2014 Italy’s postal service issued a Nutella stamp. I knew that there are said to be fifty-two hazelnuts in every jar, that a two-year supply could supposedly fill the Colosseum, that the Ferreros are the richest family in Italy, that someone wrote an opera buffa called “Nutellam Cantata,” and that the German cycling star Jan Ullrich would purportedly microwave jars of Nutella and drink the resulting liquid through a straw like a milkshake. A friend’s pediatrician claims that Nutella, not yogurt or applesauce, is the best delivery mechanism for unpalatable meds. Lady Gaga once tweeted, “Ok. Firstly, yes I love Nutella (with Banana+Wonderbread) who doesn’t?”

*MAXXI*, Italy’s national museum of twenty-first-century art, was hosting an exhibition about Nutella at its Rome headquarters. A little confusingly, it was called “joyn!”—a play on “joy” and the letter “n,” as well as an invitation to “join” in—and it was presented with Ferrero’s support in celebration of Nutella’s sixtieth birthday. The brochure featured a quote from the late Italian journalist Enzo Biagi: “I think the most effective ambassadors of our country were the restaurateurs who introduced people to pasta, olive oil, Parmesan. Then there are three names, all beginning with F, that are known everywhere: Fellini, Ferrari, and Ferrero.”

Chiara Bertini, the exhibit’s curator, met me at the entrance in a striped velvet jacket and jeans. A specialist in Flemish painting and Foucault—she has a dual master’s in museum studies and philosophy—Bertini admitted that Nutella had been a “challenging” brief. “I’m more accustomed to dealing with a piece of art,” she explained. Yet she appreciated the opportunity to work on a subject of mass interest. “Nutella is Nutella,” she said.

We stepped onto a red carpet that ran the length of the gallery, curving as though it had been spread with a butter knife. A time line marked important

moments in the brand's history, beginning with the foundation of Pietro Ferrero's pastry shop, in a small town called Dogliani, in 1923. Pietro fell in love with a woman named Piera. They got married, had a son, and moved to Alba, in Piedmont. Then Pietro briefly set off for Eritrea—at the time Italian East Africa—where he sold panettone to colonial troops. Back in Alba after the Second World War, the Ferreros, facing chocolate shortages, blended cocoa powder with locally available hazelnuts to create a product called *Giandujot*, after a type of traditional Piedmontese mask. *Giandujot* came in foil-wrapped bars that could be sliced into smaller portions for the impoverished Italian populace. This "sweet for the humble" was sold by weight, at less than a fifth of the price of chocolate. A few years later, Ferrero launched a spreadable version of *Giandujot* called Supercrema. "The true precursor to Nutella," as the exhibit noted, it was an immediate hit. Padovani writes that by the end of the fifties Ferrero was transporting so much Supercrema that its automotive fleet was second only to that of the Italian military.

The name Nutella was partially the result of legislative accident. In 1964, the Italian Parliament passed a law regulating the use of intensifiers like "super" in advertising, forcing the Ferreros to rebrand Supercrema. The new name had to sound a little European but also had to work around the globe. It had to be easy to pronounce and easy to remember. Eager to emphasize the product's hazelnut base, Ferrero considered Nutsy, Nutosa, Nutina, and Nussly. A portmanteau of "nut" and "*ella*" ("she" in Italian), Nutella connoted health, pleasure, and a cozy femininity, its "l"s protruding from the mix of vowels like a pair of knives stuck into a jar.

The French are the world's largest consumers of Nutella, and more of it is produced in Ferrero's factories near Rouen than anywhere else. In 2018, brawls broke out at French supermarkets that were offering the spread at a discount of seventy per cent. One French couple was so enamored of the brand that they attempted to christen their newborn daughter Nutella. (Courts rejected the name on the ground that it would invite "mockery and disobliging remarks," and suggested that the child be called Ella instead.) Yet, in recent years, a panoply of competitors have dipped into Ferrero's market share with products that are organic, palm-oil-free, vegan, fair trade, less sugary, or just more appealingly packaged than Nutella.

“Nutella always chooses to stay the same,” Bertini said, as we examined the show. “The taste is the same. The jar is the same. The values are the same—it always touches you in an emotional way.” The Ferrero family, she explained, was a symbol of the Italian family, transmitting Nutella across the generations, alongside truths as seemingly consistent and comforting as a schmear of hazelnut purée. “Life was more natural, your mother was always thinking of you,” one slogan read. “That’s why you grew up properly and happy. And do you remember? Your mother gave you Nutella.” Another “historic tagline” posed a thought experiment: “What kind of world would it be without Nutella?”

Nutella, in other words, was Mamma, the motherland, the unchanging womb of everything warm and good. The El Mordjene affair went much deeper than a wacky food fight or an abstruse trade dispute. It wasn’t really about hazelnut spreads. It was about nostalgia, memory, injustice, nationalism, globalization, decolonization, protectionism, racism, identity, immigration, invasion—the same things that all arguments are about nowadays, transposed to the realm of spreadable snacks. The corollary to the question “What kind of world would it be without Nutella?” is “What kind of world would it be *with* El Mordjene?”

I had hoped to visit El Mordjene’s headquarters, in Tipaza. At the beginning of December, I applied for a press visa at the Algerian Embassy in Paris. The official who interviewed me was optimistic: the story I was proposing sounded fine, and I should have the necessary authorizations in a few weeks. (Press freedom in Algeria is highly limited; the country ranks a hundred and twenty-sixth out of a hundred and eighty in a Reporters Without Borders index.) Weeks went by, then months. I still have not heard from the Algerian Embassy. I am a French citizen, and, in the period since I dropped off my dossier, the relationship between Algeria and France has radically deteriorated, resulting in what many commentators consider the most profound crisis between the two countries since Algeria gained independence, in 1962.

“Relations between Algeria and France can be good or bad, but in no case can they be banal,” the former Algerian President Houari Boumédiène once observed. His formulation captures the intimate, intense, and volatile

dynamic that has existed between the countries since at least the *coup d'éventail* affair of 1827, when the dey of Algiers struck the French consul with a flyswatter over a dispute about an outstanding loan, eventually giving the French a pretext to invade. Colonization lasted for more than a century, bringing with it mass murder, famine, disease, displacement, and the settlement of more than a million Europeans on Algerian soil. In 1945, the Sétif and Guelma massacres—in which French police fired on parading townspeople, some protesting colonial rule—initiated a traumatizing, decades-long conflict from which neither country has fully recovered.

Algeria and France continue to be closely and often uncomfortably intertwined. Algeria's economy depends on French investment, French national security depends on the coöperation of Algerian authorities, and, without dialogue, it is unlikely that either country will be able to move forward on important matters of historical justice. The French President, Emmanuel Macron, has described the Franco-Algerian relationship as "a love story that has its share of tragedy," but he might more aptly have spoken of a tragic story that has its share of love.

In his early years on the political scene, Macron devoted considerable energy to the "reconciliation of memories" with Algeria, calling colonization "a crime against humanity," acknowledging torture by the French Army, and commissioning what he hoped would be a game-changing report from the historian Benjamin Stora. According to news stories, Macron was stung by the report's lukewarm reception in Algeria. Meeting with members of Algerian memorial groups at the Élysée Palace in 2021, he denounced the Tebboune regime as a "politico-military system" that sustained itself on "a hatred of France." The Algerian Ambassador soon flounced out of Paris; three months later, he was back again, attending the inauguration of a monument to a hero of the Algerian resistance and declaring that "the fight for friendship between Algeria and France goes on."

The proximate cause of the latest dispute was not a flyswatter or a report but a letter, written by Macron and delivered to the King of Morocco in late July of last year. In it, the French President announced that he was supporting a Moroccan plan for the Western Sahara region, which has been

the subject of a long-standing conflict with an Algerian-backed independence group. Macron's decision made a certain geopolitical sense, since France is trying to bolster its position in the Sahel, but it antagonized Algeria. On July 30th, Algeria withdrew its Ambassador, and its Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned that France had not "fully grasped the potential repercussions" of its decision.

The scuffles over El Mordjene, in September, were effectively a back-to-school prelude to serious trouble later in the fall. During a television interview in October, Tebboune accused France of "genocide" and raised the literally radioactive issue of the fallout from seventeen nuclear tests that the French government had performed in the Algerian desert between 1960 and 1966. He declared that he was calling off a long-planned state visit to Paris, implying that he was unwilling to accept humiliation—a perennial byword in Franco-Algerian relations.

At the same time, France was experiencing extreme instability in its domestic politics. Last summer, Macron dissolved the National Assembly, leaving the country without a Prime Minister for months. The current government relies on the tacit blessing of Marine Le Pen's far-right party, which effectively has veto power in the parliament.

Algeria occupies a special place in the imagination of Le Pen and the French far right. Marine's late father and the party's founder, Jean-Marie Le Pen, served as a paratrooper in the Algerian war and later admitted to torture. The party is often associated with the community of *pieds-noirs*, European settlers who, as French rule crumbled, left Algeria, where many of them had lived for generations. They have bitterly mourned their losses —of land, of status, of sun-dappled days in a remembered paradise—ever since. "Colonization brought a lot to Algeria," Marine Le Pen has said, claiming that "even Algerians of good faith admit it." While glorifying the colonial era, she has lobbied to make it harder for Algerians to immigrate to France. After assuming the kingmaking seat in the Assembly, she wasted no time in calling for a crackdown on "the migratory submersion" that she claims is ruining the country.

If Algeria is a third rail of French politics, crackling with danger, it can also be a sorcerer's stone, lighting up mediocre politicians with borrowed

potency. In January, Bruno Retailleau, the hard-line Minister of the Interior, made a show of deporting an influencer known as Doualemn—an Algerian who had been calling, on TikTok, for violence against an opponent of the Tebboune administration. Doualemn was loaded onto a flight from Paris to Algeria, whose government sent him right back. “Algeria is seeking to humiliate France,” Retailleau thundered.

Diplomatic pandemonium broke loose: threats, more deportations, an unspoken but very real mutual cutback on visas. On February 22nd, an Algerian citizen attacked shoppers at a market in the French city of Mulhouse with a knife, killing one person and wounding six others. The attacker, who was mentally ill, had served time for “promoting terrorism” and was in France without a visa. French authorities said that they had tried to expel him ten times but that Algeria had refused to take him back. What began as a cyclical squabble between frenemy nations escalated into something different—a “tectonic crisis,” per *Le Monde;* “a quarrel of unprecedented gravity,” according to the A.F.P., the French news agency.

The imbroglio over El Mordjene had to be understood in this context of vexed interdependence. You could almost trace the Franco-Algerian relationship through food, among the most primordial forms of exchange: the seized lands; the stripped fields; the introduction of non-native wheat, transforming Algeria into “the breadbasket of France” and degrading the soil; the hundreds of thousands of tons of oranges, clementines, lemons, and grapefruits produced for the delectation of consumers from the metropole; the Algerian wine-producing regions that never appeared on French pedagogical maps; the spoiled tomatoes and rotten eggs that Europeans in Algiers lobbed at the politician Guy Mollet in 1956, fearing that his new Socialist government in Paris would abandon French Algeria; the relocation of Orangina from Boufarik to Marseille; the weapons smuggled to independence fighters in baskets of animal feed; the couscous dishes that *pieds-noirs* said they could still taste from their childhoods; the gruel that *harkis*, Algerians who fought with the French Army during the war, had to survive on after the French government repaid their service by interning them in camps.

In “Culinary Connections and Colonial Memories in France and Algeria,” Kolleen M. Guy examines the “moral component” of food, arguing that it can be used to create a “gastronomic ‘us’ and ‘them’ that has long-term implications that play out in contemporary French politics.” She writes that, after phylloxera devastated French vineyards in the mid-nineteenth century, Algerian wines began to compete with those made in the South of France, and Algerian winemakers faced accusations that they were blending their wines and fraudulently producing Bordeaux. The allegations reminded me that the El Mordjene affair had ample historical precedent. But, if food can be a means of repelling the foreigner, it can also be a way for the foreigner to fight back. Some observers say that Algeria has enacted a shadow ban on French wheat—as of January, a single shipment had entered the country in the past year, compared with the usual millions of tons.

Amid the geopolitical drama, El Mordjene was missing out on what clearly could have been a robust business in France. “The dreadful thing is that there are copycat products everywhere,” Ouzlifi told me. A few weeks after the El Mordjene ban, a company based in Normandy that manufactures a similar spread, called Crema Bueno, saw demand skyrocket. “Unfortunately, the European Union’s ban has put us in the spotlight,” the company’s co-manager joked in the press. Another new product, Nella Délice, had an Algerian flag on the label but was produced in Turkey. (“We made a strategic choice,” the company’s website confesses.)

*“Honey, hiding from the world is absolutely an option—but we do it by watching TV, not by crouching under the bed.”*
*Cartoon by Kendra Allenby*

On social media, a rumor began circulating that El Mordjene had been banned in France because its logo featured a woman wearing a veil. Right-wing commentators, meanwhile, presented El Mordjene as a sort of edible Trojan horse, meant to smuggle foreign values into France. The hype on TikTok, they claimed, was actually a concerted campaign of "Algerian/Muslim proselytism," while the haik-clad woman on the jar recalled members of the Algerian National Liberation Front, "responsible for the deaths of innumerable French." The far-right site *Boulevard Voltaire* vowed, "Tonight at our place, it'll be andouille sausages and Nutella crêpes!"

Ouzlifi shrugged off the haters, saying that, for every sale that the company had lost in France, it gained another from "Algerian solidarity" after Europe's ban. "If there's French chauvinism, there's Algerian chauvinism, too," Hadj Bekkouche, the *APOCE* spokesman, told me. He was right that El Mordjene had become a political cause. Just before we spoke, President Tebboune appeared at a trade fair for Algerian-made products, lingering at the Cebon booth. "It's Algeria that wins, Algeria that moves forward," he said, cradling a jar of El Mordjene.

Since I couldn't go to Tipaza, I went to Marseille—the most Algerian of French cities, where El Mordjene was rumored to still be available, if you knew where to look. Shortly after arriving, I met Clara Martot Bacry, a reporter at *Marsactu*, a local-news site, for a pizza lunch. Bacry covers criminal justice—police violence, drug trafficking. She had been drawn into the El Mordjene saga by chance, when she passed a discount store on Marseille's main drag and spied not a few stray specimens but a mother lode—hundreds of jars, neatly stacked on shelves.

Bacry had heard about El Mordjene, so she bought several jars, paying nine euros apiece. Later, she and a friend sampled her purchase at her apartment, spreading it on a baguette. "It was delicious," she recalled. Yet something tasted a little off. "My friend had had El Mordjene before, and he noticed a strange aftertaste," she said. They picked up the container and examined the label. Everything seemed legit. As they scrutinized the fine print, however, an anomaly jumped out: someone had cut a tiny rectangle into the bottom right-hand corner of the label, leaving an empty sliver under the word

“*PRODUCTED*”—where, presumably, the country of origin’s name ought to have been.

Bacry returned to the store to check out the rest of the stock. All the jars had been doctored in the same way except for one, whose label indicated that it had been made in Turkey. Furthermore, Bacry noticed, one of the ingredients was spelled wrong, and, when you scanned the QR code, nothing happened. By now, she figured that she was looking at a batch of frauds. She approached the store manger with her suspicions. “Impossible!” he replied. “It just arrived from Oran last week.” He wouldn’t say more.

Counterfeit products, Bacry knew, often make their way through Marseille, France’s largest port and a gateway to the Mediterranean. Authorities there had recently seized a container of bogus car parts, forty-five thousand fake postage stamps, and thirteen tons of adulterated “erectile honey.” According to the oversight agency Foodwatch, “the phenomenon [of food fraud] is massive” in France—fifty-nine per cent of pepper, for example, “is not what it claims to be.”

Turkey is second only to China in the fabrication of counterfeit goods bound for Europe. It also produces some seventy-five per cent of the world’s hazelnut crop and, unlike Algeria, appears on the list of countries that can export dairy products to France. The fake El Mordjene, Bacry wrote in a subsequent article, originated from a single shipping container and “seems to have all the ingredients for success: on the one hand, Turkish logistics and market expertise in hazelnut spreads, and, on the other, legal import authorization.” (Elsewhere in Europe, e-cigarette dealers were hawking cartridges of an unauthorized hazelnut-flavored product they were calling El Mordjvape.) Later, I told Johan Papz, the influencer, about the fakes. “That’s what happens to all great things!” he replied. “It’s not a Birkin, but, you know.”

Bacry reported her discovery to the Ministry of Agriculture, but officials refused to comment. Customs authorities merely said that “we could talk about counterfeiting if the El Mordjene brand were a brand registered in France.” El Mordjene had fallen into a bureaucratic black hole. The authorities seemed to be saying that they would handle the problem of

counterfeits, and they'd handle the problem of illegal products, but, when it came to counterfeit versions of illegal products, you were on your own.

I wanted to taste the real thing. I had the jar I'd ordered from Vinted at home, but when I'd opened it the seal had come off without popping, drifting into the spread like an autumn leaf, so I'd hesitated to partake. (Watching tasting videos on TikTok, I later learned that the seals on all El Mordjene jars behave like this.) Bacry suggested that I start in Noailles, a bustling neighborhood with a food market and North African shops selling spices, straw baskets, and bundles of mint. Ouzlifi had told me that, even though large loads of El Mordjene were no longer making their way into France, individual travellers continued to haul small quantities back in cabas, colorful reusable tote bags. Eventually, some of them showed up for sale.

I walked into a discount store, scanning the shelves. No sign of El Mordjene. I inquired at the register. "*Et voilà*," the cashier said, reaching down to grab a jar from what appeared to be an entire pallet partially hidden from view. The store was asking €16.99 a jar. I paid and, with the same adrenalized anticipation that accompanies securing a sold-out concert ticket, proceeded to a convenience store nearby. A friendly employee in a brown vest led me past paper towels and energy drinks to the back of the shop. Stationed there was a shopping cart covered with a dark-green velour rug. The employee lifted the rug to reveal dozens of jars of El Mordjene. "We have to hide it," he said. "The police came and said we couldn't sell it anymore." He explained that the shop had built up its stock bit by bit: "People come by and say, 'I have five jars, do you want it?' " Across the street, a chatty older man behind a cart of dried fruits offered to sell me a jar for €12.90. I asked whether he'd tried El Mordjene. "I have diabetes," he said. "I prefer to eat dates."

Later, I unscrewed the top from one of the jars I'd bought and watched the gold foil wither into the stickiness below. The lustrousness of the stuff amazed me. Compared with Nutella, it had a texture that was closer to liquid, almost silky—a definite T.S.A. throwaway. I dipped a spoon in and twirled, scooping up drizzly strands as though spinning cotton candy. To be honest, I was sort of dreading the first bite—after everything I'd heard

about El Mordjene, I expected the kind of sickly, synthetic sweetness that makes you feel like you're stuck in traffic in an air-freshened taxi with the windows up. And, indeed, El Mordjene is very sweet, with half a tablespoon of sugar per serving. But the undertone of grilled nuts, uncut by cocoa, adds something earthier, tempering the fairground with the farm. I am indifferent to Nutella. Once I started eating El Mordjene, I found it difficult to stop.

For that reason—and because the smallest jars I could find weighed more than a pound—I left behind part of my stash when I packed the next morning. When I returned to the hotel to pick up my things, the woman at the desk asked excitedly whether I was the person who had abandoned two jars of El Mordjene in Room 303. I was. She paused a second and then continued, "While I've got you, Madame, may I inquire as to where you bought them?"

Before I left Marseille, I went to see an exhibition at Mucem, the city's waterfront Museum of the Civilizations of Europe and the Mediterranean. I walked along the quay in the strong winter sun, passing a few lackadaisical fishermen and women braiding tourists' hair. The show was being held in a segment of the museum that occupies a turreted military complex dating to the Crusades. I stepped into a former barracks and blinked as my eyes adjusted to the dimmer light.

Titled "Revenir" ("Return"), the exhibit sought "to explore the complexity of experiences of 'returning,' " and to acknowledge the "plural, circular, nonlinear, sometimes awkward realities" of going home. The wall text posed a question: "Is return 'the desire and dream of all immigrants,' as the sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad wrote?"

I think not, but a lump was forming in my throat just reading it. I realized that 2025 marks fifteen years since I left the United States. I have no plans to return and am privileged even to have the option, but when I'm feeling melancholy I fret about where I might end up later in life—where will I belong, who will take care of me when I'm old? Now, on top of my private anxieties, I worried about what kind of United States there would be to go back to. The text continued, "There are those who are lucky enough to be able to return every year, for a summer, or even to settle back home

permanently after a life of exile. But what can be done when borders, politics, or wars make return impossible? How can we return when home no longer exists?”

I walked into the next room. Unsettled as I was by the stark acknowledgment of these uncertainties, I also felt a surge of pride at being part of a community of people who live in two worlds, carrying the things that matter to them in their hearts, their memories, their dreams, and sometimes their suitcases. Inside, mounted shelves held objects that a woman named Meriem, the daughter of a *harki*, had gathered upon returning to the Algerian countryside after many years away. They included a sieve used to prepare couscous, a stockpot, a wooden spoon, painted terra-cotta plates, pinecones from a cedar tree, and plastic baggies filled with kohl and *frik*, a wheat cereal. A spotlight shone on a familiar red-white-and-blue waxed plastic bag: a cabas, trusted purveyor of everything from ancestral treasures to El Mordjene. You put the past in the bag and out comes the future. ♦

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**Annals of Aviation**

# Amelia Earhart’s Reckless Final Flights

The aviator’s publicity-mad husband, George Palmer Putnam, kept pushing her to risk her life for the sake of fame.

**By Laurie Gwen Shapiro**

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*Earhart and her husband. A friend of hers recalled, “We thought he was taking advantage of Earhart. . . . She was his meal ticket.”Photograph by George Rinhart / Corbis / Getty*

Sparks flew, a wing bent, and the landing gear snapped off as the silver Lockheed Electra 10-E plane smashed into the runway at Luke Field, outside Honolulu. The pilot’s only stroke of luck was that the aircraft, which contained nearly a thousand gallons of fuel, didn’t explode.

The thirty-nine-year-old Amelia Earhart and her crew of two navigators, Fred Noonan and Harry Manning, crawled out of the wreckage, unsettled but otherwise unhurt. They had meant to depart on the second leg of a gruelling voyage: a round-the-world flight that had begun in Oakland, California, and would continue westward, with two dozen or so stops, before ending up back in Oakland. People close to Earhart knew that she wasn't fully ready for a challenge of this magnitude, and so a work-around had been devised. An extra crew member with extensive flight experience, Paul Mantz, had joined the flight to Hawaii. On the runway in Oakland, he switched places with Earhart and assumed the throttles during takeoff. She then piloted most of the way to Oahu, but Mantz often took over.

As they approached Luke Field, Mantz sensed that Earhart had "pilot fatigue." He asked her, "Do you want to land it?"

"No, you land it," Earhart said.

He did so, then said farewell. Earhart had been able to observe Mantz's handling of the plane over the Pacific, and from now on she would be the only pilot onboard. Flying the Electra solo wouldn't be easy. Although the plane had state-of-the-art technology for its time, piloting it demanded constant coördination among the throttle, the rudder, and the control column —especially during takeoff and landing. While taking off on the second leg, Earhart ignored advice that Mantz had given her not to "jockey the throttles"—change the speed to maintain direction and balance—and the plane veered into a violent spin across the runway. The press had assembled to watch Earhart soar, and instead witnessed an embarrassment.

The stakes were huge. Men had been flying around the world since 1924, when a team of eight military officers completed a twenty-seven-thousand-mile journey in a hundred and seventy-five days (with seventy-four stops). Only one pilot had done a solo circumnavigation: a Texan named Wiley Post. In 1933, Post completed a fifteen-thousand-mile journey, traversing Germany, the Soviet Union, Alaska, and Canada. Four years later, a round-the-world flight remained daunting. Earhart planned to have human navigators on board with her, but she'd be the first female pilot to accomplish the feat.

Earhart had become instantly famous in 1928, as the first woman to cross the Atlantic in a plane. But, though she'd been photographed wearing a flight suit and a leather helmet, she was merely a passenger; the plane had actually been piloted by two men, Wilmer Stultz and Louis Gordon. She had since been working on establishing her command of the cockpit. There were plenty of accomplished female pilots who could've taken command of a transatlantic flight themselves, and some of these women considered Earhart's notoriety unearned. In 1932, after logging more flight miles—but not as many as other top female pilots—she flew solo across the Atlantic in a cramped red Vega, a single-engine plane barely insulated against storms and cold temperatures. She fought exhaustion, iced wings, and a broken altimeter. Her intention was to land in Paris, but she ended up in a cow field in Ireland. Earhart approached the experience with an easy, almost reckless, confidence. She'd always been this way; as a girl growing up in the Kansas City area, she jury-rigged a "roller coaster" with steep ramps, then barrelled down it and fell off, only to exult, "This is just like flying!"

A globe-circling flight would be Earhart's lengthiest journey by far, twenty-nine thousand miles hugging the equator. This wasn't mere hopping among landmasses, as with Post's route. Her path had been ambitiously charted to include a refuelling stop on Howland Island, a speck between Hawaii and Australia. A pilot making such a journey needed to be in excellent shape, with sufficient strength and stamina to manage the controls in turbulence, particularly during long hours in a cockpit with no autopilot. The dangers were extraordinary: enormous stretches over open ocean, unpredictable weather, extended isolation, intense psychological pressure. Yet the rewards promised to be substantial, from marketing opportunities to media attention. NBC and CBS were fighting over the rights to exclusive broadcasts.

Noonan and Manning had agreed to accompany Earhart nearly the whole way. They were excited to be associated with her glamour, but they also considered the job a risk. Rather then spending time practicing in the powerful Electra, Earhart had been crisscrossing the country, giving lectures, making sponsorship appearances, and attending promotional events. For a while, she had a gig as the aviation editor at *Cosmopolitan*, in which she published a column about flying; she also launched a line of pilot-inspired women's clothing. Seen from today's perspective, Earhart

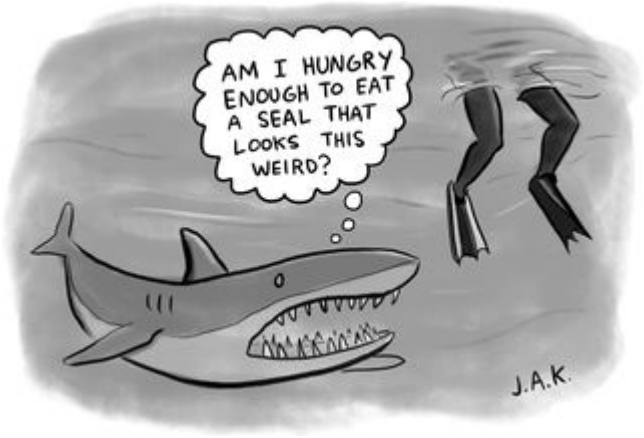
was at once a pioneering aviator and a proto-influencer. Her goal, in both roles, was to keep topping herself—and to keep the public captivated.

After the crash in Hawaii, Earhart faced reporters with a brittle smile, promising that she would mount another circumnavigation soon. Her husband of half a dozen years, George Palmer Putnam—six feet of restless energy in a tailored suit—publicly blamed a blown tire, skirting any mention of pilot error. An heir to the Putnam publishing empire, he was more than Earhart's husband; he was her manager, dealmaker, and publicist. Some found him dashing, but others thought of him as a hustler. He'd launched Earhart into fame with that Atlantic crossing in 1928—arranging the flight entirely with the intention of publishing a quickie memoir from Earhart about the stunt. (The book, "20 Hrs. 40 Min.," was allegedly ghostwritten; Earhart wrote to a friend, "I should like to have made it better but time was short and I done as good as I could.") He'd chosen her over other female aviators in no small part because of her gamine beauty—and he soon began pursuing her romantically, even though he was married.

Every stage of her round-the-world attempt was being overseen by Putnam, all coördinated to maximize publicity. He had once been an executive at his family's publishing house, focussing on memoirs of adventure and exploration, but he'd left after a merger, and as the Great Depression dragged on Earhart's fame became one of the couple's few reliable assets. Her paid appearances kept them afloat, and Putnam feverishly worked to line up side deals, including film rights. A Christmas-season release date for another memoir was already pencilled in. Putnam's career had been bumpy, but he repeatedly succeeded in giving Earhart's exploits a romantic aura—one that has lingered to this day.

The wrecked Electra had to be shipped back to California for costly repairs. Putnam fretted: *Who will pay for the damage*? *Can we afford a second attempt*? Other difficulties had arisen well before the Hawaii crash. Putnam asked Bradford Washburn, a skilled explorer, mapper, and pilot, to accompany Earhart. (When Putnam was at his family's publishing house, he'd worked with a teen-age Washburn as one of the authors on a series about boy explorers.) Putnam invited him to their estate in Rye, New York, and Earhart showed him her planned route on a world map, highlighting

how the westward leg from Hawaii to New Guinea necessitated the refuelling stop at Howland Island. Washburn pronounced it a dangerous folly. When he asked about her navigational plan, Earhart responded, “Dead reckoning”—estimating a plane’s position based on speed, time, and direction from a known point. Washburn was appalled. “I didn’t feel that she had anywhere nearly adequate equipment and preparation for a long overseas hop to Howland Island,” he later reflected. Earhart, however, was certain that she’d hit her tiny target with the gear already on board. Washburn said that she should at least place a radio on the island which would allow the Electra to home in on its position. Putnam dismissively told Washburn, “If you go to all that trouble, the book will not be out for Christmas sales.” As Washburn recalled it, “G.P. was just as confident in Earhart and her judgment as A.E. was herself, and this made a very difficult combination to argue with.”




*Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein*

Earhart and Putnam stopped trying to win Washburn over. They soon announced that Harry Manning—a marine officer who’d become a national hero after saving the crew of a sinking Italian vessel—would be Earhart’s navigator. Although Manning had a pilot’s license and knew Morse code well, some of Earhart’s friends doubted that he had the experience required for a round-the-world flight. Manning brushed off the skepticism, but after the humiliating crash in Hawaii he grew uneasy—not just about becoming an object of mockery but about risking his life.

From Honolulu, Earhart and her crew booked berths on a ship headed to California. By the time they disembarked, Manning had made it clear to

Earhart that he was quitting. As always, Earhart and Putnam were undeterred. Fred Noonan—who'd been hired, shortly before the first attempt, to handle Pacific navigation—was still up for a second attempt. A lanky six-footer with auburn hair, Noonan was a Pan Am veteran who'd helped pioneer transpacific routes. His capability as a navigator was beyond question. But so was his fondness for drinking.

In an off-the-record exchange, Earhart told James Bassett, Jr., the Los Angeles *Times'* aviation editor, that she'd seen Noonan inebriated, and that she didn't trust him. But Putnam had apparently insisted on using Noonan; for one thing, he was an inexpensive hire. Noonan, Bassett later recalled, had sworn to Earhart that he'd remain sober during the trip. But the danger was obvious.

When Manning learned that Earhart was planning a second attempt with just Noonan, he was deeply concerned. In his view, they were both dangerously casual about radio discipline: Earhart had never bothered to master Morse code, and Noonan relied heavily on celestial navigation. Together, they preferred voice communication, even though ships in the Pacific depended on continuous wave transmissions, which could travel farther and cut through static. In an interview, Earhart acknowledged, "Both Fred Noonan and I know Morse code but we're rank amateurs and probably never would be able to send and receive more than 10 words a minute." In a life-or-death emergency, voice signals might fade or be unintelligible; Morse code could punch through static and bad weather.

Earhart was content to stick with voice communication, though. It was just easier.

Earhart knew that Putnam would be frustrated by the wasted expenditures and the repair bills caused by her crashing the Electra. She told a friend, "I've just got to get away for a couple of days by myself, before it drives me crazy." Upon returning to California, she fled to a tranquil desert ranch near Palm Springs owned by close friends: Jacqueline Cochran, a fiery aviator, and her husband, Floyd Odlum, a financial titan known as the Wizard of Wall Street.

Cochran had bluntly warned Earhart against attempting a round-the-world voyage that included Howland Island. “You just don’t have sufficient navigation communication,” she said. “I don’t think you’ll ever hit it.” But Earhart wouldn’t abandon the idea. Cochran and Odlum adored her, and they had financially supported her flying career. Their feelings toward Putnam, however, were less charitable. “We didn’t like or dislike him at the start,” Odlum later said. “But we came to dislike him because . . . we thought he was taking advantage of Amelia.” He added, “She was his meal ticket.”

Some top female aviators also had their doubts about Earhart’s latest project. Elinor Smith, who had been flying since she was a child and who, at sixteen, became the youngest licensed pilot in the U.S., felt that Earhart was courageous and determined. But in 1929, in New Castle, Delaware, Smith had an eye-opening experience with her during an evaluation flight of a plane designed by the aircraft manufacturer Giuseppe Bellanca. A Bellanca test pilot, George Haldeman, handled takeoff, with Earhart in the co-pilot seat and Smith observing from the rear. At about a thousand feet, Earhart took over, and the plane immediately began lurching and wobbling. Embarrassed, she signalled for Haldeman to take over. “She knew the basics, I guess, but she didn’t have that much practice,” Smith recalled in a memoir. “As sure as God is my judge, she could not keep her nose on the horizon.”

In Smith’s view, Putnam was a grifter who kept pushing Earhart’s celebrity ahead of her skills. Getting her into a Bellanca cockpit before she was ready, Smith thought, was typical of his approach: “Knowing full well she was too inexperienced to fly it, he would simply sideline the plane in a hangar until the day when she could. He would meanwhile line up backing for a future flight.”

In March, 1929, in the lead-up to the Powder Puff Derby—a headline-making race from Santa Monica to Cleveland in which Earhart finished third—the *Times* reported that Earhart had earned a transport license, the highest civilian aviation rating issued by the government. Just a few American women held one at the time. But stamps on the license go back

only as far as 1930. It's not clear why the *Times* reported otherwise, but Putnam was known to feed stories to the papers.

Such airbrushing probably seemed harmless, even apt, for a rogue like Earhart. To become aviators, women had to aggressively scramble for resources, whereas men could receive pilot training in the military. Yet Putnam sometimes tried to push Earhart's career forward with unscrupulous methods. Smith's memoir recounts that, before the derby, Putnam offered her a peculiar job: "What would you think of a guaranteed seventy-five-dollar weekly income for a two-year period—as a starting figure, that is? You would be Amelia's pilot and mechanic during the derby. . . . You would do all the difficult cross-country flying—A.E. is not physically sturdy, you know—but of course, she must appear to be doing it. When pictures are taken at various stopovers, you will see to it that you stand to her left, so her name will always come first in the captions. You will, of course, do no writing or public speaking for another two years at least. It's all spelled out in this contract." Smith refused the offer.

The ruse, Smith suggested in her memoir, was employed successfully on at least one occasion. At an airfield on Long Island, the press celebrated Earhart's "perfect landing" of a single-engine Fokker Universal plane. But Earhart had actually stepped out of the *rear* of the aircraft, and a man whom Putnam had identified to the press as her mechanic could be seen sitting in the cockpit. Nobody, Smith wrote, had bothered to question how Earhart "had disembarked perfectly coiffed, immaculate from head to toe, and wearing a dress in a plane that couldn't be flown in one!"

Earhart needed thousands of dollars to repair the Electra. In New York, she met with Harry Bruno, an aviation publicist who had worked for Charles Lindbergh, whose piloting feats in the Spirit of St. Louis had made him an international hero. Bruno agreed to help her raise funds. At his behest, Admiral Richard Byrd contributed fifteen hundred dollars, repaying a kindness from 1928, when Earhart had directed her earnings from Lucky Strike cigarette ads to support his expedition to Antarctica; the financier Bernard Baruch added another twenty-five hundred dollars. Earhart and Putnam scraped together enough cash to repair the Electra within two months. They also revised her flight plan: this time, Earhart would launch

from Miami and head east, from Puerto Rico to Brazil to West Africa and onward. This would allow her to pass through India before the height of the summer monsoon season.

Throughout the spring, Earhart and Putnam crisscrossed the country for more appearances and meetings. Quaker Oats executives promised Earhart that, after she'd completed the flight, they would give her five thousand dollars to star in a series of ads as the brand's "World Reporter." Meanwhile, Putnam secured a book contract with Harcourt, Brace & Co. for Earhart's next memoir, to be titled "World Flight." The text would be based on in-transit dispatches that she would wire to Putnam. A deal was also struck with Gimbels department store to sell "commemorative covers"—decorated envelopes bearing buyers' home addresses that would be packed into the Electra's nose and postmarked at stops along the route, as proof that Earhart was completing her itinerary.

In May, 1937, while Putnam was working to keep his wife in the spotlight, the Hindenburg exploded at an airfield in New Jersey, killing thirty-six people. Earhart's aerial exploits no longer seemed headline-worthy. Putnam, desperate for funds, mortgaged a house that he and his first wife had owned in Rye. To save costs, modifications recommended for the Electra after the Hawaii crash—stronger radios, better direction-finding gear, upgrades to the emergency equipment—were scaled back or scrapped.

In mid-May, the Electra, housed at Lockheed's Burbank facility, was deemed ready to fly again. Within days, Earhart took off for Miami from Burbank's Union Air Terminal, with Putnam, Noonan, and her mechanic, Ruckins (Bo) McKneely, Jr. C. B. Allen, of the New York *Herald Tribune*, was dispatched to Florida, having been tipped off by Putnam about the imminent start of Earhart's second attempt to circumnavigate the Earth.

*Earhart, in a hangar in California, with the Lockheed Electra 10-E plane that she piloted in her two round-the-world attempts.Photograph by Bettmann / Getty*

Paul Mantz, who'd remained Earhart's technical adviser, was at an aviation competition in St. Louis, oblivious to her latest plans. Earhart and Putnam had decided to move ahead without informing him. When Mantz eventually heard the news, he was livid.

On the way from Burbank to Miami, Earhart made a refuelling stop in Tucson. But one of her plane's engines caught fire, which occasioned an unplanned overnight stay (and the purchase of a new fire extinguisher). The next day, she dodged a sandstorm in El Paso and arrived in New Orleans, where she reconnected with the pilot Edna Gardner, who ran the New Orleans Air College. That night, Gardner, Earhart, Putnam, and Noonan went out to dinner. Gardner, never a fan of Putnam, found herself cringing throughout the evening. "He was so domineering and so pushy," she later said. Earhart mentioned something about the plane's radio, and Putnam snapped, "You had a chance to change. It's too late now." When Earhart looked downcast, he said, "Stop your snivelling!" Gardner subsequently recalled, "I wondered if she wouldn't relish being off and away on the greatest adventure of her life." She also said, "We all loved her and disliked seeing what he was doing to her."

At the same time, Gardner worried that continuing the flight was dangerous. She calculated that, without better preparation and equipment, Earhart had slim odds of survival.

After a night in New Orleans, the Electra headed to Miami. Noonan guided them into the municipal airport, but Earhart's landing was rough and bumpy, and it was witnessed by Jane Wood, a Miami *Herald* reporter. Wood gasped, but Earhart climbed out of the cockpit laughing. "I certainly smacked it down hard that time," she joked, dusting herself off.

Earhart confirmed to Wood that she was going to try again to circumnavigate the Earth, though she didn't specify when. "Just what of scientific value do you expect to get out of your trip?" Wood asked.

"Not much," Earhart said. "I am going for the trip. I am going for fun. Can you think of any better reason?"

Earhart was more candid with Allen, of the *Herald Tribune*. "I'm getting old and want to make way for the younger generation before I'm feeble," she said. "I have a feeling that there is just one more good flight left in my system, and I'm hoping this trip is it. . . . As far as I know, I've only got one obsession—a small and probably typical feminine fear of growing old—so I won't feel completely cheated if I fail to come back." Allen, recognizing the news value of these words, wanted to publish a story about the interview, but Earhart asked him to hold off until after the journey.

Meanwhile, Allen did some investigative reporting, running through equipment checklists from Earhart's California-Hawaii flight to see how carefully the Electra had been refurbished since the crash. He noticed a glaring omission: the Electra's marine-frequency radio, which would help the plane send out a distress call to ships, had been removed. He asked Earhart for comment, and she shrugged it off. "Dead weight," she said. She reminded him that she and Noonan barely knew Morse code. Better to leave the device behind.

Hangar space was secured for the Electra. Before the big takeoff, Putnam needed to sort out some logistics and publicity operations. He and Earhart didn't want to reveal the plan yet, and she stuck to the script. She fibbed to the Miami *Daily News*, "We're just out on a shakedown trip"—a practice flight.

Earhart, Putnam, and her crew stayed at the Columbus Hotel, overlooking Biscayne Bay. Putnam was thrilled that the Miami papers were hailing their arrival and speculating about what was next. Even better, Earhart was added to the guest list of a gala honoring the aviators Dick Merrill and Jack Lambie. There, she ran into her old friend Phoebe Omlie, a trailblazer who'd won the light-aircraft crown at the 1929 Women's Air Derby. Earhart soon told her that she was about to make another world-flight attempt. Like Gardner, Omlie was skeptical. She asked about the Pacific leg and expressed concern about the risks. Earhart assured her that all contingencies had been considered.

Meanwhile, Putnam asked Bo McKneely, the mechanic, to join Earhart and Noonan for the round-the-world flight. McKneely seriously considered the offer—Putnam promised to arrange everything, fast—but his father had a heart condition, and the thought of being unreachable for weeks weighed too heavily on him. His decision to stay behind, he later said, haunted him for the rest of his life.

Putnam, for his part, expressed nothing but optimism about the journey. "We are going to make enough money out of this flight to buy a little place in California," he told an assistant. "Then we're going to settle down and enjoy life together. I'm going to write some books." During the Florida interlude, Putnam noticed that Earhart had developed an obsession with eating pompano, a local fish. He and the crew began referring to her as Madame Pompano.

One of Putnam's two sons from his first marriage, David, was living in Florida, and he came to Miami to wish his stepmother luck. The day before the first leg of the second attempt, Earhart scribbled a letter to her mother on hotel stationery: "Hope to take off tomorrow *a.m*. to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Here is three hundred bucks."

The next day, McKneely was at the hangar before dawn, soldering a part that had broken off inside the Electra. Years later, he recalled the tension of that morning—Lockheed officials were reportedly whispering about weight and balance, and about the eleven hundred and fifty-one gallons of fuel sloshing in the plane's tanks, each gallon weighing six pounds. The Electra was so heavy that just getting it aloft would be no simple feat.

Noonan squeezed uncomfortably inside the fuselage, wedged amid fuel tanks and gear. At 5:40 *a.m.*, Earhart was ready to go. Putnam later recalled seeing her off in the hangar: “There in the dim chill we perched briefly on cold concrete steps, and the feel of her hands in mine told more than the words we did not speak could have told.” The Electra’s twin engines roared, and Earhart taxied toward departure. McKneely chased after the plane with several fire extinguishers, in case of another runway accident.

The Electra lifted into the air. Putnam watched his wife soar until the plane disappeared among the clouds.

At thirty-five hundred feet, the Electra settled into its first real rhythm. Earhart and Noonan, now alone, cruised at about a hundred and fifty miles per hour.

Seven hours and thirty-four minutes later, they touched down at Isla Grande Airport, in San Juan. Waiting for them was Clara Livingston, an old friend of Earhart’s who was also an accomplished pilot—she’d been one of the first women to fly a helicopter. Livingston now ran a grapefruit-and-coconut plantation on the island. She escorted Earhart and Noonan to the property and let them rest undisturbed, shielding them even from Putnam’s calls.

That night, Putnam called to speak with his wife. Livingston said that she was sleeping, and would wake her only if the matter was urgent. Putnam was irritated, but Livingston didn’t particularly care; like many in Earhart’s circle, she found him obnoxious.

From San Juan, Earhart and Noonan traced the northeastern curve of South America, flying more than six hundred miles to Caripito, Venezuela. It was Earhart’s first real view of the jungle—from the air—and she was transfixed. They landed amid oil tanks and refuelled at a Standard Oil hangar. Executives served her and Noonan steak, grape juice, and fruitcake.

By June 3rd, Earhart and Noonan had reached Paramaribo, the capital of Dutch Guiana (now Suriname). Earhart gawked at markets where soft-shelled-turtle eggs were sold alongside string beans. She jotted impressions in a notebook. Especially intriguing to her were the Saramaka people, the

descendants of enslaved Africans who had fought for, and won, their freedom.

*“I see you got on well with the radiologist.”*
*Cartoon by Paul Noth*

Next came a nine-hour flight to Fortaleza, Brazil. Crossing the equator, Earhart was spellbound by the sprawling Amazon River below. The airport, situated outside the city, was antiquated, but their hotel, the Excelsior, was all Art Deco glamour and gleaming chandeliers. Earhart and Noonan had a laugh when they learned that the hotel had assigned them to one room. (They slept separately.)

From Fortaleza, they made a shorter flight to Natal, Brazil, a picturesque coastal city. Ahead of them loomed their most ambitious stretch yet: a nineteen-hundred–mile leap across the South Atlantic to Senegal. The leg would take twelve hours over open water—a brutal endurance test. The engine was thunderous, and to communicate Earhart relayed notes to Noonan that she attached to a bamboo fishing pole.

Over the Atlantic, they battled winds and rain for hours. Eventually, as they neared Africa, the weather broke. They touched down in Saint-Louis, Senegal—more than a hundred miles northeast of their intended target, Dakar. In Saint-Louis, Earhart attended a reception at the governorgeneral’s mansion, then wired some impressions back to Putnam, who commissioned

a colorful column that appeared in the *Herald Tribune*. (“I explained that I had only slacks and shirts in which to meet kings and beggars.”)

Readers were rooting for Earhart back home. “All day I have been thinking of Amelia Earhart somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean and hoping she will make her flight safely,” Eleanor Roosevelt wrote in her syndicated column. “She is one of the most fascinating people I know, because . . . she never seems to think that any of the things she does require any courage.”

Earhart and Noonan now had to traverse Africa, on far less established routes. They followed a section of the Niger River, flew a thousand miles across the Sahara, and, after spotting a herd of hippos below them, landed in what is now N’Djamena, the capital of Chad. On June 14th, after a five-hundred-mile flight from El Fasher, Sudan, to Khartoum, Earhart wrote, “It is really very hot . . . but the nights have been genuinely comfortable. Twice I have been able to sleep out under the stars. I should like to make this a habit.”

After arriving in Assab, Eritrea, Earhart did something unprecedented: she flew nearly eighteen hundred miles to Karachi (then part of British India, now in Pakistan). It was the first time that anyone had flown non-stop from the Red Sea to India. Putnam proudly pointed out the milestone to Earhart over the phone. “I’ll cable tomorrow an estimate of when we should get to Howland,” she told him breezily. “Goodbye! See you in Oakland!”

In Karachi, Earhart sent along more light dispatches, including a story about a morning camel ride, which his office polished up for the *Herald Tribune*. “I climbed into the saddle and swung between his two humps,” the article noted. “It was a startling takeoff as we rose. . . . Camels should have shock absorbers.”

From Karachi, Earhart sent Putnam a private letter, tender in its simplicity: “I wish you were here. So many things you would enjoy. . . . Perhaps someday we can fly together to some of the remote places of the world—just for fun.” They no longer had the passion of a secret liaison, but she admired his mind and appreciated his championing of her career. Their partnership was equally personal and professional.

Around the time of the Electra's flight around the Arabian coast, rumors were swirling of a romance between Earhart and Noonan, and of a plane crash. Noonan wrote his wife a reassuring letter: "We have had no trouble whatsoever. Earhart is a grand person for such a trip. . . . She can take hardship as well as a man—and work like one."

During this period, Putnam gave a jovial interview to a reporter from the London *Daily Telegraph*. He described the Electra's cockpit, which was crammed with more than a hundred instruments, and shared details about his wife's piloting habits. She had an alarm clock that she used to monitor fuel tanks, and kept emergency rations in case of a crash landing. "She lives on tomato juice," he revealed. "She carries cans in which she knocks a hole, and then inserts a straw."

The next leg of the flight took Earhart and Noonan some thirteen hundred miles across India. Navigating by following the spiderweb of railway lines below, they had a tense moment when a cluster of black eagles came dangerously close to their propellers. Their flight path skirted Agra, the location of the Taj Mahal, and Earhart felt a little remiss, joking, "It would be like a European sightseer dropping in on Buffalo and not viewing Niagara Falls."

As they crossed the Thar Desert on the way to Calcutta, strong southerly winds whipped sand into blinding waves. "A great barren stretch," Earhart called it, in a dispatch. "The ridges grew into mountains and poked their dark backs like sharks through a yellow sea."

They spent a night in Calcutta, and Noonan got extremely drunk at a bar. Earhart placed a call to Putnam, who was entertaining some guests at the Hotel Seymour, in Manhattan. She said that her faith in Noonan was faltering. Putnam, alarmed, urged her to call off the entire attempt, but she wouldn't hear of it. There was only one real "bad hop" left.

On June 18th, Earhart and Noonan lifted off from Calcutta's Dum Dum Airport, even though certain equipment issues, such as a nonfunctioning radio direction finder, hadn't been fixed. On the plane's way to a refuelling stop in Akyab, Burma (now Sittwe, Myanmar), farmers waved at them from rice fields. The eastward hops continued, among them Rangoon, Bangkok,

and Singapore. After landing in a part of the Dutch East Indies that is now Indonesia, Earhart got dysentery—a dangerous infection in an era before antibiotics. A photograph taken at the time shows Earhart smiling, but she was drained and frail, and could barely eat.

By the time Earhart and Noonan had reached Port Darwin, Australia, a few days later, she still felt unwell. Nevertheless, she maintained a calm front. She politely asked for a bath before meeting the press. At the Victoria Hotel, she enjoyed a ritzy meal, telling a reporter, “We eat very little while in the air, but we make up for it at landing places.”

An official at Port Darwin’s airport, Stan Rose, inspected the Electra and determined that a blown fuse had rendered the radio direction finder inoperable. Without it, Earhart had no way of establishing real-time contact with ships or stations below—and no reliable way to fix her position over the open ocean. When Rose pressed her about this, she sheepishly admitted that the device had been dead since she and Noonan left the Americas. Rose was startled by how little Earhart and Noonan understood about basic equipment maintenance. He gave her some spare fuses and taught her how to replace them. He also offered her some special assistance for her next leg: after she took off, he would give her “back bearings”—radioed directional readings—every fifteen minutes, to help her keep course. Earhart gratefully accepted. Rose ended up offering her precise bearings for an hour, until the Electra flew out of range.

Earhart and Noonan touched down in Lae, New Guinea, on June 29, 1937. Crouched between the mountains and the sea, Lae was an infernally hot gold-mining outpost. Locals gathered at the grass airstrip to welcome them as the gleaming Electra rolled to a stop.

Earhart was sleep-deprived, and she was worn thin from the still persistent dysentery and the long stretches without meals. Wire images showed her face to be bloated and pale, and her frame looked almost skeletal. Earhart and Noonan’s accommodations were the nicest Lae could offer: the Hotel Cecil. That night, Noonan caroused at the hotel bar with James Collopy, the district superintendent of the civil-aviation board. Eric Chater, Guinea Airways’ handsome general manager, had invited Earhart to dinner, and

Noonan, several Scotches in, groused to Collopy that the “skinny bitch” hadn’t invited him along.

After Collopy helped Noonan stagger back to his hotel room, Noonan toppled into the mosquito netting around his bed and crashed to the floor. Earhart, in a neighboring room, barked through the walls, “Is that you, Fred?” When Collopy answered instead, she wasn’t amused. It didn’t sound like they would be departing the next day, as they’d planned.

This proved correct. Some minor repairs were needed on the Electra, and Earhart—now concerned about her navigator’s sobriety—delayed departure by a day. She sent a terse cable to Putnam: “Radio misunderstanding and personnel unfitness. Probably will hold one day.”

The next day, Earhart, determined to keep Noonan occupied (and sober), borrowed a truck, and they drove out to a village, Butibum, where they encountered pigs that had been trained as watchdogs. That night, a local official and postal workers stamped some of the thousands of commemorative covers crammed into the Electra’s nose. Earhart’s flight remained at heart a money-making venture.

On July 1st, Earhart oversaw final preparations at the airstrip. Mechanics tuned the Electra and filled it with eleven hundred gallons of gasoline and sixty-four gallons of oil. Earhart off-loaded “unessential” items, to reduce weight. Some essential items, however, were left behind. The smoke bombs meant to facilitate a sea rescue? Noonan had apparently left them under his hotel bed.

Earhart, perhaps feeling some anxiety, asked Chater, the Guinea Airways head, to let Harry Balfour, the company’s radio operator, come along with her to Hawaii. Chater said that he couldn’t spare Balfour.

Earhart reflected, “Not much more than a month ago I was on the other shore of the Pacific, looking westward. This evening, I looked eastward over the Pacific. In those fast-moving days which have intervened, the whole width of the world has passed behind us—except this broad ocean. I shall be glad when we have the hazards of its navigation behind us.” In

newsreel footage at the Lae airfield, Earhart looks collected but serious. Noonan, clean-shaven and steady on his feet, gives a smile to the camera.

At 10 *a.m.*, the overburdened Electra roared down the grass strip. For a terrifying second, it seemed to disappear over a bluff at the end of the runway—but then it reappeared, skimming the ocean waves and bouncing lightly until it ascended into the sky.

Balfour, listening for Earhart's radio communications from the ground, marvelled at her nerve. The plane was at least five thousand pounds over its normal gross weight, but Earhart had coaxed the Electra into the air with her usual casual daring. For all the messy planning and makeshift repairs, she was a woman who had always won a bet when it really mattered.

Earhart radioed Balfour. She was heading east with heavy clouds ahead. "Goodbye, Lae," she said. "I'm turning over to night frequency."

Roughly twenty hours after the Electra took off, it went down somewhere in the Pacific. The location is still unknown. The ocean has kept its secret. ♦

*This is drawn from "The Aviator and the Showman."*
*Laurie Gwen Shapiro is the author of "The Aviator and the Showman: Amelia Earhart, George Putnam, and the Marriage that Made an American Icon."*

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**Profiles**

# Curtis Yarvin’s Plot Against America

The reactionary blogger’s call for a monarch to rule the country once seemed like a joke. Now the right is ready to bend the knee.

**By Ava Kofman**

June 2, 2025

*Yarvin wants to destroy democracy. Peter Thiel, Marc Andreessen, and J. D. Vance are among his fans.Photograph by Carolyn Drake for The New Yorker*

In the spring and summer of 2008, when Donald Trump was still a registered Democrat, an anonymous blogger known as Mencius Moldbug posted a serial manifesto under the heading “An Open Letter to Open-

Minded Progressives.” Written with the sneering disaffection of an ex-believer, the hundred-and-twenty-thousand-word letter argued that egalitarianism, far from improving the world, was actually responsible for most of its ills. That his bien-pensant readers thought otherwise, Moldbug contended, was due to the influence of the media and the academy, which worked together, however unwittingly, to perpetuate a left-liberal consensus. To this nefarious alliance he gave the name the Cathedral. Moldbug called for nothing less than its destruction and a total “reboot” of the social order. He proposed “the liquidation of democracy, the Constitution, and the rule of law,” and the eventual transfer of power to a C.E.O.-in-chief (someone like Steve Jobs or Marc Andreessen, he suggested), who would transform the government into “a heavily-armed, ultra-profitable corporation.” This new regime would sell off public schools, destroy universities, abolish the press, and imprison “decivilized populations.” It would also fire civil servants en masse (a policy Moldbug later called *RAGE*—Retire All Government Employees) and discontinue international relations, including “security guarantees, foreign aid, and mass immigration.”

Moldbug acknowledged that his vision depended on the sanity of his chief executive: “Clearly, if he or she turns out to be Hitler or Stalin, we have just recreated Nazism or Stalinism.” Yet he dismissed the failures of twentieth-century dictators, whom he saw as too reliant on popular support. For Moldbug, any system that sought legitimacy in the passions of the mob was doomed to instability. Though critics labelled him a techno-fascist, he preferred to call himself a royalist or a Jacobite—a nod to partisans of James II and his descendants, who, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, opposed Britain’s parliamentary system and upheld the divine right of kings. Never mind the French Revolution, the bête noire of reactionary thinkers: Moldbug believed that the English and American Revolutions had gone too far.

If Moldbug’s “Open Letter” showed little affection for the masses, it intimated that they might still have a use. “Communism was not overthrown by Andrei Sakharov, Joseph Brodsky, and Václav Havel,” he wrote. “What was needed was the combination of philosopher and crowd.” The best place to recruit this crowd, he said, was on the internet—a shrewd

intuition. Before long, links to Moldbug's blog, "Unqualified Reservations," were being passed around by libertarian techies, disgruntled bureaucrats, and self-styled rationalists—many of whom formed the shock troops of an online intellectual movement that came to be known as neo-reaction, or the Dark Enlightenment. While few turned into outright monarchists, their contempt for Obama-era uplift seemed to find voice in Moldbug's heresies. In his most influential coinage, which quickly gained currency among the nascent alt-right, Moldbug urged his readers to rouse themselves from their ideological slumber by taking the "red pill," like Keanu Reeves's character in "The Matrix," who chooses daunting truth over contented ignorance.

In 2013, an article on the news site *TechCrunch*, titled "Geeks for Monarchy," revealed that Mencius Moldbug was the cyber alias of a forty-year-old programmer in San Francisco named Curtis Yarvin. At the same time that he was trying to redesign the U.S. government, Yarvin was also dreaming up a new computer operating system that he hoped would serve as a "digital republic." He founded a company that he named Tlon, for the Borges story "Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius," in which a secret society describes an elaborate parallel world that begins to overtake reality. As he raised money for his startup, Yarvin became a kind of Machiavelli to his big-tech benefactors, who shared his view that the world would be better off if they were in charge. Tlon's investors included the venture-capital firms Andreessen Horowitz and Founders Fund, the latter of which was started by the billionaire Peter Thiel. Both Thiel and Balaji Srinivasan, then a general partner at Andreessen Horowitz, had become friends with Yarvin after reading his blog, though e-mails shared with me revealed that neither was thrilled to be publicly associated with him at the time. "How dangerous is it that we are being linked?" Thiel wrote to Yarvin in 2014. "One reassuring thought: one of our hidden advantages is that these people"—social-justice warriors—"wouldn't believe in a conspiracy if it hit them over the head (this is perhaps the best measure of the decline of the Left). Linkages make them sound really crazy, and they kinda know it."

A decade on, with the Trumpian right embracing strongman rule, Yarvin's links to élites in Silicon Valley and Washington are no longer a secret. In a 2021 appearance on a far-right podcast, Vice-President J. D. Vance, a

former employee of one of Thiel's venture-capital firms, cited Yarvin when suggesting that a future Trump Administration "fire every single mid-level bureaucrat, every civil servant in the administrative state, replace them with our people," and ignore the courts if they objected. Marc Andreessen, one of the heads of Andreessen Horowitz and an informal adviser to the so-called Department of Government Efficiency (*DOGE*), has started quoting his "good friend" Yarvin about the need for a founder-like figure to take charge of our "out of control" bureaucracy. Andrew Kloster, the new general counsel at the government's Office of Personnel Management, has said that replacing civil servants with loyalists could help Trump defeat "the Cathedral."

"There are figures who channel a Zeitgeist—Nietzsche calls them timely men—and Curtis is definitely a timely man," a State Department official who has been reading Yarvin since the Moldbug era told me. Back in 2011, Yarvin said that Trump was one of two figures who seemed "biologically suited" to be an American monarch. (The other was Chris Christie.) In 2022, he recommended that Trump, if reëlected, appoint Elon Musk to run the executive branch. On a podcast with his friend Michael Anton, now the director of policy planning at the State Department, Yarvin argued that the institutions of civil society, such as Harvard, would need to be shut down. "The idea that you're going to be a Caesar . . . with someone else's Department of Reality in operation is just manifestly absurd," he said.

In another timeline, Yarvin might have remained an obscure and ineffectual internet crank, a digital de Maistre. Instead, he has become one of America's most influential illiberal thinkers, an engineer of the intellectual source code for the second Trump Administration. "Yarvin has pushed the Overton window," Nikhil Pal Singh, a history professor at N.Y.U., told me. His work has revived ideas that once seemed outside the bounds of polite society, Singh said, and created a road map for the dismantling of "the administrative state and the global postwar order."

As his ideas have been surrealized in *DOGE* and Trump has taken to self-identifying as a king, one might expect to find Yarvin in an exultant mood. In fact, he has spent the past few months fretting that the moment will go to waste. "If you have a Trump boner right now, enjoy it," he wrote two days

after the election. “It’s as hard as you’ll ever get.” What many see as the most dangerous assault on American democracy in the nation’s history Yarvin dismisses as woefully insufficient—a “vibes coup.” Without a full-blown autocratic takeover, he believes, a backlash is sure to follow. When I spoke to him recently, he quoted the words of Louis de Saint-Just, the French philosopher who championed the Reign of Terror: “He who makes half a revolution digs his own grave.”

Earlier this year, Yarvin and I had lunch in Washington, D.C., where he had come to celebrate the regime change. He was in his usual getup: bluejeans, Chelsea boots, a rumpled dress shirt under a motorcycle jacket. After taking a few bites of a cheeseburger topped with crispy onions, he pushed his plate away. Last year, he explained, he’d decided to start taking an Ozempic-like drug after a debate with the right-wing commentator Richard Hanania about the relative merits of monarchy and democracy. “I destroyed him in almost every way,” Yarvin said, nudging a tomato with his fork. “But he had one huge advantage, which was that I was fat and he was not.”

The injections seemed to be working. As I ate, Yarvin’s phone filled with messages, some of them complimenting his glow-up. That morning, the *Times Magazine* had published an interview with him, accompanied by a moody black-and-white portrait. Until recently, Yarvin, with his frazzled curtain of shoulder-length hair and ill-fitting wardrobe, had seemed indifferent to his appearance. Now, wearing his leather jacket, he glared out at the reader through stylishly tousled hair. His friend Steve Sailer, a writer for white-nationalist websites, said he looked like “the fifth Ramone.”

*“How can a hunter-gatherer and a rock designer afford such a nice cave?”*
*Cartoon by Enrico Pinto*

In person, as in print, Yarvin expresses himself with imperious self-assurance. He is nearly impossible to interrupt. “When the rabbi is speaking, you let the rabbi speak,” Razib Khan, a right-wing science blogger and a close friend of Yarvin’s, told me. Even his friends and family, however, acknowledge that he has room to grow as a communicator. He talks in a halting monotone, rarely answers questions directly, and is prone to disorienting asides. In the middle of saying one thing, he is always getting distracted by something else he could be saying, like a G.P.S. that keeps suggesting faster routes.

Yarvin, for his part, was relieved at how the interview with the *Times* had gone. “My main goal was, how do I not damage any of my relationships?” he said. For years, Yarvin was best known, to the extent that he was known at all, as the court philosopher of the Thiel-verse, the network of heterodox entrepreneurs, intellectuals, and hangers-on surrounding the tech mogul. He mentioned that a businessman he knew had once complained to a journalist that Thiel had not invested enough money in his company. “That’s one strike and you’re out, and he was out,” Yarvin said, sighing theatrically. His second goal, he said, was to reach the *Times* audience. This seemed surprising: he has called for the government to shut down the paper. “I tend to be more interested in outreach to people who share my own cultural background,” Yarvin explained.

He likes to tell the story of his paternal grandparents, Jewish Communists from Brooklyn who met at a leftist gathering in the thirties. (He has less to say about his maternal grandparents, Tarrytown Wasps with a cottage on Nantucket.) “The vibe of American communism was ‘We’ve got thirty I.Q. points on these people, and we’re going to win,’ ” he said. “It’s like, what if all the gifted kids formed a political party and tried to take over the world?” Yarvin’s parents met at Brown, where his father, Herbert, was pursuing a Ph.D. in philosophy. After finishing school and failing to get tenure (“too arrogant,” Yarvin said), Herbert tried his hand at writing the Great American Novel, then joined the Foreign Service as a diplomat. In the following years, the family lived in the Dominican Republic and Cyprus. Herbert was cynical about working for the government, and Yarvin seems to have inherited his disdain: he has repeatedly proposed closing America’s

embassies, a prospect the State Department is now considering in parts of Europe and Africa.

Yarvin is reticent on the subject of his childhood, but friends and family suggested to me that his father could be harsh, domineering, and impossible to please. “He controlled their life with an iron fist,” someone with close knowledge of the family told me. “It was absolutely his domain.” (Yarvin vehemently rejected this view, saying that people who are controlling tend to be insecure, “and that is very much *not* the way of my father.” Better words to describe him, he said, would be “stubborn,” “intense,” and “formidable”—like “a good manager.”)

Growing up, Yarvin was sometimes homeschooled by his mother, and skipped three grades. (His older brother, Norman, skipped four.) The family eventually moved to Columbia, Maryland, where Yarvin entered high school as a twelve-year-old sophomore. “When you’re much younger than your classmates, you’re either an adorable mascot or a weird, threatening, disturbing alien,” Yarvin said, adding that he was the latter. Yarvin was selected to participate in a Johns Hopkins study of math prodigies. He attended the university’s Center for Talented Youth, a summer camp for gifted children, and was a Baltimore-area champion on “It’s Academic,” a television trivia show. Andrew Cone, a software engineer who currently lives in a spare room in Yarvin’s home, told me that Yarvin’s childhood seems to have left him with a lifelong feeling of inadequacy. “I think he has this sense of being not good enough, that he’s seen as ridiculous or small, and that the only way out is to perform,” Cone said.

Yarvin went to Brown, graduated at eighteen, and then entered a Ph.D. program in computer science at the University of California, Berkeley. Former peers told me that he wore a bicycle helmet in class and seemed eager to show off his knowledge to the professor. “Oh, you mean helmet-head?” one said when I asked about Yarvin. The joke among some of his classmates was that the helmet prevented new ideas from penetrating his mind. He found more of a community on Usenet, a precursor to today’s online forums. But even in groups like talk.bizarre, where intellectual peacocking was the norm, he stood out for his desire to dominate. Along with posting jokes, advice, light verse, and “flames” (blistering takedowns

of other users), he maintained a “kill file,” a list of members he had blocked because he found their posts uninteresting. “He wanted to be viewed as the smart guy—that was really, really important to him,” his first girlfriend, Meredith Tanner, told me. She was drawn to Yarvin after reading one of his virtuosic flames, and the pair dated for a few years. “Don’t get involved with someone just because you’re impressed by how creatively they insult people,” she warned. “They will turn that skill on you.”

Friends from Yarvin’s twenties described him as a reflexive contrarian who revelled in provocation. “He wasn’t a sweet kid, and he could sometimes be nasty, but he wasn’t Moldbug,” one said. Politically and culturally, Yarvin was a liberal—“a big old hippie,” as Tanner put it. He had a ponytail, wore a silver hoop earring, dropped acid at raves, and wrote poetry. Tanner recalled that when she once questioned the value of affirmative action in college admissions, it was Yarvin who convinced her of its necessity.

After a year and a half of doctoral work, Yarvin left academia to seek his fortune in the tech industry. He helped design an early version of a mobile web browser for a company that came to be known as Phone.com. In 2001, he began dating Jennifer Kollmer, a playwright he met on Craigslist, whom he later married and had two children with. Phone.com had gone public, leaving him with a windfall of a million dollars. He used some of the money to buy a condo near the Haight-Ashbury neighborhood of San Francisco and the rest to fund a self-directed study of computer science and political theory. “I was used to getting pats on the head for being smart,” he said of his decision to leave the *cursus honorum* of the gifted child. “Diverging from the pat-on-the-head economy was a strange and scary choice.”

Out in the wilderness, Yarvin delved into recondite history and economics texts, many of them newly accessible through Google Books. He read Thomas Carlyle, James Burnham, and Albert Jay Nock, alongside an early-aughts profusion of political blogs. Yarvin traces his own red-pill moment to the Presidential election of 2004. As many of his peers were being driven to the left by lies about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, Yarvin was pulled in the opposite direction by fabrications of a different sort: the Swift Boat conspiracy theory pushed by veterans allied with the George W. Bush

campaign, who claimed that the Democratic candidate, John Kerry, had lied about his service in Vietnam. It seemed obvious to Yarvin, who believed the accusations, that once the truth emerged Kerry would be forced to drop out of the race. When that didn't happen, he began to question what else he'd naïvely taken on trust. Facts no longer felt stable. How could he be confident in what he'd been told about Joseph McCarthy, the Civil War, or global warming? What about democracy itself? After years of energetic debates in the comments sections of other people's blogs, he decided to start his own. It did not lack for ambition. The first post began, "The other day I was tinkering around in my garage and I decided to build a new ideology."

The German academic Hans-Hermann Hoppe is sometimes described as an intellectual gateway to the far right. A retired economics professor at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, Hoppe argues that universal suffrage has supplanted rule by a "natural élite"; advocates for breaking nations into smaller, homogenous communities; and calls for communists, homosexuals, and others who oppose this rigid social order to be "physically removed." (Some white nationalists have made memes pairing Hoppe's face with a helicopter—an allusion to the Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet's practice of executing opponents by throwing them from aircraft.) Though Hoppe favors a minimal state, he believes that freedom is better preserved by monarchy than by democracy.

Yarvin nearly ended up a libertarian. As a Bay Area coder and a devotee of Austrian-school economists in his late twenties, he exhibited all the risk factors. Then he discovered Hoppe's book "Democracy: The God That Failed" (2001) and changed his mind. Yarvin soon adopted Hoppe's imago of a benevolent strongman—someone who would govern efficiently, avoid senseless wars, and prioritize the well-being of his subjects. "It's not copy-and-pasted, but it is such a direct influence that it's kind of obscene," Julian Waller, a scholar of authoritarianism at George Washington University, said. (Over e-mail, Hoppe recalled that he met Yarvin once at an exclusive gathering at Peter Thiel's home, where Hoppe had been invited to speak. He acknowledged his influence on Yarvin, but added, "For my taste his writing has always been a bit too flowery and rambling.") Hoppe argues that, unlike democratically elected officials, a monarch has a long-term incentive to safeguard his subjects and the state, because both belong to him. Anyone

familiar with the history of dictatorships might find this idea disingenuous. Not Yarvin.

“You don’t ransack your own house,” he told me one afternoon, at an open-air café in Venice Beach. I’d asked him what would stop his C.E.O.-monarch from plundering the country—or enslaving his people—for personal gain. “For Louis XIV, when he says, *‘L’état, c’est moi,’* ransacking the state holds no meaning because it’s all his anyway.” Following Hoppe, Yarvin proposes that nations should eventually be broken up into a “patchwork” of statelets, like Singapore or Dubai, each with its own sovereign ruler. The eternal political problems of legitimacy, accountability, and succession would be solved by a secret board with the power to select and recall the otherwise all-powerful C.E.O. of each sovereign corporation, or SovCorp. (How the board itself would be selected is unclear, but Yarvin has suggested that airline pilots—“a fraternity of intelligent, practical, and careful people who are already trusted on a regular basis with the lives of others. What’s not to like?”—could manage the transition between regimes.) To prevent a C.E.O. from staging a military coup, the board members would have access to cryptographic keys that would allow them to disarm all government weapons, from nuclear missiles down to small arms, with the push of a button.

Mass political participation would cease, and the only way that people could vote would be with their feet, by moving from one SovCorp to another if they became dissatisfied with the terms of service, like switching from X to Bluesky. The irony that dissenters like Yarvin would probably be repressed in such a state appears not to concern him. In his imagined polity, he insists, there would still be freedom of speech. “You can think, say, or write whatever you want,” he has promised. “Because the state has no reason to care.”

Yarvin’s congenital cynicism about governance disappears as soon as he starts talking about dictatorial regimes. He has kind words for El Salvador’s strongman, Nayib Bukele, and has encouraged Trump to let Putin end the liberal order “not just in Russian-speaking territories—but all the way to the English Channel.” Picking at a plate of fried calamari, Yarvin praised China and Rwanda (neither of which he has visited) for having strong

governments that insured both public safety and personal liberty. In China, he told me, “you can think and pretty much say whatever you want.” He may have sensed my skepticism, given the country’s record of imprisoning critics and detaining ethnic minorities in concentration camps. “If you want to organize against the government, you’re gonna have problems,” he admitted. Then he returned to his airbrush: “Not Stalin problems. You’ll just, like, be cancelled.”

For certain people, like meth addicts or four-year-olds, Yarvin said, too much freedom could be deadly. Then, gesturing to the homeless population camped in the neighborhood, he suddenly began to cry. “The idea that this represents success, or this represents the ‘worst of all systems, except for all the others’ ”—he was referencing Churchill’s famous comment about democracy, which I’d paraphrased earlier—“is highly delusional,” he said, wiping away the tears. (A few weeks later, on a trip to London, I watched him break down while giving a similar speech to a member of the House of Lords. It was less affecting the second time around.)

Presumably, Yarvin’s monarch would act decisively to safeguard his wards. At the Venice café, Yarvin lauded the Delancey Street Foundation, a nonprofit rehab organization, whose strict program he has characterized as exerting “fascist-parent-level control.” Some of his own proposals go further. On his blog, he once joked about converting San Francisco’s underclasses into biodiesel to power the city’s buses. Then he suggested another idea: putting them in solitary confinement, hooked up to a virtual-reality interface. Whatever the exact solution, he has written, it is crucial to find “a humane alternative to genocide,” an outcome that “achieves the same result as mass murder (the removal of undesirable elements from society) but without any of the moral stigma.”

Yarvin’s call for an American strongman is often treated as an eccentric provocation. In fact, he considers it the only answer to a world in which most people are unfit for democracy. An “African country today,” he told me, has “enough smart people in the country to run it—you just don’t have enough smart people to have a democratic election in which everyone is smart.” Because of such remarks, Yarvin is sometimes identified as a white nationalist, a label he delicately resists. In a 2007 blog post titled “Why I

Am Not a White Nationalist," he explained that, though he is "not exactly allergic to the stuff," he finds both whiteness and nationalism to be unhelpful political concepts. During lunch, he told me that he feels a rueful sympathy for the bigots of the past, who had some of the right intuitions but lacked the proper science. Neo-reactionaries tend to subscribe to what they call "human biodiversity," a set of fringe beliefs which holds, among other things, that not all racial or population groups are equally intelligent. As Yarvin came to see it from his online research, these genetic differences contributed to (and, conveniently, helped explain away) demographic differences in poverty, crime, and educational attainment. "In this house, we believe in science—*race* science," he wrote last year.

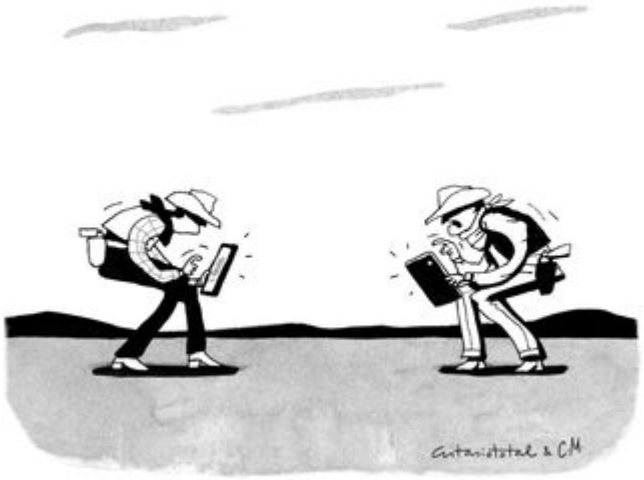
For several hours, Yarvin shuffled through his pitches for strongman rule, like an auctioneer desperate to clinch a sale. I listened patiently, though I was often puzzled by his factual distortions and peculiar asides. "What is the right policy in a completely new-from-scratch regime for African Americans?" he wondered aloud at one point. At first, this seemed like a non sequitur: I'd been pressing him on how he would define success in the second Trump Administration. Answering himself, he said that the "obvious solution" to problems of inner-city drug abuse and poverty would be to "put the church Blacks in charge of the ghetto Blacks." Yarvin, who is an atheist, is not particularly interested in theocratic rule, but he advocates creating different legal codes to govern different populations. (He has cited the Ottoman *millet* system, which granted religious communities a measure of autonomy.) To keep the "ghetto Blacks" in line, he went on, they should be forced to live in a "traditional way," like Orthodox Jews or the Amish. "The approach that the twentieth century took is, if we could just make the schools good enough, they would all turn into Unitarians," he said. "If you've seen 'The Wire' and lived in Baltimore, both of which I have, that does not seem to work at all." It wasn't until he reached the end of his speech, ten minutes later, that I realized he was, in his own way, addressing my initial question. "Unless we can totally reëngineer DNA to change what a human being is, there are many people who should not live in a modern way but in a traditional way," he concluded. "And *that* is a level of revolution that is so far beyond anything the Trump-Vance regime is doing."

Yarvin is not known for his discretion. He has a habit of sharing private correspondence, as I discovered when he started sending me unsolicited screenshots of text messages and e-mails he'd exchanged with his wife, his friends, a fact checker at the *Times Magazine*, and someone nominated to the new Administration. He seemed troubled by the thought that the wit and wisdom they contained might be lost to posterity. He was more guarded about his friendship with Thiel, but he did mention a conversation they'd privately filmed together last year and boasted about a fortieth-birthday gift he'd received from the billionaire: Francis Neilson's "The Tragedy of Europe," a contemporaneous commentary on the Second World War, though not the first edition that Yarvin had been hoping for.

Thiel has always had a prophetic touch. He co-founded PayPal, became the first outside investor in Facebook, and created Palantir, a data-mining firm that has just received a new contract to help Immigration and Customs Enforcement officers carry out deportations. Thiel supported Trump back when doing so still made one a pariah in Silicon Valley. In 2022, he donated fifteen million dollars to J. D. Vance's Senate campaign, the largest amount given to a single candidate in congressional history. A longtime libertarian, Thiel appears to have taken a Yarvinian turn around 2009, when, in a widely quoted essay published online by the Cato Institute, he wrote, "I no longer believe that freedom and democracy are compatible." Yarvin linked to it approvingly in a blog post titled "Democraphobia Goes (Slightly) Viral." They soon met for the first time, at Thiel's house in San Francisco, and, according to private messages I reviewed, struck up a confiding correspondence. Yarvin's e-mails were long and homiletic, full of precepts gleaned from pickup-artist blogs; Thiel's were straightforward and concise. Both men seemed to take for granted that America was a communist country, that journalists acted like the Stasi, and that tech C.E.O.s were their prey.

In the fall of 2014, Thiel published "Zero to One," a best-selling treatise on startups, with Blake Masters, his employee and a longtime Moldbug fan. Before the book tour, Thiel asked Yarvin for advice on fielding questions he might get on how to steer more women into tech. The premise appeared to strike them both as misguided, since women, in their view, were less likely to have men's aptitude for computer science. As Yarvin put it in one e-mail,

“There’s simply no way short of becoming a farce for Google, YC”—Y Combinator, the startup accelerator—“etc, etc, to ‘look like America.’ ” Yarvin suggested that Thiel deploy a pickup-artist tactic called “agree and amplify”—that is, ask a journalist, who probably had no solution in mind, what she would do to tackle the problem. “The purpose here is not to get the interlocutor to sleep with you, but to get her to fear this issue and run away from it—and ditto for future interviewers,” he wrote. Once, at a dinner, Thiel quizzed Yarvin on how one might go about taking down *Gawker*. (As it turned out, Thiel had already decided to secretly bankroll Hulk Hogan’s defamation lawsuit against the online publication, which eventually bankrupted it, in 2016.) In e-mails obtained by *BuzzFeed*, Yarvin bragged to Milo Yiannopoulos, the *Breitbart* editor, that he’d watched Trump’s first election at Thiel’s house and had been “coaching” him. “Peter needs guidance on politics for sure,” Yiannopoulos replied. Yarvin wrote back, “Less than you might think! . . . He’s fully enlightened, just plays it very carefully.”



*“Slowest to hit Skip has to watch the whole ad.”*
*Cartoon by Juan Astasio and Colin Mills*

When I recently visited Yarvin’s Craftsman home, in Berkeley, I noticed a painting that Thiel had given him: a portrait of Yarvin in the style of a role-playing-game character card, bearing the legend “Philosopher.” As I sipped tea from a novelty mug featuring an image of Yarvin with a cartoon crown, he told me that it would be “cringe” for him to broadcast his relationship with Thiel—or with Vance, for that matter, whom he met through Thiel around 2015. “Does a normal Ohio voter read . . . Mencius Moldbug? No,”

Vance reportedly said one night at a bar during the 2021 National Conservatism Conference. “But do they agree with the broad thrust of where we think American public policy should go? Absolutely.” “He’s a really cool guy,” Yarvin said of the Vice-President, who followed him on X earlier this year. (The White House did not respond to requests for comment.)

Although Yarvin tried to be discreet, he mentioned that Thiel has a bit of a “weirdo edge” and described Andreessen, the venture capitalist, as someone who, “apart from the bizarre and possibly even nonhuman shape of his head, would seem much more normal than Peter.” After Andreessen invested in Yarvin’s startup, Tlon, the two got to know each other; they texted and went to brunch long before Andreessen came out as a Trump supporter, last year. Andreessen has been known to urge his associates to read Yarvin’s blog. “Tech people are not interested in appeals to virtue or beauty or tradition, like most conservatives,” the State Department official said. “They are more like right-wing progressives, and for a long time Moldbug was the only person speaking to them this way.” (Andreessen and Thiel declined to comment.) Apropos of his relationships with powerful men, Yarvin paraphrased to me “a wonderful piece of advice for courtiers” that he’d picked up from Lord Chesterfield’s “Letters to His Son,” an eighteenth-century etiquette manual addressed to the author’s illegitimate child: “Never bug them. And never let them forget you exist.”

Yarvin has had more success as a courtier to startup founders than as a founder himself. He launched Tlon in 2013, with a twentysomething former Thiel fellow. Yarvin approached computer science the same way he approached the U.S. government—with, as he put it, “utopian megalomania.” Yarvin’s visionary goal was to build a peer-to-peer computer network, named Urbit, that would allow users to control their own data, free from scolds, spies, and monopolies. Each user on the Urbit network is identified with an N.F.T. that acts like a digital passport. Even though Urbit promotes decentralization, the system is designed around a hierarchical model of virtual real estate, with users owning “planets,” “stars,” or “galaxies.”

In an early sketch of the system, Yarvin named himself its “prince,” but he struggled to attract subjects to his imaginary kingdom. Like Yarvin’s political theory, his programming language, which he wrote himself, was daring, abstruse, and sometimes mistaken for a hoax. Ever the contrarian, he reversed the meaning of zeros and ones. After decades of work and an estimated thirty million dollars of investment, Urbit seems to function less like a feudal society and more like the Usenet forums of Yarvin’s youth. (The trade publication *CoinDesk* has called it “a slower version of AOL Instant Messenger.”) “It doesn’t work the way it’s supposed to,” a former Urbit employee told me, describing Yarvin as “the world’s first computer-science crank.” Yarvin left the company in 2019.

No longer needing to worry about spooking investors, Yarvin threw himself into the life style of a self-described “rogue intellectual.” Under his own name, he launched a Substack newsletter, “Gray Mirror of the Nihilist Prince.” (Today, it is the platform’s third most popular “history” publication.) He became a fixture on the right-wing podcast circuit and seemed never to turn down an invitation to party. On his travels, he often hosted “office hours”—informal, freewheeling discussions with readers, many of them thoughtful young men, alienated by liberal guilt and groupthink. What wins Yarvin converts is less the soundness of his arguments than the transgressive energy they exude: he makes his listeners feel that he is granting them access to forbidden knowledge—about racial hierarchy, historical conspiracies, and the perfidy of democratic rule—that progressive culture is at pains to suppress. His approach seizes on the reality that most Americans have never learned how to defend democracy; they were simply brought up to believe in it.

Yarvin advises his followers to avoid culture-war battles over issues like D.E.I. and abortion. It is wiser, he argues, to let the democratic system collapse on its own. In the meantime, dissidents should focus on becoming “fashionable” by building a reactionary subculture—a counter-Cathedral. Sam Kriss, a left-wing writer who has debated Yarvin, said of his work, “It flatters people who believe they can change the world simply by having weird ideas on the Internet and decadent parties in Manhattan.”

Such people have come to be known as the “dissident right,” a loose constellation of artists and strivers clustered around the Bay Area, Miami, and the Lower East Side micro-neighborhood Dimes Square. The milieu was drawn together by a frustration with electoral politics, *Covid* lockdowns, and the strictures of “wokeness.” Vice signalling has been central to the scene’s countercultural allure: instead of sharing pronouns and employing the approved nomenclature (“unhoused,” “Latinx,” “justice-involved person”), its members have revived insults like “gay” and “retarded.” Dasha Nekrasova and Anna Khachiyan, the hosts of the “Red Scare” podcast, are among the most prominent avatars of the scene. In 2021, Thiel helped to fund an anti-woke film festival in New York, and Yarvin read his poetry at one of its packed events. Urbit now hosts a literary magazine designed to look like *The New York Review of Books*. “If you are an intelligent Jewish-American urbanite who wants to play around with certain Nietzschean and eugenic themes, you aren’t going to join tiki-torch-bearing marchers chanting that ‘the Jews will not replace us,’ ” the conservative commentator Sohrab Ahmari observed in an essay last year. “No, you turn to the dissident right.”

Yarvin has emerged as a veteran edgelord of this crowd, which he compared to San Francisco’s gay subculture in the seventies and to the Lost Generation of literary modernists—tight-knit communities whose members bonded over their sense of being outsiders. James Joyce, he said, sold few copies of “Ulysses,” but his friends, like Ezra Pound and T. S. Eliot, “knew that what he was doing was good.” So it was with the creatives of the dissident right, whose endeavors, he felt, had been overlooked by the intolerant Cathedral. This past April, Yarvin pitched Darren Beattie, the acting Under-Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy, on a plan for “dissident-right art hos” to take over the American pavilion at the Venice Biennale.

Lately, Yarvin has been trying to flip some of his newly acquired cultural capital into the real thing. Last year, he returned to Urbit as a “wartime C.E.O.,” after which several top employees resigned, and in February he raised more money from Andreessen Horowitz. According to a draft of an unpublished Substack post, his newest plan is to promote Urbit as an élite private club whose members, he believes, are destined to become “the stars

of the new public sphere—a new Usenet, a new digital Athens built to last forever."

The night before Trump's Inauguration, I drove Yarvin to a black-tie "Coronation Ball" at the Watergate Hotel, in Washington, D.C. The event was organized by a neo-reactionary publishing house, Passage Press, which recently released Yarvin's book "Gray Mirror, Fascicle I: Disturbance," the first of a planned four-part cycle outlining his vision for a new political regime. Its endnotes predominantly consist of QR-code links to Wikipedia pages: "Denazification," "L'État, c'est moi," "Presentism (historical analysis)." As I negotiated the icy streets, Yarvin explained that during the Elizabethan era the finest minds in the arts and sciences were to be found at court. When I asked if he saw a parallel with Trump's inner circle, he burst out laughing. "Oh, no," he said. "My God."

Like most journalists, I had been denied entry to the ball, so I ordered a drink at a bar in the lobby. Standing next to me was a man wearing a cowboy hat and a burgundy velour suit—a Yarvin enthusiast, it turned out, named Alex Maxa. He ran a party-bus company in San Francisco, and in his free time he made memes featuring Yarvin's likeness. He said that he was drawn to Yarvin's work because "it makes me feel like I've got something that people in Washington who think they're really smart can't actually make a compelling argument against." He'd wanted to go to the ball but tickets, whose price had surged to twenty thousand dollars, were now sold out. Not long afterward, I met two of Yarvin's friends, who encouraged me, and another journalist I was with, to confidently walk into the party with them. Maxa was already inside, having taken a similar approach. "Lol I just waltzed right in by asking where the coat check was," he texted.

Passage Press had billed the event as "*MAGA* meets the Tech Right." It was not false advertising. In a banquet hall awash in pink and purple light, Anton, from the State Department, Laura Loomer, a Trump whisperer known for her anti-Muslim bigotry, and Jack Posobiec, who popularized the Pizzagate conspiracy theory, mingled with venture capitalists, crypto accelerationists, and Substack all-stars. Earlier that evening, as guests dined on seared scallops and filet mignon, Steve Bannon, the ball's keynote

speaker, called for mass deportations, the “Götterdämmerung” of the administrative state, and Mark Zuckerberg’s imprisonment.

Eight years ago, Mike Cernovich, a first-gen alt-right influencer, had co-hosted an inaugural party known as the DeploraBall, a winking reference to Hillary Clinton’s unfortunate crack about half of Trump’s supporters belonging in a “basket of deplorables.” It was, by all accounts, a shambolic affair, plagued by journalists and protesters. One of Cernovich’s co-organizers, Tim Gionet, who goes by the online pseudonym Baked Alaska, was removed from his role after posting antisemitic content on Twitter. Now, at the Coronation Ball, Baked Alaska was served for dessert—a nod, it seemed, to Gionet, who was then on probation for participating in the January 6th insurrection. (He was pardoned by Trump the next day.) Cernovich pushed a baby around in a stroller and marvelled, like a proud father, at how far the movement had come. “I was one of the oldest guys in the place!” he tweeted the following afternoon. “Real right wing. High energy and high IQ.” In 2008, Yarvin, in his “Open Letter,” had called for a reactionary vanguard to form an underground political party. The Coronation Ball made it clear that this was no longer necessary. His web-addled counter-élite was now the establishment.

Yarvin was dressed in the same tuxedo, including a bright-red cummerbund, that he’d worn to a party at Thiel’s house in D.C. the night before, where, as *Politico* reported, Vance had amiably greeted him with “You reactionary fascist!” He’d also worn the tux to his wedding last year. Yarvin’s first wife died in 2021, from a hereditary heart disease, at the age of fifty. At the ball, he was accompanied by his second wife, Kristine Militello. A former Bernie Sanders supporter and an aspiring novelist, Kristine described herself as having been “red-pilled” during the pandemic, after losing her customer-service job at an online wine retailer. She first encountered Yarvin on YouTube, where she watched a video of him arguing against the legitimacy of the American Revolution, and proceeded to read everything he’d written. She sent him an admiring e-mail in 2022, seeking advice on how to break into New York’s dissident-right literary scene, and they met for drinks a few weeks later.

Recently, Yarvin has taken to describing himself as a “dark elf” whose role is to seduce “high elves”—blue-state élites—by planting “acorns of dark doubt in their high golden minds.” (In this Tolkien-inspired metaphor, red-state conservatives are “hobbits” who should submit to the “absolute power” of a new ruling class made up, unsurprisingly, of dark elves.) He didn’t always express himself so quaintly. In 2011, the day after the far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik killed sixty-nine people, many of them teen-agers, at a summer camp in Norway, Yarvin wrote, “If you’re going to change Norway into something new, you need the present ruling class of Norway to *join* and *follow* you. Or at least, you’ll need their children.” He praised Breivik for targeting the right group (“communists, not Muslims”), but condemned his methods: “Rape is beta. Seduction is alpha. Don’t slaughter the youth camp—*recruit* the youth camp.”

Yarvin’s own recruitment efforts seemed to be working. Near the open bar, I spoke to Stevie Miller, a sprightly sophomore at Carnegie Mellon who has been reading Yarvin since the seventh grade. (Yarvin told me that he’d encountered several gifted Zoomers who’d read him as preteens because his “high-I.Q. style” served as a “high-I.Q. magnet.”) Two years ago, Miller hung out with Yarvin at Vibecamp, a gathering for nerds and techies in rural Maryland. Yarvin, who left early, asked Miller to help him throw his own party in D.C., which came to be known as Vibekampf. Afterward, Miller became Yarvin’s first personal intern. “My parents, New York Jewish liberals who I love, were totally mystified,” he said.

After half an hour, I was escorted out of the party, as were other reporters throughout the evening. Security mistook Maxa, my friend from the lobby, for one of our kind, and he was ejected, too, though not before pressing through the crowd to get his photo taken with the dark elf.

Even Trump’s most pessimistic critics have been startled by the speed with which the President, in his second term, has moved to impose autocracy on America, concentrating power in the executive branch—and often enough in the hands of the richest men on earth. Elon Musk, an unelected citizen, has led a squadron of twentysomethings on a spree through the federal government, laying off tens of thousands of civil servants, shuttering the U.S. Agency for International Development, and seizing control of the

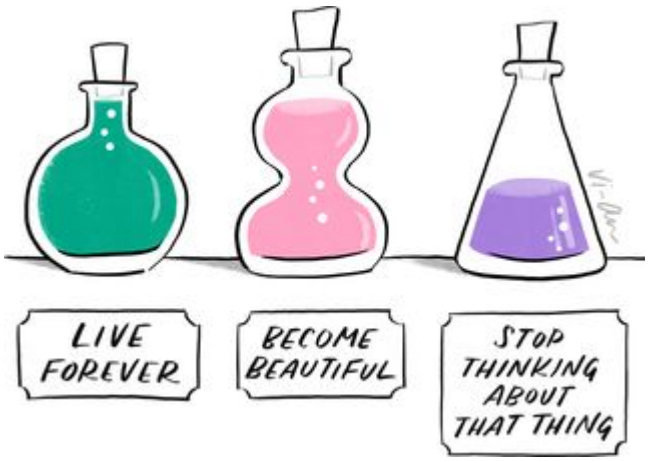
Treasury Department's payment system. Meanwhile, the Administration has launched an assault on civil society, revoking funding at Harvard and other universities that it claims are bastions of ideological indoctrination and punishing law firms that have represented Trump's opponents. It has expanded the machinery of immigration enforcement, deporting three U.S.-born children to Honduras, a group of Asian and Latin American immigrants to Africa, and more than two hundred Venezuelan migrants to a maximum-security prison in El Salvador, where they may remain until the end of their lives. U.S. citizens now find themselves with a government that claims the right to disappear them without due process: as Trump told Bukele, the President of El Salvador, during an Oval Office meeting, "Homegrowns are next." Without a vigorous system of checks and balances, one man's crank ideas—like starting an incoherent trade war that upends the global economy—don't get filtered out. They become policies that enrich his family and his allies.

Since January, a cottage industry has arisen online to trace links between the government's chaotic blitz of actions and Yarvin's writings. Yarvin is hardly the Rasputin-like figure with Oval Office access that certain Bluesky users imagine him to be, but it isn't difficult to see why some people may have come to this view. Last month, an anonymous *DOGE* adviser told the Washington *Post* that it was "an open secret that everyone in policymaking roles has read Yarvin." Stephen Miller, the President's deputy chief of staff, recently quote-tweeted him. Vance has called for the U.S. to retrench from Europe, a longtime Yarvin desideratum. Last spring, Yarvin proposed expelling all Palestinians from the Gaza Strip and turning it into a luxury resort. "Did I hear someone say 'beachfront?' " he wrote on Substack. "The new Gaza—developed, of course, by Jared Kushner—is the LA of the Mediterranean, an entirely new charter city on humanity's oldest ocean, sublime real estate with an absolutely perfect, Apple-quality government." This February, during a joint press conference with Benjamin Netanyahu, the Israeli Prime Minister, Trump surprised his advisers when he made a nearly identical proposal, describing his redeveloped Gaza as "the Riviera of the Middle East."

Whenever I asked Yarvin about resonances between his writing and real-world events, his response was nonchalant. He seemed to see himself as a

conduit for pure reason—the only mystery, to him, was why it had taken others so long to catch up. “You can invent a lie, but you can only discover the truth,” he told me. We were in London, where he was attending the Alliance for Responsible Citizenship, a conservative conference co-founded by the psychologist Jordan Peterson. (Yarvin described Peterson to me as “a dandy” with “a weird narcissistic energy coming off of him.”) Accompanying Yarvin on his travels were Eduardo Giralt Brun and Alonso Esquinca Díaz, two millennial filmmakers who were shooting a documentary about his life. Their goal was to make a naturalistic character study in the style of “Grey Gardens,” in which, as Brun put it, “the camera just happens to be around.” It wasn’t going to plan. Yarvin kept repeating the same monologues, which meant that much of the footage was the same. The filmmakers worried that his racist remarks would turn viewers off. One afternoon in London, Díaz had filmed Yarvin getting his portrait painted with Lord Maurice Glasman, a post-liberal political theorist who has been called “Labour’s *MAGA* Lord,” for his support of Brexit and his ongoing dialogue with figures like Steve Bannon. At one point in their discussion, Yarvin had pulled out his iPhone to show Glasman that he’d hacked the chatbot Claude to get it to call him by the N-word.

Some thinkers would envy the attention Yarvin is receiving. But he dismissed his influence as a “fraudulent currency” since it has yet to cash out in the revolution he desires. He poured scorn on *DOGE* (“so much libertarian DNA”) and Trump’s tariff plan (not mercantilist enough). In a recent essay on Substack, he criticized the decision to dispatch plainclothes *ICE* officers to jail college students and professors for political speech—not on moral grounds, but because the thuggish optics were likely to provoke resistance. Yarvin’s oracular pronouncements and bottomless disdain for actually existing politics have inspired a viral post: his face under the words “Your anti-regime actions work well in practice. But do they work in theory?” The conservative activist Christopher Rufo has compared Yarvin to “a sullen teenager who insists that everything is pointless.” I came to think of him as a reactionary Goldilocks who would be satisfied with nothing less than the inch-perfect autocracy that he’d constructed in his mind.




*Cartoon by Vi-An Nguyen*

This apparent desire for control also shows up in some of his relationships. Not long ago, I visited Lydia Laurenson, Yarvin's ex-fiancée, in Berkeley. The two began dating in September, 2021, after Yarvin posted a personal ad on Substack, explaining that he'd recently lost his "widower virginity" and was looking to meet someone of "childbearing age." Laurenson, a freelance writer and editor, replied the same day: "I have historically been a liberal but my IQ is really high, I want kids, and I'm incredibly curious to talk to you." Yarvin went on Zoom dates with other women who answered the post—among them, Caroline Ellison, the ex-girlfriend of the now imprisoned crypto entrepreneur Sam Bankman-Fried—but he and Laurenson soon found themselves in an all-consuming romance. She told me that the ethos of her relationship with Yarvin was " 'We're going to be geniuses together and have genius babies.' I'm making fun of it a little bit, but that really was it."

Like Yarvin, Laurenson had been a precocious child who went to college early. She'd also maintained a blog with a cult following, where, under the pseudonym Clarisse Thorn, she wrote about sex-positive feminism, B.D.S.M., and pickup artistry. She and Yarvin fought often, sometimes about politics. Laurenson had moved away from the left, but she hadn't fully embraced neo-reaction. When I asked her if she'd ever changed Yarvin's mind about anything, she said she'd gotten him to stop using the N-word, at least around her. (He later told this magazine that he was not using the word in the spirit of "a Southern plantation owner.")

The bigger source of tension, according to Laurenson, was Yarvin's autocratic attachment style. When they fought, Laurenson said, he insisted that she provide a rational justification for ending hostilities. She felt that Yarvin's slippery personal attacks resembled his manner in public debates. "He makes up explanations that seem reasonable, but are actually false; he attacks the character of the person who is trying to point out what he's doing; it's like a DDOS attack of the soul," she told me in an e-mail, referencing the cyberattack strategy of overwhelming a server with traffic from multiple sources. James Dama, a friend of Laurenson's who had his own falling out with Yarvin, recalled, "He would make a coarse joke about Lydia's weight or looks, not get a laugh, and then get angry at Lydia for being too stuck up." (Tanner, Yarvin's first girlfriend, described a similar pattern of insults and demands.)

Laurenson and Yarvin broke up in the summer of 2022, while Laurenson was pregnant. He told me that his desire for closeness might have struck Laurenson as "overbearing and stifling," and that he had a bad habit of making "a joke that's sort of a barb," but he denied that he was ever purposefully cruel during the relationship. (He added that, after the relationship ended, "my natural instinct was, I'm going to cut her down to size every time I can"—something, he noted, he was "very good at.") A few weeks after their son was born, that December, Yarvin sued for partial custody, which he received. An ongoing family-court case remains acrimonious. "The parents are in disagreement about nearly every issue," their mediator observed last year.

Now that they share a toddler, Laurenson spends a lot of time thinking about Yarvin's own childhood. "He has this class-clown thing going on, where he very much craves attention," she said. To her, it seemed that his embrace of a provocative ideology was a kind of "repetition compulsion," a psychological defense that allowed him to reframe the ostracization he experienced growing up. As America's most famous living monarchist, he could tell himself that people were rejecting him for his outré ideas, not for his personality. She wondered if he'd first adopted "the monarchist thing" as a kind of intellectual sport, a bit from Usenet, and then, like the parallel world in the Borges story, it had slowly taken on a reality of its own. "Is it

just like you found this place where people admire you and allow you to troll as much as you want, and then you just live in that world?" she asked.

In the past decade, liberalism has taken a beating from both sides of the political spectrum. Its critics to the left view its measured gradualism as incommensurate to the present's multiple emergencies: climate change, inequality, the rise of an ethno-nationalist right. Conservatives, by contrast, paint liberalism as a cultural leviathan that has trampled traditional values underfoot. In "Why Liberalism Failed" (2018), the Notre Dame political scientist Patrick Deneen argues that the contemporary American emphasis on individual freedom has come at the expense of family, faith, and community, turning us into "increasingly separate, autonomous, non-relational selves replete with rights and defined by our liberty, but insecure, powerless, afraid, and alone." Other post-liberal theorists, including Adrian Vermeule, have proposed that the state curtail certain rights in the service of an explicitly Catholic "common good."

Yarvin is calling for something simpler and more libidinally satisfying: to burn it all down and start again from scratch. Since the advent of neoliberalism in the late seventies, political leaders have increasingly treated governance like corporate management, turning citizens into customers and privatizing services. The result has been greater inequality, a weakened social safety net, and the widespread perception that democracy itself is to blame for these ills, creating an appetite for exactly the kind of autocratic efficiency Yarvin now extolls. "A Yarvin program might seem seductive during a period of neoliberal rule, where efforts to change things, whether it is global warming or the war machine, feel futile," the historian Suzanne Schneider told me. "You can sit back, not give a fuck, and let someone else run the show." Yarvin has little to say on the question of human flourishing, or about humans in general, who appear in his work as sheep to be herded, idiots to be corrected, or marionettes controlled by leftist puppeteers.

Whatever gift Yarvin has for attracting attention, his work does not survive scrutiny. It is full of spurious syllogisms and arguments retconned to match his jaundiced intuitions. He has read widely, but he uses his knowledge merely as grist for the same reactionary fairy tale: once upon a time, people

knew their place and lived in harmony; then along came the Enlightenment, with its “noble lie” of egalitarianism, plunging the world into disorder. Yarvin often criticizes academics for treating history like a Marvel movie, with oversimplified heroes and villains, but it’s unclear what he adds to the picture by calling Napoleon a “startup guy.” (He has favored the revisionist theories that Shakespeare’s plays were really written by the seventeenth Earl of Oxford and that the American Civil War, which he calls the War of Secession, worsened living conditions for Black Americans.) “The neat thing about primary sources is that often, it takes only one to prove your point,” he has proclaimed, which would come as news to historians.

Some of his most thoroughgoing critics are on the right. Rufo, the conservative activist, has written that Yarvin is a “sophist” whose debating style consists of “childish insults, bouts of paranoia, heavy italics, pointless digressions, competitive bibliography, and allusions to cartoons.” He added, “When one tries to locate what it is that you actually think, he cannot help but discover that there really isn’t much substance there.” The most generous engagement with Yarvin’s ideas has come from bloggers associated with the rationalist movement, which prides itself on weighing evidence for even seemingly far-fetched claims. Their formidable patience, however, has also worn thin. “He never addressed me as an equal, only as a brainwashed person,” Scott Aaronson, an eminent computer scientist, said of their conversations. “He seemed to think that if he just gave me one more reading assignment about happy slaves singing or one more monologue about F.D.R., I’d finally see the light.”

Intellectual seriousness may not be the point. Yarvin’s polemics have proved useful for those on the right in search of a rationale for nerd ressentiment and plutocratic will to power. “The guy does not have a coherent theory of the case,” the Democratic senator Chris Murphy, from Connecticut, told me. “He just happens to be saying something out loud that a lot of Republicans are eager to hear.”

It is not difficult to anticipate the totalitarian endgame of a world view that marries power worship with a contempt for human dignity—fascism, as some might call it. Like his ideological nemeses the Bolsheviks, Yarvin seems to believe that the only thing standing in the way of Utopia is an

unwillingness to use every means possible to achieve it. He claims that the transition to his regime will be peaceful, even joyous, but fantasies of violence flicker throughout his work. “Unless the monarch is ready to actually *genocide* the nobility or the masses, he has to capture their loyalty,” he wrote in a Substack post in March. “You’re not going to *foam* these people, like turkeys with bird flu. Right?”

Yarvin’s strong opinions on how the world ought to work extended to this profile. Some of his suggestions were intriguing: he floated the idea of staging a debate with one of his ex-girlfriends, and invited me to follow him to Doha for a meeting with Omar bin Laden, one of Osama’s sons. Others were officious. At one point, he sent me nine texts objecting to my use of the word “extreme”—“a hostile pejorative,” he explained, which my article would be better off without. (He’d previously boasted several times in our taped conversations that he was more “extreme” than anyone in the current Administration.) A few days after the Coronation Ball at the Watergate Hotel, he wrote to *The New Yorker* to complain that I’d walked in without his publisher’s permission; he said that he hoped the incident would not turn into “Watergate 2,” and referred to himself as “certainly the most media-friendly person in the scene!” (Jonathan Keeperman, his publisher at Passage Press and the host of the ball, once suggested that the Republican Party should “lamppost”—that is, lynch—“the journos,” so this was not a particularly high bar to clear.)

One morning this winter, I woke up to twenty-eight texts from Yarvin expressing concerns about my reporting technique. “The problem is that your process is slack and I can feel it generating low-quality content—because it’s not adversarial enough,” he wrote. “When the process is not adversarial, I don’t know what I am contending against.” He briefly considered whether I was “too dumb to understand the ideas,” or whether I’d succumbed to the mental self-censorship that Orwell called “crimestop.” He urged me to watch “The Lives of Others,” an Oscar-winning film that depicts the relationship between an East German playwright and a Stasi agent who is tasked with surveilling him. The Stasi agent, he wrote, “can actually write up the ideas of the playwright, *without even thinking them* It is not even that he is ‘opposed’ to the dissident ideas. It is that he does not even let them touch his brain.” In the film, the Stasi agent eventually

“cracks,” after he comes to sympathize with the playwright’s views. Yarvin, presumably, was the playwright.

He said that he was coming to see me, on the other hand, as an “NPC,” or non-player character. He proposed giving me a Voight-Kampff test, the fictional exam in “Blade Runner” used to distinguish androids from humans. His version would involve the two of us debating “the ‘blank slate theory’ versus ‘racism’ ” and recording the conversation. (“By ‘racism’ I mean of course human biodiversity,” he elaborated.) When I explained that my reporting process did not include submitting to on-demand tests, Yarvin sent me a screenshot of “August 1968,” W. H. Auden’s poem about the Soviet-led invasion of Czechoslovakia to suppress the Prague Spring:

> The Ogre does what ogres can
> Deeds quite impossible for Man,
> But one prize is beyond his reach,
> The Ogre cannot master Speech

He went on to say that although he’d agreed to participate in this story because “no publicity is bad publicity,” he would now try to kill it if he could.

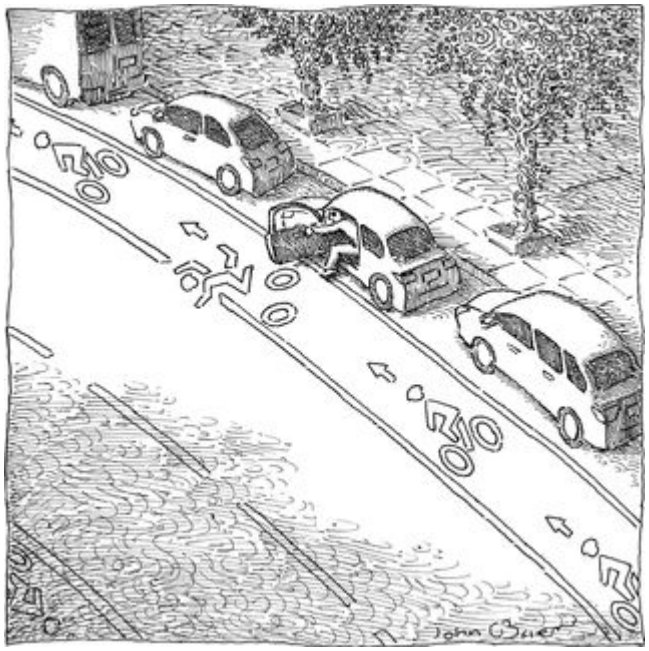
I was struck by the contrast between his messages and the coolheaded tone he’d recommended that Thiel and other friends deploy when handling the media. After the 2013 *TechCrunch* article identifying Yarvin came out, Balaji Srinivasan, the entrepreneur, proposed in an e-mail “to sic the Dark Enlightenment audience on a single vulnerable hostile reporter to dox them.” Yarvin dissuaded him. “What would Heartiste say?” Yarvin asked, referring to the white-nationalist pickup-artist blog “Chateau Heartiste.” “Almost always, the right alpha answer is ‘nothing.’ Say nothing. Do nothing.”

On a balmy afternoon in late February, Yarvin and his wife, Kristine, were driving down a country road in the South of France. They were accompanied by the documentarians, Brun and Díaz. “Where are we going, Kristine?” Brun asked from the passenger seat, turning the camera around to film her in the back beside me.

She said that she had only the vaguest notion. “Honestly, he just tells me everything last minute,” she explained. “It’s kind of like being a dog. You just know that you’re going in the car, and you don’t know if you’re gonna go to the dog park, or you’re gonna go to the vet, and you’ll find out when you get there.”

“Spontaneity,” Yarvin chimed in.

“That’s a word for it,” Kristine teased.



*Cartoon by John O’Brien*

We were on our way to meet Renaud Camus, a seventy-eight-year-old novelist and pamphleteer, who, in 2011, published “The Great Replacement,” an incendiary manifesto that argued that liberal élites were behind a conspiracy to replace white Europeans with migrants from Africa and the Middle East. The title phrase has since become a rallying cry for white nationalists around the world, from Charlottesville, Virginia, where, in 2017, marchers chanted, “You will not replace us,” to Christchurch, New Zealand, where, two years later, a man who’d published a manifesto with the same title as Camus’s killed fifty-one Muslims.

As we crested a hill, the walls of Camus’s castle, Château de Plieux, loomed into view. “Does anyone know if he’s related to Albert Camus?”

Yarvin asked. “I think he’s not related to Albert, but he’s a lovely, old, gay, literary Frenchman.”

Brun, who is Venezuelan, wondered what he would do if Camus “has a sign that says ‘No Foreigners Allowed.’ ”

“Well, are you here to replace us?” Kristine joked. Nobody replied.

Yarvin rang an impressive metal bell beside the door, and we were soon ushered inside by Pierre Jolibert, Camus’s partner. Upstairs, Camus was waiting for us with a bottle of champagne. With his manicured white beard and brown corduroy jacket, complete with a bow tie and gold pocket-watch chain, he looked like a nineteenth-century man of letters. Speaking perfect English, with an English accent, he made it sound as though he’d had no choice but to buy the castle, which dated from the early thirteen-hundreds, after his library grew too large for his small Parisian flat. That was thirty-five years ago. Now, acknowledging the stacks of books that were overtaking his cavernous study, he said that he was running into the same problem here.

Over several glasses of champagne, Yarvin fired a series of questions at Camus, though he rarely waited long enough for his host to give a full answer. What did Camus think of Philippe Pétain? Charles de Gaulle? Napoleon III? Napoleon I? Ernst Jünger? Ernst von Salomon? Ezra Pound? Basil Bunting? More than an interaction, Yarvin, the former trivia champion, seemed to want a pat on the head for his display of learning.

After we headed downstairs for lunch—strips of sizzling duck, a quiche Lorraine, red wine—Yarvin resumed his cross-examination. Did Camus rate Thomas Carlyle? Michel Houellebecq? Louis XIV? What would he say to Charles Maurras if he were alive today? What would Dostoyevsky have thought about the *Covid* lab-leak theory?

Camus let out a high-pitched giggle whenever Yarvin asked a particularly odd question, but he was baffled by his guest’s repeated inquiries about Brigitte Macron, the French First Lady, who Yarvin suspected was actually a man. “We are dealing with the most important thing in the history of the

Continent," Camus exclaimed, referring to the rise of nonwhite immigration to Europe. "What does it matter if Mrs. Macron is a man or woman?"

Brun asked the men to move to a window so that he could shoot them from outside. As Yarvin gazed at the patchwork of neatly tended fields below, he spoke about the Great Replacement as "one of the greatest crimes" in history. "Is it greater than the Holocaust? I don't know. . . . We haven't seen it play out yet." He'd been drinking since his arrival and seemed to be in an emotional state. "I have three children," he told Camus. "Will they be basically lined up and marched into mass graves?" They had been discussing Jean Raspail's apocalyptic novel, "The Camp of the Saints" (1973), which depicts an invasion of Indian migrants destroying European nations. Sobbing now, he continued, "I want my children to die in the twenty-second century. I don't want them to experience some kind of insane post-colonial Holocaust."

After dessert, coffee, and a rum from Guadeloupe, it was time for an evening stroll. Carrying a wooden cane, Camus led Yarvin through the small town of Plieux. Spring had arrived early: a cherry tree was blossoming with little flowers. As they passed the local church, Yarvin took out his phone to show Camus a photo of the toddler he shares with Laurenson. "The mother of that child was not my wife," he said confidingly. A moment later, he was reading a poem by C. P. Cavafy, in tears once again.

When Yarvin and Camus went on ahead, the filmmakers paused to assess the day's shoot. Brun said that Yarvin reminded him of the long-winded character in "Airplane!" who talks so incessantly that it drives his seatmates to kill themselves. We wondered what Camus was making of the afternoon. It wasn't long before we found out. "If intellectual exchanges were commercial exchanges—which they are, to a certain extent—the amount of my exports would not reach one per cent of that of my imports," Camus wrote in his diary, which he posted online the following day. "The visitor spoke without interruption from his arrival to his departure, for five hours, very quickly and very loudly, interrupting himself only for curious fits of tears, when he spoke of his deceased wife, but also, more strangely, certain political situations."

It was dark by the time we all returned to the château. “Thank you so much for your hospitality and your duck and your castle,” Yarvin said, looking around. “How much money did you spend on it?”

Lovingly squeezing Yarvin’s arm, Kristine said, “You can’t just ask people that!”

Camus gave Yarvin some of his books as souvenirs, but Yarvin’s mind already seemed elsewhere. Tomorrow, he would fly to Paris to meet with a group of red-pilled Zoomers and Éric Zemmour, a far-right polemicist who once ran to be the President of France.

As we headed to the car, Yarvin was buzzing with boyish excitement about his performance. He turned to me and the filmmakers. “Was that good?” he asked. “Was that good?” ♦

*Ava Kofman is a staff writer at The New Yorker. She received a National Press Club Award and the Hillman Prize for Magazine Journalism for her reporting on the hospice industry.*

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**U.S. Journal**

# Green-Wood Cemetery's Living Dead

*How the "forever business" is changing at New York City's biggest graveyard.*

***By Paige Williams***

*June 2, 2025*

*"We want to have life here," Joe Charap, a horticulturist who resides on the property with his family, said. "How do we do that while respecting the fact that this is a place to inter the dead?"Photographs by Andrew Moore for The New Yorker*

New York City was gridded for life, not death, and by the late eighteen-twenties there was no good place to put all the bodies. Burial grounds were brimming. New Yorkers walked around holding vinegar-soaked handkerchiefs to their faces, believing that "putrid miasmas" emanated from graveyards and killed people. Scientists were only starting to piece together that contaminated water, not flawed character, caused cholera; that smallpox probably originated in rodents; and that yellow fever was the vector work of the lowly mosquito, not the result of immigration or rotting vegetables. A case of yellow fever, a disease that inspired what one doctor called "great terror," often started with a headache, followed by a high temperature, a slow heart rate, delirium, a sallow complexion, and bleeding from the eyes, nose, and gums. A telltale sign of imminent demise was

“ropy mucous coffee-ground black vomit.” Sweet death: no relief. “The increment of the city” was overtaking one graveyard after another and exposing the dead to “violation in the opening of streets, and other city improvements,” David Bates Douglass, a prominent surveyor and civil engineer, wrote. Finding a solution was a matter of “great and urgent solicitude.”

New Haven, Connecticut, had “reformed” its graveyard—by creating a new one at the edge of town. Other places picked up on the idea of “rural” cemeteries. In Paris, Père Lachaise Cemetery, modelled on an English garden, opened in what is now the Twentieth Arrondissement, and Boston, inspired by Lachaise, created Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge. Henry Evelyn Pierrepont, a wealthy developer and urban planner, wanted something similar for New York. Douglass, who was scouting locations for him, knew of some “hills back of Brooklyn.”

The site stood “at the distance of two and a half miles from the South Ferry,” Douglass wrote in a report. He described the landscape as “beautifully diversified with hill and valley—descending in some places to less than twenty feet above tide-water, and in others, rising to more than two hundred,” with a “variety and beauty of picturesque scenery” rarely found in “so small a compass.” The terrain lent itself to “a high degree of adaptation, as a place of sepulture either in tombs or in graves.”

Geologically, Douglass was describing a push moraine: about twenty thousand years ago, the front edge of a glacier advanced and retreated, over and over, rumpling the earth like a thin rug badly vacuumed. The result was a tumble of hills and knolls, tiered cliffs, kettle depressions created by massive blocks of stranded ice—these later became ponds—and a vast outwash plain. Part of the Battle of Long Island, an unsuccessful but pivotal moment in the Revolutionary War, had been fought there, at the highest point in Brooklyn, in late August of 1776. Pierrepont bought a hundred and seventy-eight acres.

What to call it? Necropolis? Too cold. “A Necropolis is a mere depository for dead bodies,” Douglass wrote. “Green-Wood,” on the other hand, implied “verdure, shade, ruralness, natural beauty, every thing, in short, in

contrast with the glare, set form, fixed rule and fashion of the city." And so it was chartered, on April 18, 1838: the Green-Wood Cemetery.

Douglass laid out the first of what would become fifty-nine avenues, a hundred and eighty footpaths, and four walks. One could spend eternity, or an afternoon, on Sassafras, Snowberry, Jasmine, Lavender, Mistletoe, Linden, or Vine. The avenues formed a carriage route called the Tour. "Now you pass over verdant and sunny lawns, now through park-like groves, and now by the side of a tangled, unpruned forest," Nehemiah Cleaveland, Green-Wood's first historian, wrote. There were panoramic views of Gowanus Bay and lower Manhattan. The *Evening Post* reported that Green-Wood, whose design later influenced the creation of Central Park, was "almost too beautiful a spot to be given up to the dead."

The cemetery expanded to four hundred and seventy-eight acres, and will grow no more. Green-Wood, one of the largest privately owned properties in New York City, is now fully surrounded—by delis, apartment buildings, town houses, a car wash, Philip Kaplan Glass & Mirror, M & S Batrouni Service Station, Long & DeLosa Construction Group, an M.T.A. train yard, Fort Hamilton Tires & Rims, Life Storage, Auto Dent Collision, Padrino Auto Repair, Stanley Steemer, Shannon Florist & Greenhouse, and Baked in Brooklyn, which is an actual bakery, not a cannabis dispensary. A real-estate agent might refer to the neighborhood as Greenwood Heights, but Green-Wood's president of the past thirty-nine years, Rich Moylan—a self-described "Brooklyn boy, Fourteenth Street between Third and Fourth Avenue"—says it's also called "South *South*" Park Slope. The cemetery's current footprint was largely in place by 1895, as were a great many of the nearly six hundred thousand people now interred there, collectively known to Green-Wood's staff as "permanent residents." Its main entrance, at Twenty-fifth Street and Fifth Avenue, is marked by an imposing brownstone Gothic Revival structure, the Arch, where a pandemonium of monk parakeets has long kept an elaborate nest.

Green-Wood's earliest burial lots, typically fourteen by twenty-seven feet, cost a hundred dollars apiece; today, a grave starts at twenty-one thousand. The names of the dead are recorded in enormous archival ledgers bound in cloth or leather, the oldest of whose bindings have deteriorated into "red

rot," a substance with the consistency of suède. The inaugural name, Mrs. Sarah Hanna, was entered on September 5, 1840, in the kind of cursive handwriting that humans have lost the ability and patience to parse. Hanna and several others had been dug up from New York Marble Cemetery, in the East Village, and moved to Green-Wood, followed by people named Westcoat, White, Clark, Wilson, Lewis, Codman, and Blount. In came "Otto Van Kyle's Infant," "George Bristow's Infant," "Oakley's Infant." Causes of death: apoplexy, dropsy, smallpox, consumption.

Douglass predicted that Green-Wood would hold a collection of "monuments commemorative of the distinguished characters and events of national history." But although tens of thousands of visitors were coming for respite, too few were buying: only a hundred and seventy-five people were interred there by 1843. Père Lachaise had had a similar problem until its operators, in a macabre bit of marketing, arranged for the remains of Molière and Jean de La Fontaine to be relocated to their grounds.

*A pair of monk parakeets.*

Who could Green-Wood get? America was only sixty-seven years old. Pierrepont and company landed on a New York governor, DeWitt Clinton, who had pushed for the construction of the Erie Canal, the first shipping route between the country's interior and the Atlantic Ocean. Clinton was ridiculed for his obsession with infrastructure until the numbers proved him out: the canal transformed New York City into an economic powerhouse, and its population surged to more than two hundred thousand.

Clinton, who died suddenly, and in office, in 1828, lay in a borrowed vault in Albany, having left his family too destitute to send his body back to New York City, where he'd served multiple terms as mayor. Green-Wood offered a permanent home and a bronze "hero" statue, and the Governor was carted south. Green-Wood interred him at what is now called Clinton Dell, and, in 1853, erected the statue, by Henry Kirke Brown. It stands ten and a half feet tall on an eight-and-a-half-foot pedestal, and shows Clinton wearing both a

business suit and a toga. Green-Wood had less trouble attracting clients after that: Tiffanys, Pfizers, Henry Ward Beecher, James Gordon Bennett, Sr., Horace Greeley. Monument carvers and florists set up shop in the neighborhood.

A hundred and eighty-seven years after its founding, Green-Wood resembles a sculpture garden. There are more than two hundred and fifty thousand monuments and more than five hundred mausolea. Owls, horses, baseballs, clasped hands, winged hourglasses, and empty beds are among the iconography that I have seen incised on the funerary surfaces. The angels (and they are many) weep and sag, but they also look heavenward. Lambs mean children. Broken flower stems and shorn columns symbolize early death. There are sarcophagi and plinths and cenotaphs. Lord at the obelisks. One day this spring, I asked Moylan to show me his favorite monument. It is shaped very clearly like a—“I’ll just say ‘a marital aid,’ ” one staffer later told me. Moylan said, “We don’t know how it got past the censors.”

Topography is destiny: dozens of mausolea were tucked into those deglaciated cliffs, and during grassier seasons they resemble thatched-roof hobbit houses with bronze or stone doors. Other mausolea are freestanding. Some have Tiffany stained-glass windows. The tomb of Charles Feltman, a restaurateur who supposedly invented the hot dog, is nicer than my apartment. There are four front steps bracketed by two huge urns, half a dozen Corinthian columns, and six life-size maidens, possible goddesses. Atop a cupola, the archangel Michael stands seven feet tall, his sword lowered, facing a Burger King. Feltman’s eternal neighbors include the Sommers, the Lynans, the Archers, and the Gales. The Maniscalcos might like to know that their guardian angel has come to miss her marble arms.

*Neela Wickremesinghe, Green-Wood's chief conservator, trained in Columbia University's historic-preservation program.*

One Saturday afternoon in March, two dozen tourists representing a near-complete range of the human life span climbed aboard a trolley at Green-Wood and submitted to the effervescence of Marge Raymond, a seasoned singer with a blond updo and sunglasses the size of T-bones. She wore head-to-toe black and had on so much turquoise jewelry that I had to ask about it. "Turquoise is very protecting," she told me. "Not that I believe in anything like that." (She was raised Catholic, in Flatbush.) I sat beside Sylvia Fink, a retired physical therapist who considered tours at Green-Wood to be among life's "enriching activities"—she'd been on the trolley before, but not Marge's. As we pulled up to DeWitt Clinton's towering bronze likeness, Marge said, "Quite the man!"

If Green-Wood employees hear a noteworthy name and know that person to be a permanent resident, they are likely to say, "We've got him." And it is

usually a “him,” though the cemetery also likes to let people know that Green-Wood’s got Laura Keene, an actress who witnessed Abraham Lincoln’s assassination at Ford’s Theatre; Dr. Susan Smith McKinney Steward, New York’s first Black female physician; and Teddy Roosevelt’s mother, as well as his wife, who died hours apart on Valentine’s Day, 1884. After marking his diary “X” and writing, “The light has gone out of my life,” Roosevelt had the women placed in a vault accessible by a hatch in the earth. Across Green-Wood, stone slabs—vault covers—lie flat on the ground, often affixed with patinaed rings, for hoisting. Some clients instructed the cemetery to seal their tombs by letting the entrances grow over. You could be standing on top of a door and never know it. Certain vaults can be opened only with earth-moving machines and an iron key as long as a human forearm.

*“What? Too ribald?”*
*Cartoon by Liana Finck*

Green-Wood doesn’t have Teddy (he’s in Oyster Bay), but it’s got James Weldon Johnson, co-author of “Lift Every Voice and Sing”; James Harper, publisher; F. A. O. Schwarz, toy seller; John Underwood, typewriter maven; Duncan Phyfe, furniture-maker. Jeff Richman, the cemetery’s historian, covers most of this in four books that he’s written about Green-Wood, all

published by Green-Wood. In one of the cemetery's maps, William (Boss) Tweed, a Green-Wooder since 1878, is indexed as "Tammany crook." There is Eberhard Faber ("eraser on pencil"), Walter Hunt ("invented safety pin"), Samuel Chester Reid ("designed Amer. flag"). We won't have time here for Isabella Stewart Gardner's parents or Winston Churchill's grandparents, or, at length, for John Matthews, the "soda fountain king," one of whose descendants, Felicia Tracy, recently allowed me to tag along when she visited his monument with her daughter and granddaughter, as part of a genealogical pilgrimage from Northern California. Neela Wickremesinghe, Green-Wood's chief conservator, told the women, "Whenever I hear 'girls' trip to New York,' this is where I take people, too."

Wickremesinghe, who is thirty-seven, trained in Columbia University's historic-preservation program and runs an initiative for young people interested in the discipline. The Matthews monument often stars in her presentations. It consists of four pink-granite columns supporting a sculpture of Gothic arches and spires in brownstone and marble. Matthews lies in repose, gazing up at carved images of his life. Above that sits a figure that represents his wife, or Grief; either way, she's missing her head. Gargoyles spout water when it rains. Tracy, a rancher and a former teacher, began to tell Wickremesinghe about a close friend of her parents': "He was at Harvard, at the Fogg Museum—"

"We have the Foggs!" Wickremesinghe said.

Green-Wood is an active cemetery; the staff typically bury at least one new resident per day. Not allowed on the grounds: dogs, running, rollerblading, music, alcohol, scooters, bikes, kites, Frisbees, balls, skimpy clothing, sunbathing, swimming, shouting, skylarking, picnicking ("light lunches" excepted, and only at the ponds), or fashion modelling. Go to Prospect Park for all that.

A single grave may hold up to six people: three casketed, three cremated. Green-Wood stacks clients at depths of nine, seven, and five feet. Detailed burial orders describe who is interred. The cemetery relies on these records when investigating heirship, the legal passage of burial rights. "It goes first to children. No children? Spouse. No spouse? Parents. No parents? Brothers and sisters. No brothers and sisters? Nieces and nephews," Sara Durkacs,

the vice-president of lot-holder relations, told me. A grave at Green-Wood is the only real estate that some New Yorkers ever own. If a lot goes unused for seventy-five years, the cemetery can petition to reclaim it. Owners may sell a vacant lot back to Green-Wood. What they may not do—at least not without consent from all interested parties, or a court order—is rearrange the dead once they're in the ground, or exhume them to make a sale. This isn't Jenga.

You know that they're about to dig a grave at Green-Wood when you see a large metal supply box containing, among other things, planks, plywood, and a mechanical casket-lowering device. One bitter Friday, Jahongir Usmanov, Green-Wood's operations manager, who drives around in an F-150, parked near a supply box and led me up a gravel footpath called Autumn Walk, in a section named for the country estate of Samuel F. B. Morse, who invented the telegraph before becoming a Green-Wooder in 1872. It was nine-thirty in the morning and so windy that miniature flags on graves were horizontal. The gravediggers were preparing for a funeral at two. Four neon-orange stakes marked off a rectangle in front of a headstone. The stone was inscribed with the name of a woman buried at nine feet; her husband was coming in at seven.

Crewmen arrived in yellow hard hats: Pedro Medina and Marian Kosiorowski, on foot; Raymon Echevarria, in a utility cart; and Jimmy Figueroa Santiago, in a beeping backhoe. The gravediggers are unionized; many of them used to be Irishmen, but they are now Polish, Cuban, Puerto Rican, Dominican. They tend to live in Brooklyn, and they have their own bowling league and wayfinding language. "Danny's island" refers to a section of the cemetery where one guy's brother is buried; "big baby" refers to an area where Henry Ruggles, a nineteenth-century artist, is memorialized with a sculpture of a kneeling boy. "Basquiat" means the zone where the artist Jean-Michel Basquiat was buried, in 1988. Basquiat's marker belongs to a winding row of low, modern headstones that were installed in place of a road, inadvertently creating the effect of a big snake in a nice garden. Basquiat gets regular visitors, who leave gifts. One day, I saw a graphite pencil, a gold medallion, a pinecone, and a stone painted with the word "hero" left on his monument. A gravedigger named Raphael Ortiz told me, "We have to clean lipstick off of it a lot."

Medina and Kosiorowski stood on opposite corners of a sheet of plywood, which lay next to the uncut grave. Each held a slender iron rod perpendicular to the wood. Santiago extended the backhoe's arm and used the bucket to knuckle each pole down through the plywood and into the earth, like you'd stick candles into a birthday cake. An expert machine operator can make a hydraulic arm seem almost sentient. A plank was then placed lengthwise against the bottom of the iron pilings, creating a baseboard. The toothed scoop bit into the earth, inches from the tombstone, and peeled off a layer of turf, then dumped it onto the plywood. The baseboard kept the dirt from rolling downhill. The next scoop went into Echevarria's utility cart; he hauled the dirt away, to fill in graves that were settling.

Green-Wood consists mostly of glacial till, an unstratified jumble of sands, cobbles, and clays. Clay is easier to handle than sand, which caves in on itself. The steeper the terrain, or the more crowded with monuments, the slower the work. It can take anywhere from half an hour to all day to open a grave. Green-Wood's gravediggers undergo a forty-day tryout to prove that they are capable of "patience and perseverance," Usmanov told me. "We've had *young* men who give up in the middle and say, 'I can't do this anymore.' " Grave-digging is an all-weather job, and in traditional Jewish and Muslim burials there is a twenty-four-hour deadline. During the first months of *COVID*, Green-Wood put ten caskets in the ground and cremated twenty bodies every day. The crematory, which was built in the fifties, shares a building with the executive offices, a columbarium, and two modern chapels. In normal times, having a couple dozen waiting caskets in the crematory is considered a bottleneck; at the height of the pandemic, there were seventy-five. Eric Barna, the senior vice-president of operations, had to ask for a special permit to operate the retorts around the clock.

Green-Wood stayed open to the public when everything shut down. Visitors were so grateful that hundreds became Green-Wood volunteers. I met one, Christy Jones, on a recent Sunday, in an office at the base of the Arch. She and several other volunteers were opening fat brown envelopes of old burial orders and pencilling information onto manila folders, streamlining the archives. Jones told me that visiting Green-Wood helped her grieve the pandemic-related loss of her job at the Japan Society, and also visually

process a difficult milestone: on June 15, 2021, the United States surpassed six hundred thousand *COVID* deaths, roughly the number of people interred at Green-Wood. When Jones's own mother died, in early 2023 (not of *COVID*, but gone nonetheless), Jones's family memorialized her at the cemetery by adopting a Japanese maple.

Collective trauma is well represented at Green-Wood. More than five thousand Civil War veterans, Union and Confederate, are buried there; Richman, the historian, has been discovering and marking their graves for more than two decades. A hundred and three of nearly three hundred people who died in a fire at Brooklyn Theatre on December 5, 1876, are buried at Green-Wood in a communal lot, their bodies arranged like spokes on a wheel. Forty-six of more than a thousand people who died when the General Slocum, a passenger steamboat, sank in the East River, in 1904, are at Green-Wood. After two passenger jets collided over Staten Island, on December 16, 1960, Green-Wood received three caskets containing the remains of an indeterminate number of victims and memorialized, in granite, all hundred and thirty-four people who died. On the morning of September 11, 2001, cemetery workers stood on hillsides and watched the World Trade Center collapse. One employee lost his wife. Green-Wood handled the remains, or the memorials, of firefighters and police officers. A hundred and thirty people work at the cemetery—gravediggers and cremators, but also salespeople, archivists, preservationists, educators, horticulturists. They consider themselves "last responders."

Medina extended a tape measure into the hole and said, "Six-ten." When one side of the grave collapsed slightly, the scoop evened out the rectangle. A few minutes later, the hydraulic arm folded up, like a bird tucking in a wing, and the machine trundled off to work another job. Medina and Kosiorowski covered the mound of displaced dirt with an AstroTurf tarp, which is called "dressing up the grave," a courtesy to mourners. Usmanov and I stared down into the gaping hole, its walls marbled with grass roots. He told me about a time that he felt compelled to attend the burial of a man whose only other witness was his lawyer, and said, "Everything we have in life is of our making." Later, he showed me the grave of Frank Morgan, the actor who played the wizard (and four other roles) in "The Wizard of Oz."

Green-Wood had planted a yellow brick road of golden crocuses. They were up.

*Marge Raymond, a singer and a tour guide, leads trolleys full of visitors through the grounds.*

*Rich Moylan, Green-Wood's outgoing president, started working at the cemetery in 1972.*

A grave does not come with the job at Green-Wood, but the job does come with a discount. Usmanov is forty-three but already knows who will be in charge of his funeral playlist, and of drinks (bylaws notwithstanding), and of enforcing his persona-non-grata list. "Am *I* invited?" Lauryn Duncan, a newly hired archivist, recently asked him. "I'll bring bagpipes!" She is thirty-two and used to live in Scotland.

"Oh, I forgot bagpipes!" Usmanov said, and added them to the list.

Durkacs and her husband plan to be cremated, inurned, and buried at the cemetery's Irish memorial. Moylan will be with his parents, who are at Clinton Dell. Barna, who is fifty-one, told me, "I've told my parents, 'Just cremate me and do whatever you want.' I'm not a romantic when it comes to death. I never understood somebody spending a million dollars building a monument. Couldn't you take that million and *help* somebody?" Marge, the

tour guide, has picked out a spot near Do-Hum-Me, the daughter of a Sac and Fox Nation chief; she died in 1843, at the age of eighteen, probably of flu, while performing with P. T. Barnum. During our trolley ride, Marge urged her audience not to leave a decision as important as eternity to others. "What do you *want*?" she asked. Burial? Cremation? A tombstone? A monument? A bench? An urn? A tree? Marge had a friend who'd had Stage IV cancer and no family to speak of. "Go in the Tranquility Garden," Marge told her. "There's a koi pond!" Marge visits her there now. For herself, Marge planned a tombstone with carvings of inverted torches. "The flame never goes out because the soul is forever and ever," she explained. "There's *thousands* of them in the cemetery!"

Moylan, who turns seventy-one in August, wears his silver hair short and has pale-blue eyes, a shockingly cluttered office, and an ex-wife named Gloria, who, he informed me, five minutes after we met, is Jamaican and Cuban. (We had been talking about his youth as a "sort of racist teen-ager," part of a larger conversation about diversity in cemetery leadership.)

Moylan began working at Green-Wood in 1972, when he was seventeen. He started out on lawns. His father, a monument installer, got him the job. He kept working there after earning a law degree, and ascended from grounds supervisor to the presidency in 1986, after his predecessor died unexpectedly, of a heart attack. An iconic photo from the turn of the twentieth century shows well-dressed New Yorkers strolling near the Arch, in top hats and beneath parasols, during an era when Green-Wood was said to be the second most popular tourist attraction in New York State, after Niagara Falls. By the time Moylan took over, you had to own a burial lot or have a pass to get inside. "The place, in the seventies, like the rest of New York City, wasn't very well maintained," he told me. Lawns were overgrown; the historic chapel, which was built in 1913, by the firm that had just done Grand Central Terminal, was derelict. "Green-Wood wasn't a place to be proud of," Moylan said. In the late nineties, after visiting an abandoned cemetery in Baltimore, he told himself, "This can't happen in Brooklyn."

*“The members of the jury will disregard the witness’s last statement, but they should infer a great deal from his facial hair.”*
*Cartoon by Tom Chitty*

Moylan set about improving the grounds. A retired cop, John Cashman, who was obsessed with finding Civil War graves, began hosting popular walking tours, which suggested the potential of wider public interest. Moylan realized that the cemetery contained the history of a *society*. Green-Wooders helped create Ebbets Field, Cooper Union, the sewing machine, the A.S.P.C.A., Colgate toothpaste, Steeplechase Park, the New York Institute for the Education of the Blind, the Hudson River School, the New Jersey College for Women, the American Museum of Natural History, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Brooklyn Bridge. A visitor could see the graves of a Mafia hit man and of Varian Fry, a young journalist who, in 1940, sneaked three thousand dollars into Nazi-occupied France and facilitated the escape of thousands of people, including Marc Chagall, Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, and Hannah Arendt.

Moylan and Richman searched for notable names in the cemetery’s records and provided monuments for certain unmarked graves. After “Gangs of New York” came out, in 2002, Green-Wood erected a tombstone on the previously blank grave of William (Bill the Butcher) Poole, and offered “Gangs of New York” tours. A few years later, the executive director of the Historic Districts Council noted that “Green-Wood must more and more look to tourism and the community for support,” adding that building a constituency required “a great deal of creativity and thought.”

Green-Wood now puts on three hundred programs a year, which surprises a lot of people. “Do you know about the *night* life here?” Persephone Whiteside-McFadden, a documentary filmmaker, asked me the other day. She and her father, brother, and stepmother were visiting Green-Wood to sign off on renovations to three mausolea where her ancestors, the Cuttings, are interred. There are outdoor movies, and celebrations of *hanami*, Qingming, el Día de los Muertos. There are concerts in the catacombs. Only at Green-Wood is it possible to enjoy a show performed on a Steinway concert grand piano near the tomb of the actual Steinways. After modern dancers in flowing white costumes began performing on the grounds (and atop the mausolea, and in the trees), Moylan cheerfully warned prospective clients, “We literally might be dancing on your grave.” The pondside mausoleum of Billy Niblo, who owned a famous Manhattan theatre in the late eighteen-hundreds, called for a two-night Victorian-circus extravaganza. The historic chapel was restored and is now used for funeral services, book talks, and the occasional wedding.

A grief-education program is run by Gabrielle Gatto, a thirty-one-year-old death doula who wears big-shouldered blazers and calls Green-Wood’s residents “other-siders.” She got into her line of work after losing a favorite uncle, a retired F.D.N.Y. captain, to a 9/11-related illness, and recognizing the importance of speaking frankly about death and dying. Her free workshops include Grieving & Weaving, where regulars knit or crochet and talk about whatever. In March, a continuing-ed event for morticians featured an appearance by Jennifer Muldowney, an Irish funeral planner who’s known as the Glam Reaper. The event was standing room only. A recent panel featuring gravediggers sold out.

Years ago, the cemetery had to walk back a programming misfire involving horror movies. A local assemblywoman, conveying a constituent’s disapproval, asked Moylan for an explanation. He assured her, “My mother’s buried here, my father’s buried here, my uncle’s buried here, my grandmother’s buried here. I would never do anything to dishonor them.” Joe Charap, Green-Wood’s vice-president of horticulture, who lives on the grounds with his wife and their two children, told me, “We want to have *life* here. How do we do that while respecting the fact that this is a place to inter the dead?”

A cemetery fills up—then what? Selling lots keeps the grass mowed. At Green-Wood, the hope is that tourism and programming will offset the inevitable depletion of available space for full-body burials, the service that brings in the most revenue. (The cemetery, a nonprofit, made about $18.5 million in 2023, including grants and investment income.) Cremation, increasingly popular, is cheaper: good for the customer, less so for the bottom line.

Green-Wood has invested well—its assets are worth about half a billion dollars—but Moylan worries, obsessively, that it won't be enough. "I mean, what if the inflation of the eighties comes back, blows everything out of the water?" he told me. David Fleming, Jr., a lobbyist in Albany who has specialized in cemetery preservation for thirty years, said, "I don't think any cemetery has enough money. We're in the *forever* business. Really, how much money is going to be enough, in a hundred years, to maintain a workforce that's necessary for the upkeep of grounds and monuments, and to provide public space? It's very difficult to gauge what those costs are going to be. Right now, they're climbing at an astronomical rate."

Traditionally, a cemetery's care fell to families and churches. "But we live in a transient world," Fleming said. "Property gets sold, people move out of state, there's no longer any heirs." In the past thirty-five years, nearly two hundred of New York State's six thousand cemeteries have been abandoned. By law, the local municipality almost always assumes responsibility for a failed cemetery. Moylan, hoping never to reach that point, has tried to make Green-Wood so essential—as both a working cemetery and a cultural institution—that New York would never turn its back on it.

Where expansion isn't possible, innovation and efficiency must prevail, the way that life on a ship requires using every available inch. At Green-Wood, as at many cemeteries, you can pay to have ashes scattered, inurned and buried, or niched. For thirty-five hundred dollars, you can adopt a memorial bench. To have a name permanently emplaqued on one of Green-Wood's eight thousand trees, prices start at five grand. Moylan is intrigued, personally, by a newer service, green burial, which is to say, O.G. burial: using biodegradable materials and no embalming fluid. Aquamation—liquefying a body via alkaline hydrolysis—may one day be an option. I

would be interested in atomization. Stand on a New York City sidewalk and spray me into the faces of people who never look up from their phones.

According to Moylan, Green-Wood will be out of room for full-body burials in five years. He's been saying this for ages, but, empirically, it will someday be true. The staff has been mapping every last crevice of salable land, a job that Barna, the operations V.P., told me may one day be done with drones. Finding space between existing lots would be easy math in a flat, ordered graveyard; Green-Wood's configuration is complicated by the curvilinear landscape, and by the fact that Green-Wood's earliest families got to choose whatever lot shape they wanted, in whatever location suited them. Usmanov showed me a surveyor's sketch and said, "Circular—my least favorite. And ellipses—I hate ellipses! They're a pain in the ass to work with. Squares, you find one side, you can find the other."

A potentially developable area is the receiving tomb, a cavernous underside of a cliff near the chapel. John Argenziano, the cemetery's head of security, who spent thirty-two years at the N.Y.P.D., unlocked it for me one night. As we went inside, I stomped my boots to scare off any rats, and turned on a flashlight. The beam showed stashed statues and pews, and walls that consisted of many hundreds of rectangular openings, which originally held bodies until the ground thawed or burial arrangements could be finalized. There was room for fifteen hundred.

Back outside, we drove around the grounds, to see how dark it gets at Green-Wood at night. You can see your own nose on Border Avenue, but best of luck on Blossom Path. Thieves and vandals used to jump the cemetery's iron fence to smash monuments or steal bronze, but Argenziano swore that stuff like that doesn't happen anymore. No ghosts, either, before you ask. "Fifteen years here and *nothing*," I heard Stacy Locke, the cemetery's communications director, tell Duncan, the archivist. Duncan looked disappointed. Green-Wood does have one of the Fox sisters, who, in 1848, claimed that they could communicate with the dead through tapping sounds; they were exposed as frauds who were only cracking their toes. I went to Green-Wood almost every day for weeks this spring, and the most unnerving thing I saw was an enormous hunched figure, wearing a cloak,

with a gaping hole for a face. This was Azrael, the angel of death—a bronze sculpture by Solon Borglum, whose brother did Mt. Rushmore.

In 1851, Green-Wood's comptroller, Joseph Perry, wrote that he hoped the cemetery would be "unmarred by mistaken taste, undesecrated by rude hands." Moylan does his best. Balloons he despises, as well as "little plastic fences" and "fancy plastic Madonnas." Items that I saw in (or destined for) garbage cans at Green-Wood included pink tinsel, wind spinners, fake flowers, and St. Patrick's Day decorations. Lot holders know that tchotchkes aren't allowed but that the grounds crew will indulge them, for a time. Charap, the horticulturist, said, "We don't begrudge people their traditions, but we have to start thinking about the bigger picture, about waste."

Fleming, the lobbyist in Albany, who has done consulting work for Green-Wood, told me, "Green-Wood is an example that we use frequently, across the state, of how to do things right." Over time, Moylan has surprised himself by accepting evolved interpretations of the cemetery's mission. The horticulturists, working with Cornell University, convinced him of the environmental urgency of allowing certain manicured areas to be reimagined as native meadows. (During Marge's trolley tour, a tourist pointed to a grassy hillside and asked, "Why is that one all overgrown?" Marge explained carbon emissions.) Charap told me, "I think we've learned a great deal about people's threshold for conceptions of 'neglect' and 'care.' This is the type of work that cemeteries and public parks are going to have to start reckoning with in this day of mass extinctions and climate collapse."


*Jean-Michel Basquiat's monument gets regular visitors. "We have to clean lipstick off of it a lot," a gravedigger said.*

*By the end of the nineteenth century, Green-Wood was said to be the second most popular tourist attraction in New York State, after Niagara Falls.*

Green-Wood's tagline is "Art, history, and nature in the heart of Brooklyn." Charap might happily reverse the order. A new beetle species was discovered at the cemetery, in partnership with the U.S. Forest Service; Charap showed me a laboratory area in the service yard where bugs wander off of decaying tree branches and into jugs of pink antifreeze, to become immortalized in scientific studies on the preservation of urban forests. Green-Wood recently received nearly $2.5 million in grants for a stormwater-management program that helps with irrigation and eases pressure on the city's overburdened sewer system.

In 2006, Green-Wood became a National Historic Landmark, which, among other things, improves its chances of receiving grants. Such funding allowed the cemetery to buy and restore Weir Greenhouse, the city's only surviving commercial greenhouse from the Victorian era. The structure,

which has an octagonal dome and a copper-clad cupola, anchors the project that Moylan calls his “baby,” a forty-million-dollar welcome center that’s being constructed just opposite the main gate. The center is scheduled to open next year. It will house administrative offices, classrooms, and—unusual at a cemetery—event and exhibition spaces.

Years ago, Moylan decided that Green-Wood needed to own at least one original work by each of the hundreds of artists in permanent residence. His first purchase, in 2006, for a thousand dollars, was a painting of nymphs by Louis Michel Eilshemius. Green-Wood has never been able to afford an Asher B. Durand, who was a father of American landscape painting, or a Basquiat, whose work auctions for tens of millions of dollars. The cemetery does, however, own more than six hundred other pieces, including a George Catlin portrait of DeWitt Clinton—a “doubleheader,” Moylan has called it, as both men are Green-Wooders. Paintings hang floor to ceiling in the administrative buildings, even in the stairwells.

Thousands of artifacts are locked away—Civil War-era journals, vintage cameras. Green-Wood families often donate heirlooms, but Richman, the historian, also buys pieces on eBay. He showed John Matthews’s descendants a soda fountain, brass pressure gauges, and a catalogue advertising “Snow Flake Marble Dust,” pulverized marble being an ingredient that, when combined with sulfuric acid, creates carbon dioxide—fizz. Wickremesinghe jokes that to recruit young preservationists in Brooklyn all she has to say is “seltzer.”

At the welcome center, the art and artifacts will reside in a research unit that was backed by a half-million-dollar grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. Green-Wood won the grant in early 2023 and received the first third of the funds shortly thereafter. This year, when it became clear that the Trump Administration intended to decimate federal support for cultural institutions, Green-Wood contacted the N.E.H. and asked if the balance could be put through quickly. The funds arrived in April. “We moved the money into the construction account immediately, and spent it,” Moylan told me.

Moylan will not get to inhabit the new welcome center—he retires this month, wistfully. Fleming told me, “He’s extremely difficult to replace. You

can’t re-create the experience and knowledge that comes from decades of service.” On May 22nd, Green-Wood announced Moylan’s successor, Meera Joshi, a former deputy mayor for Eric Adams. (She resigned from City Hall in February, after the Justice Department indicated that it would drop a corruption case against Adams in an apparent quid pro quo for going along with President Trump’s immigration crackdown.)

Moylan, who calls himself “a names person,” has been spending some of his remaining time at Green-Wood gently matching prospective clients to prime locations, a service that he admittedly does not offer to everyone. He recently showed Rosanne Cash and her husband, John Leventhal, a lovely sloping lot, between a Japanese cherry and a Colorado blue spruce. They decided not to buy it, but they did take a photo of Roy Smeck’s grave, to show to Jackson Browne.

*Cartoon by Roland High*

Moylan later showed the same lot to the sculptor Lee Hutt, who is eighty-seven, and her husband, Alfred, a retired ophthalmologist, who is ninety. The Hutts had some spare time one week, between seeing the Knicks play the Warriors and going to the opera. The moment Lee saw the spot, she told Moylan that it was perfect. Afterward, I caught up with her and Alfred in the sales office. Lee told me, “You look at space, you look at background, you look at sky, you look at other monuments, and you imagine yourself in some artistic place where your relatives, who you hope will visit, will say, ‘Isn’t that beautiful?’ ” She was eating a blue lollipop and already thinking about which sculptures to create for their monuments. “It’s time, you know,” she told me. “And we’re not afraid.”

Moylan is on cellphone terms with Bill de Blasio, the former mayor, who was known for strolling the cemetery during *COVID*, and he recently sent a

happy-birthday e-mail to John Turturro, a Brooklyn native who lives nearby. Turturro filmed part of his movie “Romance & Cigarettes” at Green-Wood, including a scene involving Tony Goldwyn and Susan Sarandon being naughty. “I’m a person who’s interested in cemeteries,” Turturro told me. “I don’t know why.” His mother and a brother are buried at Green-Wood. After buying a lot of his own, he told his wife, Katherine, “You’re welcome to join me.”

Moylan is the person whom the newspaperman and author Pete Hamill called, about fifteen years ago, when he was ready to pick out a burial lot. Green-Wood’s best-known authors, at the time, were a romance novelist and the guy who gave us Peter Piper and his picked pickled peck. (Green-Wood got Paul Auster last year.) Moylan took Hamill around the avenues in an electric cart. When they came to the grave of Boss Tweed, Hamill stopped him. Old hacks never stop thinking about old criminals.

Maps were checked; there was room nearby. Hamill died on August 5, 2020, and is buried just behind Tweed. “Give me Tweed before any crusader for earthly utopias: religious, Marxist, fascist or neocon,” he once wrote. “Save me from tinhorn messiahs, and from almost every Republican or Democrat now holding public office.”

The “B” on Hamill’s headstone is for the Brooklyn Dodgers, though on the trolley Marge mischievously noted a typographic similarity to the Boston Red Sox logo. (“I’m not about to open up *that* can of worms,” she said.) The best stop on her tour is Battle Hill. My trolley unloaded, and we climbed stone steps to the 1776 battleground, two hundred and eighteen feet above sea level. Marge approached an enormous bronze statue of Minerva, the goddess of wisdom and war. Minerva faces New York Harbor. Marge told us to turn and follow her gaze. We did, and found the Statue of Liberty staring back.

Lady Liberty presides over the harbor’s entrance, with a flaming torch in her raised right hand, as if welcoming incoming ships. From Green-Wood, she appears to salute the battleground. Minerva’s left arm is raised in mirrored tribute. Minerva was erected in 1920—by Charles M. Higgins, an Irish immigrant who manufactured a famous ink—to commemorate the hundred-and-forty-fourth anniversary of the Battle of Long Island. “Glory

and patriotism!” Marge declared, and read aloud Minerva’s inscription, which praised “the wisdom of American institutions.” Then she said, “O.K., let’s go see Lenny Bernstein. He loves company!”

Crossing a footpath, we came to the grave of the composer Leonard Bernstein, a Green-Wooder since 1990. His tombstone was flat and modest; people had left bouquets and stones. Marge started a round of “Jet Song,” from “West Side Story,” but a ponytailed tourist in a plaid shirt and hoop earrings jumped the cue, throwing everybody off. Marge recovered the beat. *You’re never alone! You’re never disconnected!* “Friend me on social media!” she kept saying afterward.

I looked her up later, and there she was, on Instagram—a young, dark-haired Marge, gleefully sandwiched between a young Bruce Springsteen and a young Patti Smith. Marge, an R.C.A. artist, was the performer that night—Smith and Springsteen came to *her* show. Her band was called Flame. Marge could have mentioned Flame on our tour, during the part about her love of inverted torches, but she didn’t. Green-Wood is full of little secrets. ♦

*Paige Williams, a staff writer, writes U.S. Journal, a series that Calvin Trillin created, in The New Yorker, in 1967. She is the author of “The Dinosaur Artist” and the winner of a 2024 Mirror Award.*

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# Takes

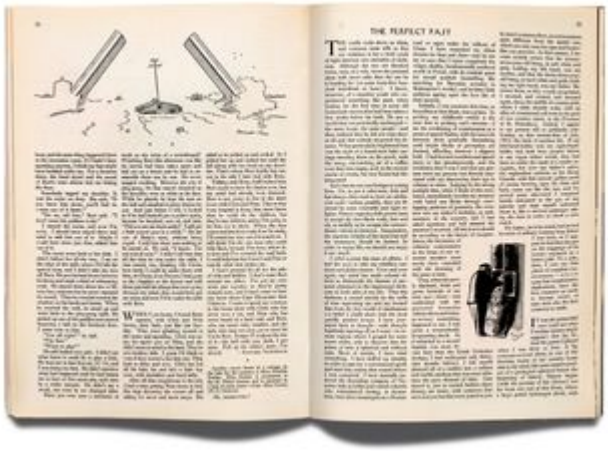
- **Elif Batuman on Vladimir Nabokov's "The Perfect Past"**
  By Elif Batuman | A contract with the The New Yorker saw Nabokov through his cash-strapped pre-"Lolita" years—and continued beyond them for three decades.

**Takes**

# Elif Batuman on Vladimir Nabokov’s “The Perfect Past”

***By Elif Batuman***

*June 1, 2025*



*April 15, 1950*

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

Eleven chapters of Vladimir Nabokov's autobiography, "Speak, Memory," initially appeared, out of order, in *The New Yorker*. "Portrait of My Uncle," one of his first prose pieces in the magazine, became Chapter 3. Chapter 1, originally titled "The Perfect Past," came out last. Its opening line—"The cradle rocks above an abyss, and common sense tells us that our existence is but a brief crack of light between two eternities of darkness"—has, by now, been seared into numberless brains.

The most interesting texts often include tips about how to read them. Midway through "The Perfect Past," we find an instructive anecdote. Part 1: in 1904, a family friend, General Kuropatkin, is entertaining young Nabokov with a trick involving matches when he is suddenly called away to the Russo-Japanese War. Part 2: fifteen years later, while fleeing Petrograd, Nabokov's father is accosted on a bridge by a gray-bearded peasant, who asks for a light and proves to be Kuropatkin in disguise. Nabokov alerts readers to "the evolution of the match theme: Those magic ones he had shown me had been trifled with and mislaid, and his armies had also vanished, and everything had fallen through"—just like the toy trains he had moved over frozen puddles the following winter, imagining them crossing Lake Baikal. The "true purpose of autobiography," Nabokov continues, is "the following of such thematic designs through one's life."

"Speak, Memory" reframes life itself as a detective novel sparkling with clues. Nabokov professed to "abhor" crime fiction, maybe because what he was trying to solve wasn't a crime but its opposite: a transpersonal, death-undoing act of recuperation. Interpreted correctly, the clues would reveal the "two eternities of darkness" as an illusion. The "walls of time" would fall away—just like the last sofa cushion in the "pitch-dark tunnel" through which Nabokov, as a toddler, would propel himself "on rapidly thudding hands and knees" before emerging into the drawing room of his family's country home.

It's a testament to cosmic synchronicities, and the thoughtfulness of *The New Yorker*, that a cartoon on the page where that passage appears shows passengers in a glass-topped "dome car"—then a new technology—ducking their heads as their train rushes into a tunnel. The cartoon on the following page seems, initially, less relevant: four ladies at a card table, one declaring,

“Of course you understand I don’t always have what I bid.” But consider the game—and the significance, here and elsewhere, of bridges. Consider Nabokov’s claim to have envisioned his memoir “according to the way his life had been planned by unknown players of games.” Think of other groups of seated women: of the fates, and of table-turning. A poem on the same page, at the end of “The Perfect Past,” is titled “Séance.”

Séances play a role in Nabokov’s 1962 novel, “Pale Fire”—which, like “Speak, Memory,” is an artistic effort to undo the losses incurred by time, to find the “correlated pattern in the game.” In a pivotal scene, Hazel Shade communicates with a ghostly “roundlet of pale light.” After her death, the light reappears in a poem by her father, posthumously published in “the New York magazine *The Beau and the Butterfly*.”

It clearly struck Nabokov as remarkable that the magazine that played a decisive role in his American career had, as its emblem, a young aristocrat examining a butterfly—a cartoonish image of Nabokov’s own youth. A lifelong lepidopterist, Nabokov often invoked the butterfly to collapse time and space. In “Speak, Memory,” he chases a swallowtail in prerevolutionary Russia, only to rediscover it, forty years later, on a dandelion in Colorado—during a sojourn made possible, he explains, because Harold Ross, *The New Yorker’s* founding editor, “hit it off so well with the ghost of my past.” A contract with the magazine saw Nabokov through his cash-strapped pre-“Lolita” years—and continued beyond them for three decades.

Long after Nabokov’s death, a fantastic-sounding theory that he had formulated about butterfly migration was vindicated via gene sequencing. (He had proposed that New World *Polyommatus* blues had originated, a bit like himself, in Asia, migrating in five waves across the Bering Strait.) In at least this instance, a Nabokovian literary resonance turned out to reflect an empirical truth. In future years, will more cases come to light? ♦

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**Read the original story.**

# The Perfect Past

Neither in environment nor in heredity can I find the exact instrument that fashioned me.

*Elif Batuman has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2010. Her books include the novel "Either/Or."*

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# Shouts & Murmurs

- **Neighborhood Update: We've Finally Taken Down Our Christmas Lights**
  By Alyssa Brandt | We have been so touched by the flood of D.M.s, the comments posted on Nextdoor, and the notes tied to rocks thrown through our window with heartfelt concerns like "ARE YOU KEEPING THEM UP FOREVER??!!!"

**Shouts & Murmurs**

# Neighborhood Update: We've Finally Taken Down Our Christmas Lights

***By Alyssa Brandt***

*June 2, 2025*

*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

First, a sincere thanks to the friends, neighbors, and homeowners'-association representatives who have reached out during the past four months. We've heard from so many of you—a couple of times via a note tied to a rock thrown through our window—as we've navigated this journey. Because of all the feelings people have expressed along the way, I wanted to give everyone a quick update on our family: we have taken our Christmas lights down.

It was not an easy decision to make. Our Christmas lights had been up since November, so nearly six months as part of our household!

We have been so touched by the flood of D.M.s to our Instagram, the messages pushed through our mail slot, and the comments posted to our neighborhood Nextdoor feed. Heartfelt concerns like “ARE YOU KEEPING THEM UP FOREVER??!!!” particularly moved us, because we could feel the emotional investment some of you had in the longevity of our display. We acknowledge the hope that it inspired, the hope that these lights—bought during a Lowe’s Black Friday *BOGO* sale—had indeed found their forever home.

That was the hope, anyway. But there were problems almost immediately. The audible sizzle. The constant smell of ozone. The moths. Then, there was the one green bulb that kept fritzing. Some nights it was on, some nights off. This Jekyll-and-Hyde behavior was not something we anticipated having to deal with. We quietly sought professional help. But Shiny Brite Christmas Light Installations L.L.C. wanted to charge us an arm and a leg to assist us with it! Thankfully, we discovered that we could replace the single wonky bulb. Yes, we knew it meant disrupting the color sequence by having two red bulbs next to each other. But what choice did we have? I wish I could say that was the end of it.

You’re familiar with the term “tightly wound”? Well, then you know how being around someone—or something—like that can fracture a family. We weren’t equipped to deal with the coils and tangles in the wires. “Kink” is not a word I toss about lightly—this is a family neighborhood—but a kink is what we got, all right. On more than one occasion in early December, exhausted and frustrated, we asked ourselves, “What are we doing wrong?” I remember falling into bed the night we finally wrangled the lights into submission around the front porch and saying to my loving life partner, “Is it us?” His answer helped restore my sanity: “No. It’s them. It’s those bullshit, cheap-ass Christmas lights. We should take them back.”

I gasped. True, the lights were driving a wedge between us, but *return* them? Unthinkable. Mainly because I’d lost the receipt, but also because what kind of monsters return an item to their local big-box store after they’ve used it? No. The lights were up, they were part of us now, and up they would stay.

We were finally able to relax and enjoy the peace of the season. Christmas Day became New Year's Day, then Valentine's Day, then St. Patrick's Day. Daffodils bloomed and Easter arrived. Temperatures crept unseasonably into the seventies, but I don't control the weather.

Colorful dyed eggs in baskets, and colorful plastic eggs dangling from trees, and expensive raw eggs lobbed at our house are apparently perfectly acceptable at this time of year, but colorful lights adorning one's house, shrubbery, and garage that also play Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You" when a sensor is triggered by every Amazon delivery truck? Not so much.

As I stated repeatedly at the last block party: I don't control Jeff Bezos's trucks. But we've taken the lights down. Contrary to the terrible rumors proliferating online (and at book club at Betsy's last week), we have not returned them to the manufacturer. They have been comfortably rehomed in the basement, for now. But, rest assured, we remain committed to these lights. They are a permanent part of our family, even if they're no longer on permanent display. At least until Halloween. ♦

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

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# Fiction

- **“Elias”**
  By Jon Fosse | I need to open the door now, it’s not the end of the world, it’s just that it’s been such a long time since anyone’s knocked on my door.

**Fiction**

# Elias

**By Jon Fosse**

June 1, 2025

*Illustration by Marie Larrivé*

But there, isn’t that a knock on the door, yes, it definitely is, and there, there’s another knock, and I can’t remember anyone knocking on my door in a long time, the last person to do it was Jatgeir, but that stopped when that woman moved in with him and turned everything upside down, so it’s been years now since he knocked on my door, but I guess it could be Jatgeir, and I’d probably better open the door then, but there are dirty dishes in the sink, and they’ve been there for several days, not that I use so many dishes, but, still, there might even be a little mold, and when’s the last time I aired out the place, no, not since I can remember, so it smells stuffy, yes, that’s the least you could say about it, it probably smells like me, too, and everything in here’s just a mess, in the hall, in the kitchen, in the living room, there are books everywhere, books and newspapers piled up on top of each other, and so if there’s a knock at the door and someone wants to come in here, to my mess, to my house’s mess, no, if only I’d known that someone was going to knock on my door, but how could I have thought that would happen, now that Jatgeir doesn’t come by anymore, because it’s been forever and a day since the last time he stopped by, and there’s another knock, no, I can’t believe it, and was the knock louder this time? maybe the knock was louder, or probably it’s just that I could hear it better this time and that’s why it sounded louder, yes, that must be what it was, but there’s another knock, because that is knocking, right? yes, it is, but weaker this time, yes, almost inaudible, maybe that was another knock or maybe it wasn’t, but I probably need to go open the door either way, it may well be Jatgeir, maybe he suddenly thought he should drop by and see me, or it might be someone else, there are probably lots of reasons someone might knock, maybe it’s someone coming with an important message for me, maybe someone’s died, but what relatives of mine could have died, no, I don’t know, but it could be something, yes, important, because I don’t have a telephone, and they probably wouldn’t send news that someone had died by letter, no, I can’t imagine that would ever happen, but there weren’t that many knocks, so now the person knocking must have given up since I didn’t open the door, and since the lights are on in the house the person who’s knocking probably thought that I didn’t want to open the door but there, yes, there’s another knock, and I can probably just open the door, I probably don’t need to invite whoever it is in, unless it’s Jatgeir of course, yes, that’s a strange name he has, Jatgeir, but it was his nickname, he told me that time I went to Bjørgvin with him on his motorboat that his name was Geir, he was baptized Geir, but that when he was young everyone started calling him Jatgeir, and I don’t

really know why, but maybe because he always said yes to things when he was little, he said *ja*, *ja*, he always went along with things, he always *jatta*, and that sounds plausible, but no one really knows why he's Jatgeir now, but he is, yes, so I need to invite him in, but only if it's him, if it isn't Jatgeir then we can probably just talk at the door, maybe, yes, why didn't I think of that before, I can just open the door and then the person knocking and I can just stand in the doorway and talk, yes, of course, and there's another knock, but this time it's not hard or soft, it's just a knock, just a little rap on the door, no more no less, but now, yes, now I'll go and open the door, no more dawdling and thinking it over now, no, out to the hall and over to the door, straight there and right now, absolutely, so yes, I think and I open the living-room door and go out into the hall and just then there's another knock, but it's almost inaudible and that's strange since just now the knocks were clear enough, but not loud or soft, just knocking, a rap on the door, no more no less, but now, yes, now I'll open the door, no more dawdling and thinking it over now, no, out to the hall and over to the door, straight there and right now, absolutely, so yes, I think and I go over to the front door and just then there's another knock, but it's almost inaudible and that's strange since just now the knocks were clear enough, but anyway I need to open the door now, it's not the end of the world, it's just that it's been such a long time since anyone's knocked on my door, so now—there's another knock, and was it harder this time? or? but there, there, there's another knock anyway and now I open the door, and since I never lock the door I just need to open it, and so I push down on the handle and I open the door and I look out and I don't know who I think will be there, I have no idea, but no one's there and, no, I would never have thought that, that no one would be there, because how was there a knocking all by itself, there's no one in sight, no, this is almost spooky, but the person knocking can't just have left right away like that, so fast, no, that's impossible, there was knocking just now and I opened the door right after the last knock, and the person who was knocking can't have just disappeared, no, I don't believe it, that can't have happened, people don't do things like that, not people in Vaim anyway, and my goodness it's so dark out, even though it's so early in the day everything's almost totally dark, it's probably only around four o'clock in the afternoon and still it's so dark that you can't see anything, and, well, that's how it is at this time of year, just before Christmas, so if I don't see anyone I can always ask

Is anybody there? I say

and I don’t hear anything, and I think that I should say it again

Anybody there? I say

and it’s not like I expect to get an answer, and I don’t get an answer either, but where can the person who was knocking have disappeared to, he or she has to be somewhere, nothing else is possible, because thin air can’t knock on a door, or can it, no, but the wind can shake and rattle a door or other things, that’s true, but I heard so clearly that there was knocking, hard and for a long time, it was quiet and then there was another knock, but a careful one, no, I have to figure this out and I slip on my clogs and I go out the front door and I go over to the corner of the house, no, no one’s there, could it maybe be someone playing a joke on me, but now who would do that, maybe some kids, but there aren’t any kids living around here, there’ve been fewer and fewer children born in Vaim over the years, but now this is actually creepy, maybe it was a ghost, that’s possible, yes, everything seems to point to it being a ghost that was knocking on the door, and I’ve never had any doubt that ghosts exist, even if I’ve never seen or heard one before today, but, no, it can’t have been a ghost, and so it must have been a person, because there’s no animal that can knock like that on a door, no, and it can’t have been the wind, because it’s not windy now, there’s no wind, so in that case—yes, well, what can it have been, it must have been a person, but I can’t see anyone anywhere, and there’s fresh snow too, so that means I can go and look for footprints in the snow, I just need to go inside and get a flashlight and then walk around the house and see if I see footprints, and of course I need to check the road, or path I guess, that goes down to the main road, and then, yes, I need to put on some warm clothes, because it’s gotten cold out, I think and I go inside and put on my big thick jacket and pull a cap down over my ears and then I take the flashlight that’s hanging in its place in the hall and then I go right outside and I walk around the house and I shine the light both ahead of me and to either side, but there aren’t any footprints, not straight ahead of me and not to either side, and not on the road either, and it can’t have snowed since the knocking, no, of course not, and since there’s no wind it can’t be that snowdrifts have covered the footprints, no, I don’t understand, whoever knocked on my door must have vanished into thin air, as they say, it’s strange, I can’t understand it, I think, and it’s cold out so I guess I better go back inside, that knocking is what it is, I think, most likely the knocking was just something I imagined, I think and I go to

the front door and I stamp my feet to knock the clumps of snow off my clogs, and then I realize that I need to turn off the flashlight, there's no reason to have it on in the light from the house, I think, so I turn off the flashlight, knock the snow off my clogs, go into the hall, slip off my clogs, take off my jacket and cap, shut the front door, but that was really strange, I think, I must just have heard wrong, heard something that wasn't there, just imagined that someone was knocking, yes maybe I felt so alone that I imagined someone knocking at my door, yes, that might be what happened, I can't think of any other reasonable explanation, but there, yes, there's a knock at the door again, and this, this isn't something I'm just imagining, that's a knock, and there's another knock, yes, not just knocking, yes, there's a real hammering on the door, yes, pounding, yes, it sounds almost like a thunderclap, no, not quite that bad, but almost, yes, almost like a thunderclap, but only almost, and there, there's another knock, but not quite as hard now, no, this, I think, no, I'm not imagining this, I'm really hearing it, there's no doubt about it, but now should I open the front door again, even though I couldn't see anyone there the last time I opened the door, yes I probably should, I think and I go over to the door and now I hear something like a slow knocking and then, suddenly, I yank the door open and shout in an extremely irritated voice

Yes, who is it?

and I almost leap right out the door I'm so surprised by my own voice, and when I jump it feels like I'm breaking through some kind of gentle, comfortable wall, or how can I put it, it's not warm or cold, and then I stand there outside the front door, all alone, and I look all around, up, down, behind everything, but there's no one and nothing, no, this, I think, no, I can't tell anybody this, not even Jatgeir, because they'll think I've gone crazy, because there's no way to believe that I've heard this, yes, they'd probably think I was like the people who heard voices and everyone thought they were crazy and sent them to The Madhouse in Bjørgvin, so I'm not going to say anything about this, not a word to anyone, I think, but what could it have been, or who, that's a better way to put it, no, there was no way to understand it, it's inexplicable, as they say, it's actually spooky, yes, it's so frightening that I don't really want to go back to my room, but I have to, I have to lie down on the bench for a bit and rest, I think and I go and lie down on the bench and spread the blanket over me and I think that it feels like I

need someone to talk to, but I don’t have too much contact with other people, well, yes, I had a little contact with my family, but even that’s tapered off too in recent years, after my parents died, those two sisters of mine never had all that much to do with me, to tell the truth, and then they got married and moved to other parts of the country, where the men they married came from, that’s where they live, each with her husband, and they’ve had children, too, one had two daughters, the other had a son, and then, the children, yes, I’m these children’s uncle but all of them are grown now, good and grown up, or almost grown up, and I’m not in touch with my sisters much, so I haven’t had any contact at all with those two girls and that one boy I’m an uncle to, to tell the truth I’m not even entirely sure of their names, yes, well, one is named Karen Elise, or maybe they write it “Karen-Elise,” if it isn’t Marte Elise, actually, and then there’s Gudrun Anna or Anna Gudrun, and there couldn’t be a hyphen between Anna and Gudrun or Gudrun and Anna, could there, no, I don’t think so, but I can’t be sure of that, either, and as for which of the two is named what I can never manage to remember that, but the other sister has a son, and his name is Olaf, and that’s easy to remember since he was named after my father, after my and my sisters’ father, but my father’s two sisters, my aunts, it was even worse with them, not that their names were so hard, they were Gudrun and Olaug, both fine names, and I knew that they were named after my father’s parents, yes, my grandmother was named Olaug and my grandfather was named Gudmund, that’s how it was, if I’m not remembering wrong, but even I couldn’t be wrong about something like that, but I could never remember which one was Gudrun and which one was Olaug, no, but I usually managed to get through situations that could have been embarrassing by talking about both Olaug and Gudrun in general, but is that something I should be thinking about now, no, definitely not, certainly not after I heard a mysterious knocking at my door without there being anyone there knocking, no matter how hard I looked, and now I realize I’m feeling anxious, and I think I’ll just go and drop by Jatgeir’s house, even if it’s been forever and a day since the last time I did that, because to try to soothe this anxiety a little I’ll just go and see him, this anxiety doesn’t feel good at all, no, and to tell the truth it’s been years now since I’ve visited Jatgeir and to tell the truth he’s the only person in Vaim I ever visit, so if I’m going to do it again it might as well be now, to put it that way, but it kind of hasn’t been the same since she, what was her name again, yes, Eline, right, since she came back with him when he took his summer boat trip to Bjørgvin that time, the way he always used to

do every summer, but that was many years ago, yes, time goes by so fast that it's already many years ago now, he didn't come back home alone, no, that summer he brought a woman back with him, and not just any woman, either, but someone who up until then, this was what people said anyway, was married and living on Sartor, but she'd grown up in Vaim and, funnily enough, the boat Jatgeir had had all those years was called Eline, and maybe that was why the woman he brought back home was called Eline too, so now Jatgeir was living with her in sin, at least that was what some of the prayerhouse people said, and it was hard to believe that Jatgeir would do something like that, come dragging some married woman back to Vaim who'd left a long time before, someone barely anyone in Vaim even remembered and wouldn't have remembered if it weren't for this going and kidnapping the bride, yes, that was what they called it in the countryside, kidnapping the bride, people talked about how her husband might come to Vaim one day to get his wife back and he'd beat Jatgeir to death, or at least beat him up badly, because the man she was married to was surely a big strong man, and a fisherman on Sartor, but for all I know he was just glad to get rid of his wife, that was another rumor going around, that that's how it was, it was probably one of the guys at The Quay, below The Vaim General Store, who'd said that maybe it was like that, and if only there was a meeting tonight in The Vaim Prayerhouse I could have some company there, but there isn't, and I haven't gone to see anyone other than Jatgeir for years, earlier I used to drop by and see him a lot, and Jatgeir would come and see me at least as often, but ever since he's had a common-law partner, as they call it, yes, it's like he wasn't the same anymore, so now I can go forever and a day without seeing him, not that she, yes, his partner, yes, Eline, minded at all when I did stop by once, after such a long time, no, she retreated to the kitchen and then maybe poked her head out and asked if she could make us a cup of coffee or something and then Jatgeir said that might be good and I said yes please, thanks, that'd be great, and then Jatgeir and I sat there and everything was like it used to be in the old days, but only almost like it used to be, because everything was kind of completely different, it was like Jatgeir had turned into a different person somehow, even if he looked exactly like the same old Jatgeir, but something had changed, no question about it, he'd become shy in a way he never used to be before, more withdrawn, like he had to be careful all the time and he couldn't just say whatever he wanted anymore, he had to think it over before he said almost anything, to make sure he didn't say something that might be offensive, or whatever the term

is, and the only thing I could think of that had changed was her, Eline, who had moved in with him, and even if she had come quietly and unnoticed her being there wouldn't have stayed unnoticed, if you can put it that way, because the living room was unrecognizable, the pile of old newspapers in the middle of the floor, of old issues of the *Northern Herald*, the pile that had grown week after week, and would have filled up the whole room sooner or later, I think, and driven Jatgeir out of his own living room, now the pile of newspapers was gone, and where multiple years' worth of newspapers had once stood there was now just a gaping void that you sort of couldn't help looking at the whole time, and then the curtains, they had been the same for all those years but now they'd been replaced by curtains with a pattern of large flowers in all kinds of colors, the ones that had been there before had been brown, not even the sofa cushions were the same old cushions, and I just couldn't bring myself to ask where the old newspapers had gone, the old curtains, no, nothing was the way it was before, and that meant I didn't really like going to visit him, and he never came by to visit me anymore, but who else could I go and see, probably no one, to tell the truth, so I'd probably better stay at home, I think, and if I was going to go somewhere I'd have to wear good shoes and my nice warm coat, but it's probably best for me just to stay home, and not worry about whatever that knocking was, it was most likely just something I imagined, I think and then I must have dozed off, because I wake up, and the first thing I think about is the knocking there was on the door before I lay down, yes, I just couldn't understand it—but now there's another knock, hard, yes, so hard it makes me jump, I must have fallen asleep, I don't know for how long, and now a knocking suddenly woke me up, and I sit up on the bench, and now there's more knocking on the door, hard now too, but not as hard as before, no, this is, and I stand up and go out to the hall and there's another knock on the door, but now it's pretty soft, no, it's just something I'm imagining, there's nothing else it can be, so I won't open the door, if there'd been footprints in the snow I'd know for sure that it's just some kids playing a joke on me, that it's a prank, and now these kids have hidden somewhere or other and are laughing about how they tricked me, even scared me, yes, but I guess that's fine, they can do that, there isn't that much for kids in Vaim to do, probably the only fun they have is what they come up with themselves, but it's strange I didn't think of that before, that it was a kid, not a ghost, I must have turned into someone who's easily tricked and easily scared too, I've started believing in all kinds of things, but there's another knock, and now as hard

as can be, so I probably need to open the door again, and if there's no one there then at least I'll know that there are some rascals lurking in the dark somewhere, giggling and snickering and having a good laugh about how they tricked me again, but this time they won't see me looking scared at least, they sure won't, not that, no, not this time, and there's another knock, a little harder than last time even, and now I'll open it right away, so, over to the door, yank it open—and look, but can you believe it, if it's not Jatgeir himself standing there, no, who would believe it, I'm going around thinking that I should drop by Jatgeir's house and he must have been thinking the same thing, because if it isn't Jatgeir himself standing here in person

You must be surprised to see me, Jatgeir says

and I think that I probably can't say that I was just pacing around my living room thinking that I should go and see him, and definitely not that there'd been a knocking and pounding and hammering on the door for a good long time and then when I went to open the door there was no one there, and that I'd gotten a bit anxious and scared and so I thought I'd go see my old friend

Come in, I say

I believe I will, he says

Come in, old man, I say

and Jatgeir walks through the door and I say, It's been a long time since we've seen each other, I honestly can't remember when the last time was, it's been so long, I say and Jatgeir says he'd guess it's been several years and I say I can believe it and Jatgeir says no, he can't remember exactly when the last time was

No, our memory's not as good as it used to be, I say

True enough, he says

That's how things are with us, Elias, he says

Elias, Jatgeir says

Yes, I say

When I got here I saw someone standing outside your door, he says

Someone was standing outside my door, I say

Yes, yes, I saw someone there, I saw it when I came around the corner of the house, he says

and I don’t say anything

And the strange thing was that he just suddenly disappeared, he says

It was a man, I say

No, I can’t say for sure, but I’m sure that someone was standing there, he says

Really, I say

And it wasn’t so strange that someone was there, the strange thing was that he suddenly disappeared, yes, vanished into thin air, he says

It was eerie, he says

*“No—it’s click once to signal the job is done, twice to turn the fan off, and three times for the fan-and-lights combo.”*

*Cartoon by Ali Solomon*

Yes, I say

and I think about whether I should tell Jatgeir after all that there'd been the sound of knocking, yes, practically pounding on my door, and that it had scared me, but maybe the best thing would be not to tell anyone about that, probably, because then everything would just get even more frightening, I'd get even more anxious, or maybe not, because at least now I know for certain that some kind of ghost was at my door, there couldn't be any doubt about it now, or maybe there could, in some strange abstract way, abstract, yes, now that's a word to use in this situation, but a ghost probably is abstract if it exists at all, because you can't say it's concrete, can you, a spirit that exists in some way without a body is probably what a ghost is, or however you'd put it, but it was weird that Jatgeir knocked on my door right afterward, could it be that the knocking was a sign he was about to come, a warning, an omen, as they say, but can that really happen, for someone to, for example, knock before they actually come and knock, no, it can't be, things like that don't happen, but, anyway, Jatgeir's here now, but he needs to come in and not just stand in the doorway, I have to ask him again to come in, and then I can offer him a cup of coffee

You'll take a cup of coffee, I say

and Jatgeir just looks at me

You're not scared of ghosts? he says

and I don't really know what to say, and Jatgeir sort of answers for me, no probably not really, he says, and I can only nod in response

So that's how it is, Jatgeir says

and then it's quiet again, and suddenly, without warning, Jatgeir says that he has to go home

But you just got here, I say

Yes, but there's something I forgot, he says

I just realized it, he says

So I’m going now, I have to hurry, he says

and I say that, well, anyone can forget something, but he should come by again soon, I say

But I actually just wanted to say a quick hello, he says

I need to hurry, he says

and I say I understand, yes, even though I don’t understand anything he’s saying, no

Talk to you soon, Jatgeir says

See you later, I say

and I see Jatgeir turn around and start to walk away from the house, he’s walking slowly, and then he sort of disappears around the corner of the house, and I stay where I am looking out the open door and for some reason I decide that I want to leave the door open, but I can’t do that, it’s cold out, I can’t leave the door open and let all the cold in, no, it’d be better if I took a walk, I’ll just put on my warm coat and then my black sailor’s cap, the one I always wear, and I don’t exactly know why I’ve worn a black sailor’s cap all these years, but there it is, so I’ll put my things on and head out to The Vaim General Store, because it’s probably open, but I can’t think of anything I need to buy, still, I can just take a walk over there, I think, since I don’t know where else I could go, if there was a meeting at The Vaim Prayerhouse I’d have gone there, yes, I’d even go to Jatgeir’s house, if he hadn’t just been here, so if I want to see people I guess I’ll just go to The Vaim General Store then, but on Sunday there’s a service at The Vaim Church, not that I’m a believer, but I go to the prayerhouse and the church anyway, just to be with other people, and I’m kind of a believer, too, in my way, and I look forward to going to church on Sundays, I think, so off I go to The Vaim General Store, because maybe I can talk a little with the guys who are usually there at The Quay, and then I’ll probably remember some little thing I can buy, but I was just there to do my shopping a couple of days ago so I can’t think of anything I can buy today, but the guys at The Quay will definitely be there,

at least some of them, today too, so I can probably talk to them for a bit, the way I sometimes do, not that often, I'm not one of the guys who hang around there all the time, but I don't want to stay home anyway, I need to calm my nerves, as they say, so let's put on that sailor's cap and outer coat and these good solid shoes and then I'm off, yes, and I put them on and go out the front door, and shut the door behind me and then I walk down the side road to the country road and then I take a left and then go straight down to The Vaim General Store, no, I don't want to think about that knocking on the door, or that short visit from Jatgeir, either, I think and without thinking about either thing I walk fast, because it's a cool night, and I try to think of something I can buy at The Vaim General Store, but I can't think of anything, so I don't even need to go into the store, I can just go down to The Quay and talk for a bit with the guys there, because over there, yes, there are some guys standing there the way there usually tend to be, and that's good, isn't it, because there isn't always someone there, even if there usually is, but they don't look too talkative today, they're just standing there silently with their heads bent, not how they usually stand there, they usually stand there talking a little and laughing about this or that, so nothing's the way it usually is today, I think, and then they hear me walking over and everyone looks up at me and then they look back down again and it doesn't look like any of them are going to say, here comes our prayerhouse man today, or here comes our churchman, no, it doesn't look like any of them has anything at all to say today, but I'll probably still go over to them, there's nothing else I can really do since I'm already on my way toward the guys on The Quay, and I go down to them, I stop, don't say anything, and none of them looks at me, they just stand there looking down and now someone's got to say something

Not too chatty today are you, I say

and it takes a long time before one of them looks straight ahead instead of down

Yes, it's sad, he says

and I stand there and wonder what he means, what he's saying is sad

That he's gone, yes, he says

And you were such good friends, you and him, another one says

and again it’s silent

What are you talking about, I say

and all the guys standing there, maybe four or five guys, look up and lean toward me

Yes, I say

That he’s gone? I say

Yes, Jatgeir, he says

What do you mean? I say

Jatgeir died today, he says

and he looks at me not understanding

Jatgeir, I say

and no one says anything

You haven’t heard? one of them says then

Heard what? I say

That Jatgeir died today, he says

and I shake my head

No, but, I say

He was found floating in the sea, dead, next to his boat, he says

I was just talking to him, yes, it can’t have been more than half an hour ago, I say

and they look at me again, not understanding

But he was found several hours ago, drowned, one of them says

I just saw him, yes, I talked to him right before I came down here, and it’s not that long a walk, I say

No, he was found a couple of hours ago, drowned, one of them says

She, yes, that common-law partner of his, right, she found him floating in the sea next to his motorboat, he says

And she couldn’t manage to pull him back onto land, and then she found a rope and she tied him to the dock and then, he says

And then I came walking by, he says

And then she shouted that I had to come help her, and when I went down there I saw Jatgeir lying there, floating in the cold water with his nose pointing up in the air, he says

and again no one says anything and I think now that’s too much for me, that’s just too much, I don’t understand anything in the world anymore, because I was just talking to Jatgeir, and he was as alive and well as ever, and didn’t we talk about how I should come and visit him, no, we didn’t talk about that, but still, I think

I was just talking to Jatgeir, I say

Yes, right before I came here, I say

*“If you’re all-powerful, how come you let yourself get so old?”*
*Cartoon by Emily Flake*

Yes well then he rose up from the dead, one of them says

Yes, like another Christ, he says

There’s a lot you can accuse Jatgeir of, but he wasn’t another Christ, someone else says

But you know more about that kind of thing than we do, a third one says

The doctor came and looked at him and declared him dead, there was nothing to do to try to save him, one says

and it’s silent, totally silent, and my thoughts kind of go back and forth without them being thought, and I’m frozen in place, just standing there

Yes, the two of you were good friends, one says

Yes, I say

Yes, even if you were a prayerhouse person, Elias, and he sure wasn’t, one says

and again it’s silent, and I think that I probably can’t just stay standing here, I have to keep going, whatever that means, I think

Yes, it’s sad, one says

Very sad, another one says

And so unexpected, he says

Because he’d spent his whole life on the water, another one says

I can’t understand it, a third one says

No, I say

It’s like there’s nothing you can say about it, one says

and then what they’re saying turns into a droning buzz of voices, and I can’t tell the difference between what one of them is saying and what the others are saying, the words and the sentences blend into one another the same way my thoughts are blending into one another, and I was just talking to Jatgeir, but, no, I can’t understand it, and then it probably was him who knocked on my door, yes, after he’d already drowned, yes, that’s how it must have been, that’s the only explanation, if I can call it an explanation, and it’s spooky, I think, but why did he come by to talk to me after he was dead, yes, like back in the old days, as if nothing had changed, no, probably no one can understand things like that, I think, it was like he came to say goodbye, I think, and I guess I can’t do anything but go back home now, because what else can I do then, I don’t have anywhere else to go

Yes, O.K., see you later, I say

and there’s a sound like thanks, you too, or something like that from the guys there on The Quay and then I turn around and start to walk home

See you at the prayerhouse, one of them says behind me

Or in church, another one says

Yes, and of course at Jatgeir’s funeral, a third one says

and I think that it’s unbelievable, but Jatgeir was a good person, and my only friend in Vaim, yes, probably the best friend I had in my whole adult life, and if he’s gone now, yes, then he’s gone, that’s for certain, and as for what he believed or didn’t believe, we never talked about that, and he probably never set foot in The Vaim Prayerhouse or The Vaim Church, either, but what does that mean, no, I think, and I think that this drowning had something to do with Eline in a way, that he couldn’t stand living with her anymore, that he got careless and fell into the sea because of that, either he was going to just check on his boat or he was going for a little ride, but if that was what happened then it should really have happened a long time ago, because Eline had been living in his house for forever and a day, she just moved right in, just did what she wanted, yes, that’s really it, she got on board his boat some way or another, and Jatgeir couldn’t get her off his boat, she was just there, on the boat and later in his house, and who knows, maybe it was because he’d named his boat Eline that she dared to do it, I don’t know, but why in the world had he named his boat Eline and then someone named Eline came on board the boat and then moved in with him, no, it’s impossible to understand, I think, and I think that now I’ll go straight home and then I’ll pull myself together and pray for Jatgeir, I think, and I’ll miss him, because if you could say I had any friend at all in Vaim it was Jatgeir, in all of Vaim his was the only house I’ve ever been in, and he was the only person who ever came through the door of my humble home, I never really got to know the people I met at The Vaim Prayerhouse or in The Vaim Church, and I probably won’t ever get to know them, either, but after that Eline moved in with Jatgeir, yes, it wasn’t so nice to see him anymore, I kind of got the feeling that Eline didn’t like me coming to visit, and she most likely didn’t like Jatgeir coming to see me either, and that’s why he stopped coming over to my house, and I stopped going over to his house too, so it was not least because of that that it was such a surprise to see him standing outside my door today, and then this, yes, that he drowned today, and around the same time he was talking to me, no, it’s unbelievable and you can’t understand it either, but anyway, he probably came over to say goodbye, maybe, that’s what must have happened, and now I have no one I can say I’m friends with in Vaim, there are just these prayerhouse people and church people left, but they don’t really count since I kind of never got to know them, we kind of just belonged to the same organizations and so now I’m

even more alone than I was before, and there, yes, there, I can feel that it's like Jatgeir is near me, but it's not that I can see him, and he seems happy and it's like he's waving goodbye and he says that it's good where he is now, and I feel like Jatgeir is looking down at me now from somewhere above me, but not that far above me, and I get the feeling that he now knows everything that's going to happen in the future, with me too, and he somehow takes it all in with a happy calm, and I could probably say in Christian words that he is in God's peace now and in the light of Christ's cross, but I feel like those are kind of just meaningless words and I raise my arm and I wave at him and it's like he raises his arm and waves at me and with a kind of joy he says, it's good here, and I, walking up the road in Vaim, I raise my hand and wave at the sky, at where I feel like Jatgeir is, and everything feels right, but what would someone think if they saw me doing this, but after all there isn't anyone who can see me, yes, except for Jatgeir

Goodbye, Jatgeir, I say

And thank you for our time together, I say

and I see Jatgeir, see his hand and arm, disappear into the dark sky ♦

*(Translated, from the Norwegian, by Damion Searls.)*

*This is drawn from "Vaim."*

*Jon Fosse received the 2023 Nobel Prize in Literature. His books include the novel "Vaim," translated from the Norwegian by Damion Searls.*

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# The Critics

- **The Met’s Exhibit on Black Male Style Is an Exceptional Achievement**
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- **Briefly Noted**
  “Marketcrafters,” “Children of Radium,” “The South,” and “Heart, Be at Peace.”
- **What We Get Wrong About Violent Crime**
  By Malcolm Gladwell | A Chicago criminologist challenges our assumptions about why most shootings happen—and what really makes a city safe.
- **How Margaret Fuller Set Minds on Fire**
  By James Marcus | High-minded and scandal-prone, a foe of marriage who dreamed of domesticity, Fuller radiated a charisma that helped ignite the fight for women’s rights.
- **Is “The Phoenician Scheme” Wes Anderson’s Most Emotional Film?**
  By Richard Brody | Despite an abundance of plot strands and characters, Anderson’s latest drills down into the father-daughter relationship depicted by its leads, Benicio del Toro and Mia Threapleton.

**The Art World**

# The Met’s Exhibit on Black Male Style Is an Exceptional Achievement

In “Superfine,” the Africana-studies scholar Monica L. Miller explores the links between style, self-presentation, and survival.

**By Hilton Als**

June 2, 2025

*The journalist and creative director André Leon Talley, whose clothing and luggage are featured in “Superfine: Tailoring Black Style,” in a Polaroid from 1975.Photograph by Reed Evins Art*

“Superfine: Tailoring Black Style” (at the Met through October 26th) is a heartbreak of a show, brilliant in concept, design, and execution. Curated with great feeling and insight by Monica L. Miller, the chair of Africana Studies at Barnard College, with Andrew Bolton, the head of the Met’s Costume Institute, “Superfine” does something exceedingly rare in the history of costume-based exhibitions: it privileges Black male beauty

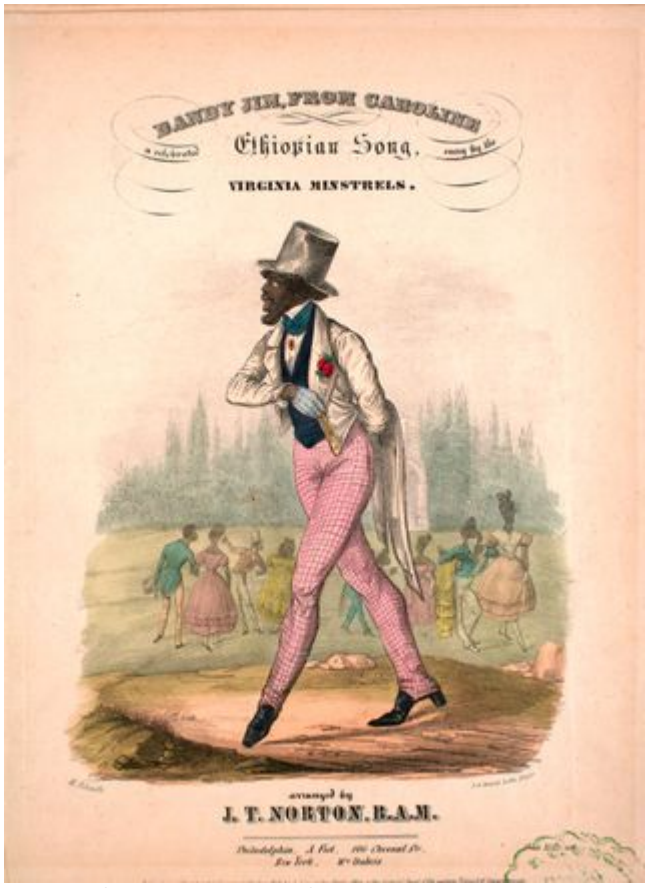
without requiring the guys to earn their keep as props for female models or for ideas about masculinity. There have been shows dedicated to the dandy before, most notably “Artist, Rebel, Dandy,” at the *RISD* Museum, in 2013, but this is the first I’ve seen in which the culture of race—and its effect on self-presentation—*is* the show.

It comes as a shock, too, to realize how unusual it still is for someone to present the complex reality of individuals of color without treating them as a group or a sociological “problem” dressed in the sackcloth and ashes of the Million Man March. Miller views such extraordinary figures as the Harlem Renaissance model, teacher, and cultural man-about-town Harold Jackman and Jamaica’s former Prime Minister Michael Manley through the lens of style, which is not to be confused with fashion: style is an individual response to garments and the world, whereas fashion is a collective response to itself, to trend. (It wouldn’t be a stretch to consider “Superfine” the flip side of the coin to “American Women of Style,” organized by Diana Vreeland at the Met in 1975. Like Miller, Vreeland celebrated self-invention as much as she did clothing.)

Writing in this magazine in 1973, Kennedy Fraser referred to style as “individualistic, aristocratic, and reckless,” and one or all of those qualities can be seen in the various personalities whose sartorial choices are featured here, including the fantastic, in all senses of the word, Julius Soubise, an eighteenth-century dandy who was born into slavery in the Caribbean and more or less adopted into the aristocracy in England; the stately young W. E. B. Du Bois, dressed to the nines, in 1900, at the Paris International Exposition, for which he organized a groundbreaking exhibit on the Black condition in the U.S.; and the late journalist, creative director, and *Vogue* editor André Leon Talley, in a Polaroid from the nineteen-seventies, draped in an African robe and sporting a multicolored kufi. But to see these flourishes, no matter how entertaining, as only flourishes would be wrong. Miller is aiming at something deeper and more elusive.

Style, Fraser noted, is not merely a matter of elegance or taste: “it is more akin to a philosophy, and it is surely closer to an art.” But how do you resist the urge to anthropologize or mummify it in a museum setting? Especially one as large as the Met, where aesthetics and anthropology often go hand in

hand? And how do you discuss the ways in which the history of race has affected and fuelled the elusive progress of style, which depends on change to keep itself alive? Part of what makes “Superfine” work is the fact that Miller doesn’t turn away from these questions; instead, she gives us a synthesis of possible responses to them.




*Cover image of the sheet music for “Dandy Jim, from Caroline: A Celebrated Ethiopian Song,” arranged by J. T. Norton, printed in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1844.Photograph from Sheridan Libraries / Levy / Gado / Getty*

In her essential (if unfortunately titled) “Slaves to Fashion,” a study of the Black dandy and what she calls “black diasporic identity,” Miller argues that “stylin’ out” has been a fact of Black American life for centuries. For many enslaved people who had escaped or been freed, she notes, fashion was “practically and symbolically important to a . . . sense of individuality and liberty.” “Stylin’ out” has never been just about dressing up. It is a way of showing yourself and your community that you’ve survived another day. To dress in whatever constitutes your best, and displays your sense of self, honors the body in a way that the world often doesn’t. In our puritanical

nation, which has a complex, often crushing relationship to difference, “stylin’ out” was and remains an act of resistance.

But America wasn’t on my mind when I first entered the show’s dark, moodily lit space; France was. Not the France of Charles Baudelaire, who, in 1863, famously wrote about the dandy’s “burning need to create . . . a personal originality,” but the France I encountered a number of years ago when I visited the Church of Saint-Sulpice, in Paris—how struck I was by the church’s dramatic lighting, as priests walked in and out of the shadows, amid statues depicting Christian suffering. “Superfine” ’s lighting is similarly dramatic, and has a reverential feel, too, that evokes Baudelaire’s claim that dandyism is an act of faith practiced by “a weird kind of spiritualist.”

Designed by the artist Torkwase Dyson, the exhibition occupies nearly ten thousand square feet; as expansive as it is, you’ll find yourself wishing that the Met had devoted even more space to it. Rather than gallery-standard white walls, the show has unconventionally angled surfaces painted in shades of black and gray; it looks like a night sky filled with stars. The mannequins are a deep, almost silvery black, and we see them standing on platforms and on pedestals placed high on walls which give the impression that they’re floating, like well-dressed apparitions, above the scene. Dyson has a collagist’s eye, and that, along with her love of elegant carving and her tactile relationship to her materials, reminded me of the sculptor Louise Nevelson’s late public sculptures. Nevelson’s strong vertical forms, often painted black, can throw off your perception of the horizontal, which is to say the earth that they and you are standing on.

But you won’t stand still for long in “Superfine.” The show has a structure that Miller borrowed from Zora Neale Hurston’s essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” a fantastic, vexing piece, from 1934, in which Hurston talks about such aspects of Black life as “Culture Heroes,” “Originality,” and “The Will to Adorn.” Miller has divided “Superfine” into single-word concepts that pertain specifically to the Black body: “Ownership,” “Presence,” “Distinction,” and “Disguise” are four of the twelve titles that delineate the show without interrupting its flow.

On the afternoon I went, I started with “Ownership,” which features an exquisite piece from the Meissen porcelain factory. Titled “Lady with Attendant” (c. 1740), it shows a liveried Black servant offering a woman, presumably his owner, a cup of tea or coffee. The two figures gaze at each other with a look of mutual admiration, and although the characters are fictional, a lot of sad and familiar facts went into the making of this object. In eighteenth-century Europe, it was the fashion among the rich to dress their Black servants in what they thought African style might be—turbans, earrings, feathers. All those exotic things, including the servants’ black skin, of course, served the purpose of enhancing the “pure” whiteness of the Europeans. Looking at this piece, I recalled a lamp that some relatives of mine owned when I was a boy. The base was a knockoff of a knockoff of a Meissen piece that showed a similar scene: a Black servant and a white woman frozen in a loving glance. I remember thinking about how delicate that lamp was, on so many levels, and wondering how long it would be before someone smashed it.

*Clothing by the contemporary designer Marvin Desroc.Photograph © Tyler Mitchell 2025 / Courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art*

As I continued through “Ownership,” the devoted expression of the Black figure in “Lady with Attendant” soon turned to recalcitrance. The refusal of the Black men represented in the show to be anything less than a self was clear in the stories of Soubise and others, who did not so much erase their past as make a spectacle of their present. Born to an enslaved mother in St. Kitts in the seventeen-fifties, Soubise was ten when he was presented as a gift to the Duchess of Queensberry in London—the Meissen piece come to life. Eventually, the Duchess freed Soubise but kept him on retainer; her patronage allowed him to live a life of privilege in elaborately furnished apartments, socializing with the nobility, going to the opera, and so on. Of course, his privilege was intolerable to some, and he was caricatured in the press. Still, “despite his perceptible social agency,” Miller writes in the show’s beautifully produced catalogue, “Soubise left relatively little historical evidence of his own—the fate of so many Black dandies to follow.” Writing history is not the same as living it. And the dandy lives, always, in the drama of the now, even if, or especially if, that now appears unable to contain him.

In “Disguise,” the most insightfully curated section of the show, I learned about William and Ellen Craft, an enslaved couple from Georgia who escaped to freedom in Philadelphia, in 1848, by dressing the light-skinned Ellen in the finery of a white male plantation owner, while her husband acted as the planter’s manservant. The Crafts freed themselves by becoming something they were not but which freedom required them to be. You can feel that freedom at work in Diane Arbus’s portrait of Stormé DeLarverie, whom she described as “the lady who appears to be a gentleman.” An m.c. at the Jewel Box Revue, in New York, in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, Stormé was the only male impersonator in a cast of drag queens, and by the time I met her, in the eighties, she was a bouncer at a gay club I frequented in the West Village. I remember the erotic thrill of Stormé, in her denim and leather vest, hugging me, the power of her muscles combined with the softness of her breasts, how she looked one way and felt another. “Disguise” is not only about passing as white or as a man or a woman. It also engages with what the malevolent have always accused people of color and gay or transgender people of trying to do: pass as human. The image of Stormé, for me, brought a particularly wrenching pathos to “Superfine,”

because to see the show is, in a sense, to understand that you have outlived the drama of these dandies, that they are now consigned to history.

Miller took the title of her show from the abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, a formerly enslaved man who, in his autobiography, “The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano” (1789), wrote, “I laid out above eight pounds of my own money for a suit of superfine clothes to dance with at my freedom.” In the book, Equiano describes an early childhood in what is now southern Nigeria, his capture, his enslavement, and his eventual freedom, in England. Like all so-called slave narratives, his tale is a desperately lonely one. Torn from family, rites, and culture, Equiano, like a number of people represented in this haunting and haunted show, used his dandyism, in part, as a defense against a hating world: fashion as a form of tricksterism. Now you see me, now you don’t—all you see is the extravagance and beauty of my clothes. Miller’s use of Equiano’s term draws attention to the emotional bedrock of the exhibition: style is a kind of house in which her singular subjects live freely, a place where there is grace for all. It may be the only such place.

In a section titled “Cosmopolitanism,” I saw a set of prized and well-cared-for Vuitton luggage that had belonged to André Leon Talley. Across the room, a mannequin was attired in Talley’s checked Morty Sills suit from 1986, and, in the stillness of the mannequin’s pose, I saw Talley’s vivid presence. Time rolled backward to moments I myself had shared with André, enthralled by the theatricality of his voice, his meaningful silences, and his vulnerability. I thought of all that he’d introduced me to. There was the day we visited Karl Lagerfeld at his atelier and he gave André a shopping bag partly filled with bijoux, as a gift: André’s glee as he skip-walked down that Paris street when we left—a beautiful child who’d been given the *best* piece of candy. Or the time when André took me and a young designer named John Galliano to Lagerfeld’s house, and Lagerfeld, like a true design mama, told Galliano, who hadn’t shown his work because of budget problems, “You show, even if it’s made out of paper.” Or André’s look of sadness and defeat when he received a letter from a Black designer he’d championed accusing him of not doing enough. All around these memories there were beautiful pieces by Grace Wales Bonner and Willy

Chavarria, living manifestations of how much André did to help promote talented people of color.

*The sociologist, historian, and civil-rights activist W. E. B. Du Bois, in 1900, at the Paris International Exposition, for which he organized a groundbreaking exhibit on the Black condition in the U.S.Photograph courtesy W. E. B. Du Bois Papers, Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, UMass Amherst Libraries*

Even the designs of those current fashion stars were marked by history. Bonner's excellent mauve suit, its short jacket studded with Swarovski crystals and cowrie shells, alluded to the fact that the shells were once a form of currency in certain parts of Africa. Another standout was work by Denzil Patrick, whose exciting tailoring brought to mind the designs of Rei Kawakubo, of Comme des Garçons, but married to Edwardian ideas of correctness. Precise, colorful suits by the great Savile Row tailor Ozwald Boateng seemed intended to function also as a kind of protective armor. As thrilled as I was to see these pieces, I also saw in them a past that felt beyond my reach—because what kept dandies like Equiano alive in that past was not emotional truth but the disguise that clothing can become, masking one's mysteries, sealing one's heart.

Looking around, I thought of other dandies I'd known, including the one I knew most intimately, who, even at a time when he was unhoused, sent a friend a photograph of himself with a beautifully tied scarf around his neck. I thought of Michael Roberts, the late art and fashion director and

photographer, whom I met through Tina Brown, a former editor of this magazine. Roberts, who often looked to me like an English schoolboy—rumpled shirt, rep tie—had worked with Tina to transform the British magazine *Tatler* from a staid society rag into a place of mischief. (One cover I loved: a handsome man carrying a Barbara Hutton look-alike, with the dandyish title “Too Rich to Walk.”) Years ago, I wanted to write about Roberts. I remember Tina approving the story, but then asking me, “Does Michael have a home life? Does he have any kind of comfort?” Even after many years of working with him, she didn’t know. And it wasn’t a question I could ever answer, either, but I never forgot it, and I thought of it at “Superfine,” where it helped me see that what Talley, Roberts, and many others in the show shared was not only a kind of spiritual homelessness but an understanding of how, by living so completely in the moment, which included the moments of being bludgeoned by racism from whites and Blacks alike, they gave little thought to their bodies or to what it meant to have a future. In response, like true aristocrats born to their own invented class, they made dream-building their life’s purpose. It’s there in the garments and histories and attitudes and thoughts they left behind, and it helps make Miller’s show feel like a complete world of nearly unutterable beauty. ♦

*Hilton Als, a staff writer at The New Yorker, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of “God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin.”*

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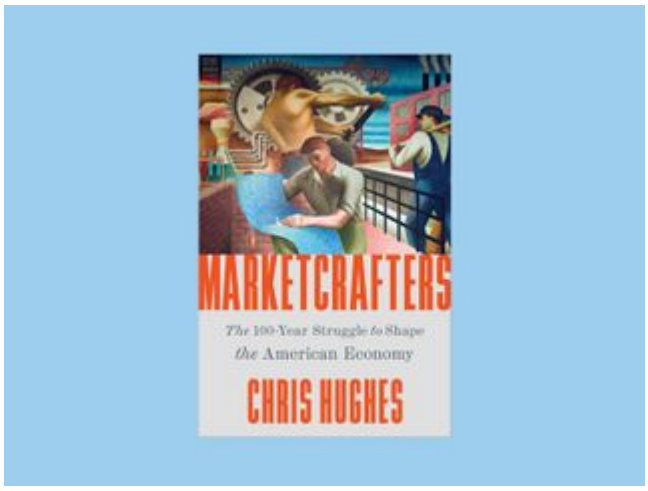
**Books**

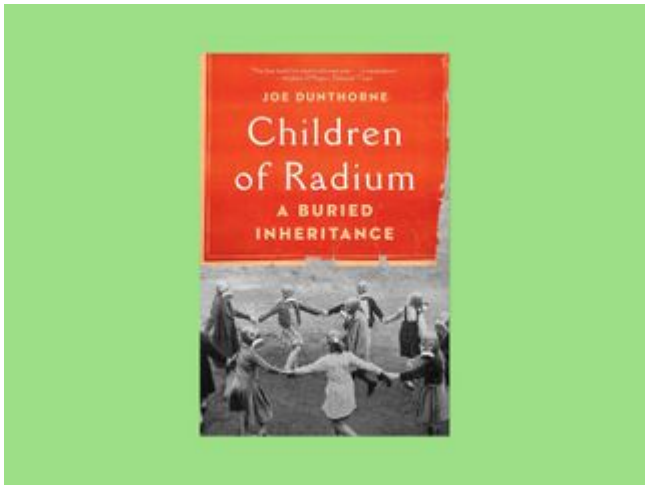
# Briefly Noted

*“Marketcrafters,” “Children of Radium,” “The South,” and “Heart, Be at Peace.”*

*June 2, 2025*




**Marketcrafters**, *by Chris Hughes (Avid Reader)*. This economic history argues that America’s prosperity is the product not of an undisturbed free market but, rather, of the hard work of functionaries. Hughes profiles a range of government technocrats working in eras of tumult—including the Great Depression and the energy crisis of the nineteen-seventies—to support the notion that setting clear objectives and giving skilled, intelligent people resources and flexibility will bear fruit. An especially strong section dissects the implementation of the *CHIPS* Act, a simple policy aimed at bringing semiconductor manufacturing to the U.S., which successfully increased domestic investment in the industry.




**Children of Radium**, *by Joe Dunthorne (Scribner)*. At once a family history and an account of the author's piecing together of that history, this lively memoir centers on Siegfried Merzbacher, a German Jewish chemist who worked in his home country during Hitler's rise, then immigrated to Turkey, in 1935. Dunthorne, a novelist, is Merzbacher's great-grandson, and he attempts to discover how much his ancestor—who worked for a company run by Nazis which manufactured chemical weapons—understood about his own complicity. Dunthorne draws from Merzbacher's patchy, unpublished memoirs, and supplements that text with findings from a ranging investigation that took him to such places as Turkish hillsides and radioactive-waste sites.

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## What We're Reading

*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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

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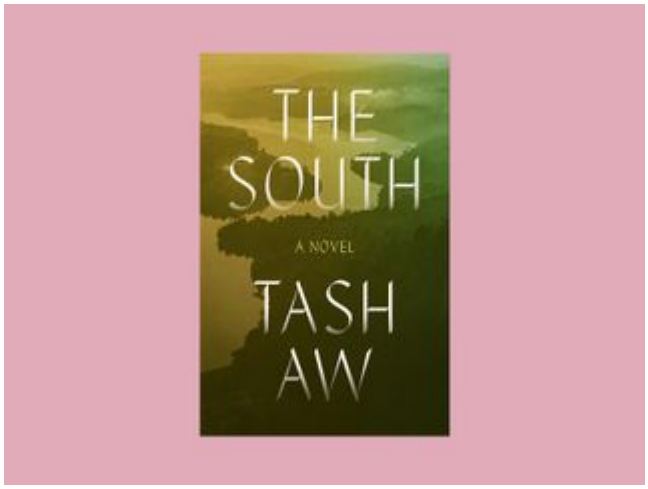
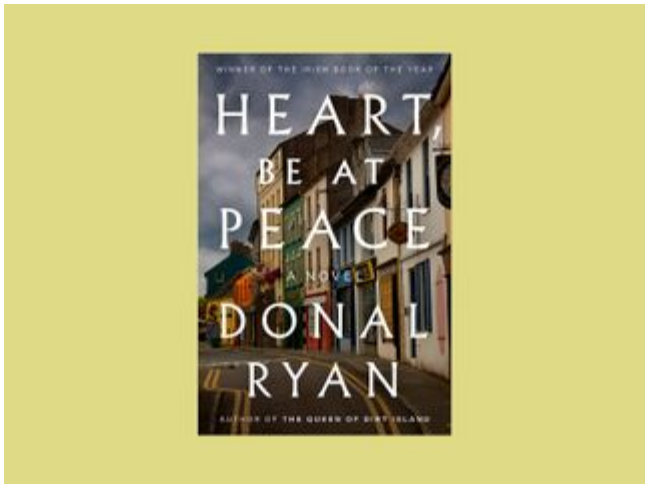



**The South**, *by Tash Aw (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. Spanning a single summer on a struggling Malaysian farm, this bildungsroman, set in the nineteen-nineties, follows a romance between two young men: Jay, whose family owns the farm, and Chuan, the son of the farm's longtime manager. Switching among points of view, the novel explores the impacts of financial strain, ethnic hierarchies, and class disparity, in addition to the secrets that bind the families of the teen-agers together. These include infidelities, unspoken longings, and thorny questions of land inheritance. Aw affectingly evokes places: the private spaces where queer men congregate without shame; a nearby city where it's possible to spy the skyscrapers of Singapore; and the farm itself, which will, like its fireflies, go dark one day, "signifying the end of a season—of many tiny lives."




**Heart, Be at Peace**, *by Donal Ryan (Viking)*. This short, powerful novel is a sequel to Ryan's début, "The Spinning Heart," from 2012, a series of

monologues that told stories connected to a failed housing development in Ireland and the economic collapse following the Celtic Tiger. The new book picks up a decade later with a different crisis, this one born of a sudden increase in drugs. Among the novel's central characters are people engaged in trafficking, a vigilante intent on stopping drug dealers, and the ghost of a man murdered in the first book. The collective effect of their intimate, first-person narratives is that of a confessional, revealing the psyche of a country going through a traumatic change.

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**Books**

# What We Get Wrong About Violent Crime

A Chicago criminologist challenges our assumptions about why most shootings happen—and what really makes a city safe.

**By Malcolm Gladwell**

June 2, 2025

*Most violence isn’t instrumental and planned around some gain; it’s expressive, born of flaring tempers—and unaffected by the calibration of penalties.Illustration by Ben Hickey*

Late on a Sunday night in June of 2023, a woman named Carlishia Hood and her fourteen-year-old son, an honor student, pulled into Maxwell Street Express, a fast-food joint in West Pullman, on the far South Side of Chicago. Her son stayed in the car. Hood went inside. Maxwell is a no-frills place—takeout-style, no indoor seating. It’s open twenty-four hours a day. Hood asked for a special order—without realizing that at Maxwell, a busy place, special orders are frowned upon. The man behind her in line got

upset; she was slowing things down. His name was Jeremy Brown. On the street, they called him the Knock-Out King. Brown began to gesticulate, his arms rising and falling in exasperation. He argued with Hood, growing more agitated. Then he cocked his fist, leaned back to bring the full weight of his body into the motion, and punched her in the head.

When the argument had started, Hood texted her son, asking him to come inside. Now he was at the door, slight and tentative in a white hoodie. He saw Brown punch his mother a second time. The boy pulled out a revolver and shot Brown in the back. Brown ran from the restaurant. The boy pursued him, still firing. Brown died on the street—one of a dozen men killed by gunfire in Chicago that weekend.

In the remarkable new book "Unforgiving Places" (Chicago), Jens Ludwig breaks down the Brown killing, moment by moment. Ludwig is the director of the University of Chicago Crime Lab, and he uses as a heuristic the psychologist Daniel Kahneman's version of the distinction between System 1 and System 2 thinking. According to Kahneman, these are the two cognitive modes that all human beings toggle between. The first is fast, automatic, and intuitive. The second is slow, effortful, and analytical. Ludwig's innovation is to apply the dichotomy to criminal acts. A System 2 crime might be a carefully planned robbery, in which the assailant stalks and assesses his victims before attacking them. This is what criminologists call instrumental violence: acts, Ludwig writes, "committed in order to achieve some tangible or 'instrumental' goal (getting someone's cash or phone or watch or drug turf), where violence is a means to some other, larger end." A System 1 crime, by contrast, is an act of what Ludwig calls "expressive violence"—aimed not at gaining something tangible but at hurting someone, often in a sudden burst of frustration or anger.

## What We're Reading

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

The central argument of “Unforgiving Places” is that Americans, in their attempts to curb crime, have made a fundamental conceptual error. We’ve assumed that the problem is instrumental violence—and have fashioned our criminal-justice system around that assumption. But the real problem is expressive violence. The ongoing bloodshed in America’s streets is just Maxwell Street Express, over and over again.

For the better part of a generation, the study of American crime has been in a state of confusion. The first destabilizing event came in the nineteen-nineties, with a sudden and sustained drop in urban crime across the United States, most notably in New York City. At the time, the prevailing view was that gun violence was deeply rooted—a product of entrenched racism, poverty, and despair. But, if that were true, how did New York’s homicide rate fall by more than half in the span of a single decade? Deeply rooted problems aren’t supposed to resolve themselves so swiftly.

The conventional wisdom adapted. Attention turned to shifts in policing—specifically, the rise of proactive tactics in the nineties. The N.Y.P.D.’s stop-and-frisk strategy, aimed at getting guns off the street, was credited with driving the crime decline. But then, in 2013, a federal judge ruled that the police’s stop-and-frisk practices violated constitutional rights. And what happened? Crime continued to fall. New York got safer even though the police stopped doing the things that we thought were making the city safer. It made no sense.

Then there were those who argued that violent crime was a matter of individual pathology: stunted development, childhood trauma, antisocial tendencies. Look closely at the criminal, we were told. But research—from

criminologists like David Weisburd and Lawrence W. Sherman—showed that, in city after city, crime was hyperconcentrated. A handful of blocks accounted for a disproportionate share of violence, and those blocks stayed violent, year after year. In other words, the problem wasn't people. It was *place*.

Last summer, I was given a tour of a low-income neighborhood in Philadelphia by the Pennsylvania Horticultural Society. Its program Transforming Vacant Lots has led a concerted effort to clean up thousands of vacant lots scattered across the city. The approach is simple: clear the weeds, pick up the trash, plant a lawn, put up a post-and-rail fence. The initiative works on over twelve thousand lots, and the results are striking. What once looked like a struggling neighborhood now resembles, at a glance, a middle-class one.

What's remarkable, though, isn't just the aesthetics. It's that the neighborhoods where these lots have been turned into green spaces have seen a twenty-nine-per-cent drop in gun violence. Twenty-nine per cent! The people haven't changed. The pathologies haven't changed. The same police force still patrols the neighborhood. The only new variable is that someone comes by to mow the lawn once or twice a month. As economists like to say: How do you model that?

This is the puzzle that Ludwig sets out to solve in "Unforgiving Places." His answer is that these episodes confound us only because we haven't appreciated how utterly different System 1 criminality is from that of System 2. System 1 thinking is egocentric: it involves, Ludwig writes, interpreting "everything through the lens of 'What does this have to do with me?' " It depends on stark binaries—reducing a range of possibilities to a simple yes or no—and, as he notes, it "focuses more on negative over positive information." In short, it's wired for threats. System 1 catastrophizes. It imagines the worst.

Brown's encounter with Carlishia Hood pushed him into System 1 mode. He made an immediate egocentric assumption: if he knew that special orders were a norm violation, then Hood must know, too. "Given that System 1 assumption," Ludwig explains, "from there it is natural that

Brown believed the person in front of him was deliberately holding things up."

Hood, meanwhile, didn't know about the special-order taboo, so she was operating under her own egocentric assumptions. She "knew she wasn't being disrespectful and deliberately trying to hold up everyone else in line, so the curse of knowledge led her System 1 to assume that Brown surely also knew that," Ludwig writes. "So why was he getting so bent out of shape? She didn't mean to be inconsiderate to the people behind her in line; she just wanted the Maxwell Street Express people to change whatever it was that she wanted changed on the burger." Neither had the cognitive space to consider that they were caught in a misunderstanding. They were in binary mode: *I'm right, so you must be wrong*. From there, things escalated:

> Hood says to her son, who's standing behind Brown, "Get in the car."
>
> Brown seems to think that comment is directed at him—another misreading of the situation."*WHO*?!?" he says. "Get in the *CAR*?!?"
>
> Hood says something that's hard to make out from the video.
>
> Brown says, "Hey lady, lady, lady, lady. *GET YOUR FOOD. GET YOUR FOOD*. If you say one more thing, I'm going to *KNOCK YOU OUT*." You can see his right fist, clenching and unclenching, over and over.
>
> She says something that is again hard to make out on the video.
>
> He says, "Oh my God I *SAID* if you say one more thing, I'm going to knock you out."

At which point he punches her—*hard*.

Hood's son is standing in the doorway, watching the assault of his mother. Had he been in System 2 mode, he might have paused. He might have asked for help. He might have called 911. He could have weighed the trade-offs and thought, *Yes, it's unbearable to watch my mother being beaten. But,*

*if I kill this man, I could spend years in prison*. But he's filled with adrenaline. He shifts into catastrophizing mode: *There is nothing worse than seeing my mother get pummelled by a stranger.* Brown punches her again—and again. The boy shoots him in the back. Brown runs. Hood tells her son to follow him. *There is nothing worse than letting him get away*. Still in System 1, the boy fires again. Brown collapses in the street.

Ludwig argues that this is what most homicide looks like. Much of what gets labelled gang violence, he says, is really just conflict between individuals who happen to be in gangs. We misread these events because we insist on naming the affiliations of the combatants. Imagine, he suggests, if we did this for everyone: " 'This morning by Buckingham Fountain, a financial analyst at Morningstar killed a mechanic for United Airlines.' Naturally you'd think the place of employment must be relevant to understanding the shooting, otherwise why mention it at all?"

The "super-predator"—the remorseless psychopath of television dramas—turns out to be rare. The mass shooter, meticulously assembling his arsenal, is a statistical anomaly. The professional hit man is mostly a literary invention. "A careful look at twenty years of U.S. murder data collected by the F.B.I.," Ludwig writes, "concluded that only 23 percent of all murders were instrumental; 77 percent of murders—nearly four of every five—were some form of expressive violence."

The Chicago Police Department estimates that arguments lie behind seventy to eighty per cent of homicides. The numbers for Philadelphia and Milwaukee are similar. And that proportion has held remarkably steady over time. Drawing on data from Houston in 1969, the sociologist Donald Black concluded that barely more than a tenth of homicides occurred during predatory crimes like burglary or robbery. The rest, he found, arose from emotionally charged disputes—over infidelity, household finances, drinking, child custody. Not calculated acts of gain, in other words, but eruptions rooted in contested ideas of right and wrong.

Ludwig's point is that the criminal-justice system, as we've built it, fails to reckon with this reality. We've focussed on the signalling function of punishment—on getting the deterrents right, offering the proper mixture of carrots and sticks to influence rational actors. Mass incarceration, which

swept the country in the late twentieth century, rested on the assumption that a person spoiling for a fight with another person was weighing costs: that the difference between ten years and twenty-five would matter. But was Jeremy Brown calculating odds when he punched Carlishia Hood? Was her son performing a Bayesian analysis as he ran from the restaurant, gun in hand?

This misapprehension, he argues, is why the American experience of crime so often seems baffling. Murders are volatile—a city really can go from dangerous to safe overnight—because the behavior driving most homicides is volatile.

Why did crime in New York continue to fall after the N.Y.P.D. ended stop-and-frisk? Because what makes police officers effective isn't how many people they stop or arrest—it's how many arguments they interrupt or defuse, ideally without resorting to handcuffs or charges.

Why does crime seem more related to places than to people? Because some places are simply better at de-escalation than others. Imagine Maxwell Street Express in a more stable neighborhood, with a core of regulars—people connected to one another, who know something about Jeremy Brown and his temper. Another customer might have stepped in and said, "Hey, wait a minute, Jeremy. Cool it. I don't think the lady knows how this restaurant works."

And why did Philadelphia's vacant-lot program work so well? Because, when an empty lot becomes a well-kept lawn, people come outside. They have barbecues and picnics. Kids play. And suddenly, as Jane Jacobs famously put it, the block has "eyes on the street."

"Jane Jacobs claimed that informal social control contributed vitally to public safety by interrupting criminal and violent acts in the moment," Ludwig writes. It's an idea that doesn't make much sense if you assume that violence is instrumental. The rational criminal, after all, will just move a block over—set up shop where the odds tilt in his favor. But that's not how most offenders operate. They've lost their temper. For a few volatile minutes, they're not thinking straight. And, in that state, violence interrupted is violence prevented.

One subject that Ludwig all but ignores in “Unforgiving Places” is guns. It’s a notable omission, since what turns the confrontation at Maxwell Street Express from a fight into a homicide is the peculiarly American fact that Carlishia Hood had a handgun in her car. In any other developed country, a fistfight between Jeremy Brown and Carlishia Hood would in all likelihood have remained a fistfight.

But Ludwig is weary of gun-control arguments. He simply doesn’t believe that the United States is ever going to enact serious restrictions. “Over the last 243 years of U.S. history, the number of major, restrictive federal gun laws has been (depending on how you count) something like five or six.” That’s what economists call the base rate—and Ludwig’s position is that the energy devoted to that lost cause might be better directed elsewhere.

He wants us, instead, to take System 1 behavior seriously. First, stop talking about criminals as if they occupy some distinct moral category. Neither Jeremy Brown nor Hood’s son was evil. They were caught in an unforgiving moment. Second, stop locking up so many people for long prison terms. The best way to keep arguments among teen-agers from turning violent is for adults to step in and tell them to cool down—and mass incarceration drains adults from troubled neighborhoods.

Third, spend more time thinking about what makes one neighborhood safe and another unsafe. Ludwig cites a randomized trial in New York City’s public-housing projects, which found that developments given upgraded outdoor lighting experienced a thirty-five-per-cent reduction in serious crimes compared with those left as is. A well-lit space makes it easier for bystanders to see a confrontation unfold—and makes those involved a little more self-conscious.

But the biggest opportunity, Ludwig argues, lies in behavioral modification. He writes about a program in Chicago called *BAM*—Becoming a Man—which teaches teen-agers how to navigate potentially volatile encounters. In a large randomized trial, Ludwig compared students on Chicago’s West Side and South Side who had participated in *BAM* with those who hadn’t, and found that participation reduced arrests for violent crime by fifty per cent.

He describes one of the program's exercises, in which students are paired off. One is given a ball; the other is told he has thirty seconds to take it.

> Almost all of them rely on force to try to complete the assignment; they try to pry the other person's hand open, or wrestle or even pummel the other person. During the debrief that follows, a BAM counselor asks why no one asked for the ball. Most youths respond by saying their partner would have thought they were a punk (or something worse—you can imagine). The counselor then asks the partner what he would have done if asked. The usual answer: "I would have given it, it's just a stupid ball."

Exactly. It's almost always a stupid ball. Or someone asking to hold the pickle. No one walked into Maxwell Street Express that night expecting to die, or to kill. But that's the nature of expressive violence: no plan, no purpose—just a match struck in passing. As Ludwig reminds us, we have been trying to stop violent offenders without understanding what goes on in the mind of the violent offender. ♦

*Malcolm Gladwell is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the host of the podcast "Revisionist History."*

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A Critic at Large

# How Margaret Fuller Set Minds on Fire

High-minded and scandal-prone, a foe of marriage who dreamed of domesticity, Fuller radiated a charisma that helped ignite the fight for women’s rights.

**By James Marcus**

June 2, 2025

*In 1839, Fuller launched her Conversations, gatherings for women that were a “cross between graduate seminar, professional symposium, and social network”; they sparked responses akin to those at a revival meeting.Illustration by Fanny Blanc*

In the four and a half decades since its founding, the Library of America has issued not only the pillars of our national literature but such populist fare as

the lyrics of Cole Porter and a volume devoted to "Peanuts." This is certainly the right move—the jazzy and the colloquial are the very lifeblood of our culture. Still, it's curious that it has taken until 2025 for these gatekeepers to anoint Margaret Fuller with a book of her own.

Chalk it up, perhaps, to Fuller's blurry role in the canon. Although her brief life is richly documented, she often fails to come into focus. A sworn enemy of marriage who longed for a husband and child, a Transcendentalist who made a beeline for revolutionary Europe, an incurable gossip and an erstwhile Platonist: she is all these things and is defined by none of them.

"Margaret Fuller: Collected Writings" (Library of America) should help to sharpen the picture. Its editors, Brigitte Bailey, Noelle A. Baker, and Megan Marshall, have embedded Fuller's two books and a selection of her reportage in the context of her journals and correspondence. This seems like a wise approach for an author whose life speaks to us as eloquently as her work. It wasn't enough for Fuller, in other words, to produce the first major feminist manifesto in American history. She also put flesh on its bones by breaking the rigid rules of gendered conduct whenever possible, which is why the pioneering activist Elizabeth Cady Stanton later described Fuller's work as "a vindication of woman's right to think."

## What We're Reading

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The Library of America has company in commemorating this extraordinary figure. Last year, Allison Pataki, who has previously written fictionalized

lives of queens (Empress Elisabeth of Austria) and commoners (Peggy Shippen, the seductive, insanity-faking wife of Benedict Arnold), published "Finding Margaret Fuller: A Novel" (Ballantine). And now we have Randall Fuller's "Bright Circle: Five Remarkable Women in the Age of Transcendentalism" (Oxford). The author, a scholar and a distant relation of you-know-who, argues that the history of Transcendentalism has long been distorted by an undue stress on its marquee figures, all of them male. Instead, he insists, the movement owes just as much to its female participants, very much including Margaret Fuller. We appear to be in the midst of a Fuller moment. But what, more than two centuries after her birth, does she have to tell us now?

Some writers are youthful prodigies, some late bloomers. Fuller, in a typically paradoxical fashion, was both at once. She owed her early accomplishment to her father, Timothy Fuller, who was determined to turn young Margaret into a machine of erudition—a genius in pigtails. He knew that a girl born in Cambridgeport, Massachusetts, in 1810 would be denied the educational opportunities that could be granted to a boy. A product of Harvard himself, he decided to level the playing field for his eldest daughter.

"I was taught Latin and English grammar at the same time," Fuller later recalled, "and began to read Latin at six years old." Her father soon bulked up the curriculum with literature, mythology, music, philosophy, history, French, Italian, and Greek. In a forward-looking moment, he even considered assigning Mary Wollstonecraft's "A Vindication of the Rights of Woman"—but changed his mind, figuring that an attack on traditional female domesticity might be taking his pedagogical program a little too far.

As Megan Marshall recounts in her superb biography "Margaret Fuller: A New American Life," this routine left Fuller in a state of constant anxiety. When she went to bed, she dreamed of being trampled by horses or drowned in blood. She felt an alarming split between her outer life, dominated by rote memorizing and the paternal pat on the head, and the inner life of what was, after all, a child. "My true life was only the dearer," she later wrote, "that it was secluded and veiled over by a thick curtain of available intellect."

Another effect of such a curtain is to keep out other people. Fuller, like many a brilliant nerd, was initially awkward with her peers. “The girls supposed me really superior to themselves, and did not hate me for feeling it, but neither did they like me, nor wish to have me with them,” Fuller noted of her childhood.

Here, sadly, a template was being set for Fuller’s existence as a social being. She was smarter than most people she would subsequently meet. This opened up a gap between herself and others—which was compounded by her appearance. Fuller suffered from a curvature of the spine, which made her slouch, and from myopia, which made her squint. As a girl, she was also tormented by a reddish blotchiness on her face, most likely from rosacea or acne. Intensely self-conscious about these physical flaws, Fuller resigned herself early on “to be bright and ugly.”

Still, when Timothy Fuller moved his growing family to a house in Cambridge proper, in 1826, his sixteen-year-old daughter made an amazing discovery. Her lavishly stocked brain, which she had so often viewed as a social stumbling block, had turned her into a scintillating conversationalist. Sarah Freeman Clarke, who would be a lifelong friend, noted that even as a teen-ager Fuller “told startling truths,” and, “though she broke down your little shams and defenses, you felt exhilarated by the compliment of being found out.”

None of this, as Marshall makes clear in her biography, solved the enormous problem of vocation. For a woman of Fuller’s talents, there was essentially nowhere to go, no obvious niche in the ecosystem of New England’s intellectual life. She could teach school (which she did), or assist in running the Fuller household, transplanted in 1833 to a farm in Groton and by then including six younger siblings (which almost killed her).

These were years of drift and depression. Still, Fuller kept up with her literary labors—and it was her translation of Goethe’s play “Torquato Tasso” that precipitated the next great sea change in her life, when a copy was placed in the hands of Ralph Waldo Emerson. The essayist and Transcendentalist kingpin was impressed. In July of 1836, he invited Fuller for what turned out to be a three-week visit to the Emerson household, in

Concord, Massachusetts, initiating exactly the sort of transformative friendship that both parties relished.

*“I’ll let the kitchen know about your broccoli sensitivity.”*
*Cartoon by Julia Thomas*

Yet problems crept into the relationship almost immediately. Despite their many affinities, these two personalities were almost diabolically engineered to create conflict. Fuller, after a childhood of emotional deprivation, always wanted more. The married Emerson, seven years older and soon to be a father, wanted less. He craved warmth, but, when it was offered, he usually backpedalled into his chilly solitude. It took many of these freeze-and-thaw cycles, over the course of many years, for the friendship to attain any sort of equilibrium.

In the meantime, Fuller was drawn deeper into Emerson’s circle. First, there was a spell of teaching at Bronson Alcott’s embattled, Boston-based Temple School, in 1837, for which she was never paid. Then she was offered a better gig. As she recorded in her journal on September 25, 1839: “It is now proposed that I should conduct a magazine which would afford me space and occasion for every thing I may wish to do.”

This was *The Dial*, which became the Transcendentalist house organ. Fuller was one of the magazine’s founders, and Emerson proposed that she be its editor. She was understandably thrilled. It was a great leap forward, even though it meant herding a crew of contributors and weeding out the excesses of Transcendental prose—the latter task made more difficult by the

fact that she, too, was sometimes drawn to the gassy and gossamer tone of the Concord crew. During the next two years, she edited eight issues of what was basically an avant-garde quarterly, and contributed many pieces of her own. Fuller quit as a dismal pattern began to assert itself once again: she was never paid.

Even as her job at *The Dial* plunged her deeper into the heart of Transcendentalism, Fuller began to separate herself from the movement. For obvious reasons, she needed money. The lyceum speaking circuit had exploded in popularity, but women were largely barred from it. The author and abolitionist Lydia Maria Child, who was also a friend of Fuller's, expressed what was undoubtedly a mutual frustration: "Oh, if I was a man, how I *would* lecture! But I am a woman, and so I sit in the corner and knit socks."

Fuller came up with a solution of her own. In 1839, she launched what she called her Conversations. These were meetings of twenty-five or so women, each of whom paid the substantial sum of ten dollars to hear Fuller exercise her verbal brilliance in the course of a thirteen-week-long series, in semiprivate settings.

She couldn't have found a better showcase. Fuller already knew that conversing with other people fired her imagination in a way that the printed page sometimes did not. Speaking with men brought out her defiant side, as she noted in her journal: "They do not see where we got our knowledge and while they tramp on in their clumsy way we wheel and fly and dart hither and thither." With women, she was warm and supportive, insisting that such conversations must be a dialogue, a modest meeting of souls.

Randall Fuller is particularly good on these momentous exchanges. As he notes, the collegial atmosphere, so different from the jostling of alpha-dog males in public debates, brought out surprising contributions from the group. "Ideas the women had only vaguely considered in solitude suddenly gushed forth," he writes, "as if from an underground spring, dazzling them in the light of day."

Fuller's methods, then, were deeply connected to gender. But so was the subject matter of the Conversations, which attracted more than two hundred

participants in the course of five years. Fuller often got the ball rolling by speaking on mythological, historical, or philosophical themes. Yet the discussion kept gravitating back to the subordination of women, a topic even her well-heeled listeners had no trouble understanding.

It would have been bold enough for Fuller to lambaste the social conditions that made women into second-class citizens. But she was intent on going deeper: What were the differences between men and women that had produced these social conditions in the first place? Fuller believed that all people had a mixture of male and female qualities. (In her journal, she wrote that her dual nature made her a perfect friend for Emerson, since she was "enough of woman to sympathize with all his feelings, enough of man to appreciate all thoughts.") Perhaps, she argued, it was simply the *distribution* of these qualities that separated the genders, rather than any sort of biological destiny.

In this sense, her thinking is strikingly modern. Souls were essentially androgynous, albeit with numerous gradations. The main goal, she exhorted her audience, was to junk the old, stale distinctions. Women should make moral decisions, for example, as human beings, rather than peering through the distorting lenses of traditional femininity. Otherwise, they would sink into what Fuller called "the depths of sentimentalism."

Randall Fuller calls the Conversations a "cross between graduate seminar, professional symposium, and social network," as well as "the foundation of what we now call the women's rights movement." They were, clearly, all these things. But the engine of the whole enterprise was Fuller's intensity and charisma, which prompted responses more akin to those at a revival meeting. As one awestruck audience member put it, Fuller had "opened the book of life and helped us to read it for ourselves." She hadn't, in other words, assaulted her listeners with the kind of factual cornucopia that she had been forced to absorb as a child. She made knowledge, or even consciousness, into a communal effort.

In 1843, Fuller began a four-month, post-*Dial* journey to the American Midwest. Most of the time, she was accompanied by friends. But she spent ten days exploring Mackinac Island, in Michigan, on her own—a daring move for a middle-class woman of her era. This was still wild country, and

Fuller set off with the express purpose of producing a book about her journey. Travel writing was not a Transcendentalist genre. The movement's key players were armchair visionaries—or, like Henry David Thoreau, determined to see the universe in the minimal acreage of a New England village.

The result of her travels was "Summer on the Lakes, in 1843," published in 1844. Fuller turns out to be an excellent nature writer, pinning flora and fauna and leviathan-sized Midwest clouds to the page. She sees, too, how the scale of the landscape modified the psychology of its white settlers, who were more accustomed to the close quarters back East. "Here a man need not take a small slice from the landscape," she writes, "and fence it in from the obtrusions of an uncongenial neighbor, and there cut down his fancies to miniature improvements which a chicken could run over in ten minutes."

The rawness of the terrain near the Rock River, in Illinois, strikes Fuller as a divine statement. She declares that "there was neither wall nor road in Eden, that those who walked there lost and found their way just as we did, and that all the gain from the Fall was that we had a wagon to ride in." There are many other such memorable moments. The author also varies the texture of the book by inserting poems, quotations, dramatic dialogue, a veiled account of her unhappy days at boarding school, and a lengthy digression on the German mystic Friederike Hauffe, who claimed to be clairvoyant and to communicate with spirits.

For some readers, all this will be an invitation to go *AWOL*. The book hangs together better once you recognize its real nature: not so much a straight travel narrative as a disguised autobiography, or confession, or gender polemic. As the fictional Fuller muses in Allison Pataki's novel, "Summer on the Lakes" is "a work of female adventure, written by a woman who went on her own into parts unknown," as well as a "philosophical pondering of what we carry with us from our own natures."

This seems accurate enough. Such a hybrid can easily accommodate Fuller's foundational misery as an adolescent and her commitment to ecstatic perception. Fuller is also alert to the domestic arrangements made by white settlers and Native Americans alike. How are men and women

supposed to live together? The question was not only anthropological but highly personal, since the author still longed for a suitable companion.

Gender relations, in fact, lay at the heart of her next book. "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" was published in February of 1845 and became an immediate hit, selling out its first printing of fifteen hundred copies within a week. It was a scandal and a landmark, introducing many new readers to what Lydia Maria Child, one of its early reviewers, called "a contralto voice in literature: deep, rich, and strong."

As it happens, "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" contains some of the same obstacles as its predecessor. Again, Fuller opts for a loose and accumulative sense of structure, only slightly less rigorous than a tossed salad. The tone is lofty, sometimes opaque. Part of the problem for modern readers is that we now expect a cultural bombshell to be, well, explosive. But political speech in the nineteenth century, as testified to by any number of senatorial addresses, tended toward the oratorical and long-winded. Elevation was the preferred tool for changing minds. So Fuller, too, keeps shifting her diction into high gear.

Her basic argument is simple enough. Men have been ruling the roost for almost all of recorded history. It is now time for women, "the other chamber of the heart of life," to take their turn in what Fuller calls "the full pulsation." She goes on to make her argument in more specific terms, of course. She examines four different kinds of marriage, most of them defective in one way or another. What makes a marriage work, in her view, is a joint mission between equals: two minds joined by "the only contract that can permanently avail, of a common faith and a common purpose."

This statement, which may now strike us as anodyne, offended a good many of her friends, including the married ones. Some readers also failed to appreciate the way Fuller explicitly tied the liberation of women to that of both enslaved Black people and Native Americans. This, too, was more daring than it may seem today. During the eighteen-forties, the antislavery movement was splintering over the question of whether such crusades should be compartmentalized, either for tactical reasons or because some of its male adherents felt that women should stay out of politics altogether. Some even quoted from St. Paul: "Let women keep silence in the church."

To Fuller, however, all these struggles were inseparable—and silence was not an option.

This emancipatory impulse unites the disparate materials in the book. So does the plainer, sharper, satirical tone that intermittently enlivens the author's prose. At one point, she mounts a marvellous defense of bachelors and spinsters, existing as they do on the fringes of conjugal life. "The business of society has become so complex," she writes, "that it could now scarcely be carried on without the presence of these despised auxiliaries; and detachments from the army of aunts and uncles are wanted to stop gaps in every hedge. They rove about, mental and moral Ishmaelites, pitching their tents amid the fixed and ornamented homes of men." Here the hyperbole is delicious, tart, and doubtless truer to the tone of Fuller's speaking voice.

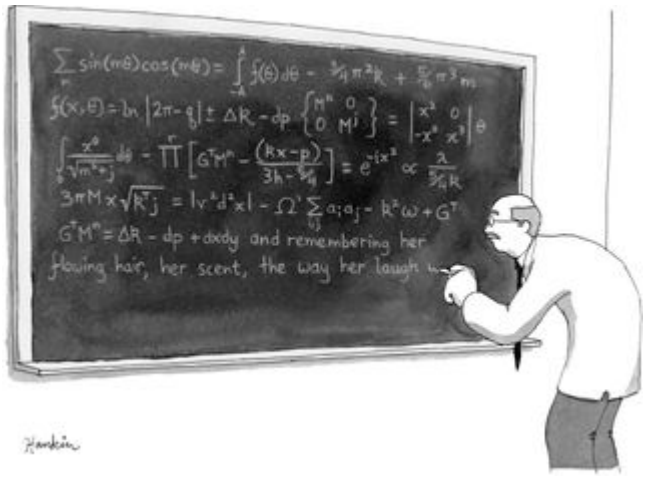
So is her reiteration, near the end of the book, that women must seek their own higher purposes, without the guidance of their male counterparts. Fuller is not a separatist by any means, but she is wary of the default relationships between man and woman, which had hobbled her own progress since childhood. "I wish woman to live, *first* for God's sake," she exclaims. "Then she will not make an imperfect man her god, and thus sink to idolatry."

Fuller had moved to New York City at the end of 1844, after Horace Greeley, the founder of the New-York *Tribune*, offered her a job as literary editor. An ardent fan of his new hire, Greeley not only co-published "Woman in the Nineteenth Century" but initially insisted that Fuller live in his tumbledown mansion in Manhattan's Turtle Bay. There she was scolded by the nutritionally chaste household for drinking coffee and wearing leather gloves.

Despite her job title, Fuller was primarily a writer, making her the only full-time female reporter in the *Tribune's* newsroom, and perhaps in American journalism as a whole. During her first two years at the paper, her style continued to sharpen, in part to meet the demands of a tabloid audience. ("Newspaper writing is next door to conversation," she decided.) Noting Balzac's chilliness, she asserted that "he must originally have had a heart, or he could not read so well the hearts of others." Longfellow's poetry

struck her as “a tastefully arranged Museum, between whose glass cases are interspersed neatly potted rose trees, geraniums and hyacinths, grown by himself with aid of in-door heat.”

At the same time, she became more of a political animal. She visited the city’s jails and insane asylums, exposing their abuses in what were early examples of muckraking. What troubled her most was the way in which incarcerated people were made to feel that they had been erased from society. In a sense, their banishment was simply a heightened version of the semi-invisibility conferred upon women, and Fuller’s fellow-feeling gave the pieces an added pathos. She had come a long, long way from the bucolic life in Concord.




*Cartoon by Charlie Hankin*

She was about to go farther still. In August of 1846, she boarded a steamship for Europe. Fuller had been watching the Continent’s social unrest for some time, and writing about it in the *Tribune*. “The cauldron simmers,” she observed, “and so great is the fire that we expect it soon to boil over, and new Fates appear for Europe.” What she found there, during the initial leg of her Grand Tour, was a level of adulation her own country had often withheld. Fuller was known as the controversial author of “Woman in the Nineteenth Century,” and she consorted with a crowd of A-listers: William Wordsworth, Matthew Arnold, Harriet Martineau, George Sand, Thomas Carlyle, Frédéric Chopin.

What happened next seems like the stuff of fiction. Having travelled to Rome, Fuller struck up a romance with a skinny, diffident twenty-six-year-

old named Giovanni Angelo Ossoli. He came from an aristocratic Italian family, but he had neither money nor the slightest command of English. In fact, he had little education at all, which made him an unlikely consort for Fuller, who was also ten years older. You could say this was an inversion of the Jamesian formula: here, European innocence was offering itself up to American sophistication. Fuller was also inverting her previous ideas about exalted companionship, which was supposed to rely on a "supersensual" commingling of inner lives—no organs involved. Whether they were ever legally married is unclear. But they certainly became parents, with the birth of Angelo Eugene Philip Ossoli, in September of 1848.

By then, her fate was wrapped up in the political cauldron she had foreseen two years earlier. As civic unrest ripped its way through Europe in the spring of 1848, it finally reached Rome, where the populace rose against Pope Pius IX and announced the formation of an independent republic. Fuller was anything but a detached foreign observer. She was the wife of a Roman citizen, who had joined the insurgent militia. She was also a passionate believer in the uprising who happened to be covering it for the *Tribune* in her capacity as America's first female war correspondent.

Her dispatches home, the last work she ever published, are full of fire. Alas, what she ended up covering was ultimately a defeat, as the French rushed in to put down the Roman republic. Fuller reported on the bombardments, the casualties at a field hospital, and the awful aftermath: "A pair of skeleton legs protruded from a bank of one barricade; lower a dog had scratched away its light covering of earth from the body of a man, and discovered it lying face upward all dressed; the dog stood gazing on it with an air of stupid amusement." The language is vivid, exact, as if she were anticipating Mathew Brady's images of Civil War carnage. The late bloomer had finally found her métier.

But now it was too late. After the failure of his cause, the penniless Ossoli was forced to leave Rome, and it was up to Fuller to decide their next move. "The American in Europe, if a thinking mind, can only become more American," Fuller had earlier declared, and now she wanted to go home. It was unclear what her husband, with his meagre English and messy legal status, would do in America. It was also unclear whether Fuller, who was

already working on a big journalistic history of the Roman revolution, could earn enough to support them.

Fuller would never again set foot on American soil. She and her family boarded the cargo ship Elizabeth, in Livorno, in the spring of 1850. On July 19th, the ship broke up amid a violent storm, having run aground on a sandbar just three hundred yards off Fire Island, New York. America, then, was visible to Fuller as the ferocious winds destroyed the vessel. So, too, was Fuller visible to the gathering crowds on the shore: a distant figure in a white nightgown, handing her nearly two-year-old child to a crew member before a wave swept her overboard.

The body of the child, whom they called Nino, eventually washed ashore. No trace of Fuller or Ossoli was ever found, nor was the manuscript of her Roman chronicle, although a friend recovered a waterlogged trunk containing her papers and scavengers plundered the wreckage, which included large quantities of silk, almonds, and marble. They also found a seven-foot statue of the pro-slavery firebrand John C. Calhoun, a cargo that Fuller, who admired its sculptor, might have nonetheless despised.

What of Margaret Fuller's remains—literary, political, spiritual? For Allison Pataki, the protagonist of "Finding Margaret Fuller" is one in a long line of unconventional women whose stories have been suppressed or sidelined. It's not that Pataki is writing feminist polemics. Quite the opposite: her novels are sweeping, rapid, crinoline-crammed specimens of historical fiction. Her account of Fuller's life includes shafts of wit—her description of the young Thoreau as a "feral Pan" is spot on—and pays lavish attention to the natural world, which I imagine would have pleased the author of "Summer on the Lakes." Yet one also senses a desire to smooth out some of the oddities of Fuller's existence, to make her story into a kind of romance.

The first chapter begins with the heroine's early encounter with Emerson; since the record shows that he was initially put off by her appearance, I very much doubt he touched her temple or stuck a flirty flower in her hair. Nor does Pataki dwell much on Fuller's own sense of being an ugly duckling, which surely fuelled her hyper-cerebral approach to reality, not to mention her skittishness toward sexual intimacy. The effect is to make this unconventional woman slightly more conventional. She is a creature whose

blood swells and veins throb (a lot), but who seems unlikely to have written the peculiar and permanent books that Fuller did.

Randall Fuller gets closer to the core of his subject's personality simply by focussing on her conversational impulse, and on her ecumenical vision of society. America's first feminist icon would have found identity politics a hard pill to swallow. She tended to resist essentialism of any kind. Hence her view that gender was not an insuperable barrier but almost an accident; as she wrote in "Woman in the Nineteenth Century," men and women were "perpetually passing into one another."

Yet Fuller found her own identity—as a woman *and* a writer—to be a source of confusion, and sometimes constriction. "At hours," she wrote, "I live truly as a woman; at others, I should stifle; as, on the other hand, I should palsy, when I would play the artist." Here, she is selling herself short. Fuller was not the first female author in American literature, and, since her talent was of a slow-germinating kind, we will never know what wonders she might have produced after her return to America. Yet she managed to fuse those two roles so completely in the public eye that they could never again be separated. Her epitaph might be a line she inscribed in her journal, after studying a portrait of the French *salonnière* Juliette Récamier: "It seems when you see a woman in a picture with a book, that she is doing exactly that for which she was born." ♦

*James Marcus is a writer, an editor, and a translator. His books include "Glad to the Brink of Fear: A Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson."*

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**The Current Cinema**

# Is “The Phoenician Scheme” Wes Anderson’s Most Emotional Film?

*Despite an abundance of plot strands and characters, Anderson’s latest drills down into the father-daughter relationship depicted by its leads, Benicio del Toro and Mia Threapleton.*

***By Richard Brody***

*May 29, 2025*

*Benicio del Toro leads an ensemble cast in Wes Anderson’s film.Illustration by Kristian Hammerstad*

Wes Anderson’s new film, “The Phoenician Scheme,” is a funny-ha-ha comedy, but there’s nothing funny about its story, which involves a wealthy industrialist’s attempts to realize a grandiose infrastructure project. Anderson’s signature is instantly recognizable in the movie’s decorative production design, its frontal and symmetrical framings, and its antic, densely plotted story—and equally in the fact that it is a violent and death-haunted action film, filled with fights and chases. Yet, compared with “The Grand Budapest Hotel” (2014) and the work that has followed, the new film is relatively simple: rather than nesting stories within other stories, it follows its protagonist closely. The result is a heightened clarity—revealing the distinctive world view that Anderson’s methods embody—and an unusually direct emotionalism.

“The Phoenician Scheme” is the story of an amusingly bad man who becomes a little less amusing and a little less bad. Benicio del Toro, alternately glowering and glib, stars as Anatole (Zsa-zsa) Korda, an Onassis-like figure of uninhibited ruthlessness. The action, which runs from 1950 to late 1951, begins as Zsa-zsa, a proud citizen of no country, flits about in a private Air Korda plane that he knows to be a target of saboteurs. Sure enough, mid-flight, a hole is blown in the fuselage, and Zsa-zsa, taking the controls, crash-lands the plane. Unconscious, he has a near-death experience—filmed in black-and-white with a sense of both comedy and wonderment—in which he arrives in a cotton-puff Heaven under the severe scrutiny of a berobed gatekeeper (played by Willem Dafoe).

Badly wounded, Zsa-zsa recuperates in his sixteenth-century Italian palazzo, and summons his twenty-year-old daughter, Liesl (Mia Threapleton), a novitiate nun. She’s the eldest of his ten children (the other nine are boys), and he wants her to renounce her vocation and become the heir to his enterprises, at a critical moment. A grand project in the fictitious country of Phoenicia, thirty years in the making—involving a canal, a tunnel, a railroad line, and a dam—may finally be coming to fruition, and Zsa-zsa, who is set to get five per cent of the profits, will stop at nothing to realize it. The film sardonically conjures a golden age of interventionist arrogance. Though there’s no explicit mention of the Cold War, there’s plenty of espionage and intrigue. Zsa-zsa’s many enemies include American secret agents, an international business consortium, and a well-armed band of revolutionaries, led by a man named Sergio (Richard Ayoade). Zsa-zsa’s scheme comes at a high human cost: it may bring modernization to Phoenicia, but it will depend on slave labor. This doesn’t trouble his conscience any more than does his reputation for financial misdeeds. But the scheme puts several targets on his back: governments and corporate entities see him as a loose cannon, and the revolutionaries see him as a predator.

It’s no wonder that Zsa-zsa is accustomed to assassination attempts. At meals, he puts a drop of reagent into his drinks, and he is unruffled when one turns out to be poisoned. He is at home with violence, literally: he keeps a box full of hand grenades nearby at all times and offers them to guests as if they were cigars or chocolates. He endures danger, such as a

submersion in quicksand, with gruff equanimity. He also keeps his cool in heated dealings with a far-flung cast of associates whose backing he needs: with Prince Farouk (Riz Ahmed), he faces two Americans (Tom Hanks and Bryan Cranston) in a high-stakes basketball shoot-out; he takes a bullet for Marseille Bob (Mathieu Amalric) in the Frenchman's Art Deco night club; he negotiates with the Newark Syndicate's hipster representative, Marty (Jeffrey Wright), with the aid of deadly force. Closer to home, he hopes to marry a rich second cousin, Hilda Sussman-Korda (Scarlett Johansson), and seeks the support of an estranged half brother, called Uncle Nubar (Benedict Cumberbatch).

This last relationship becomes particularly fraught. Zsa-zsa has outlived all three of his wives, including Liesl's mother, and Liesl has heard rumors that he killed her, or had her killed. When she confronts him, he pins the blame on Nubar, and Liesl demands that her uncle be punished. (Threapleton, in her first major feature-film role, has a striking presence, both quietly fierce and effortlessly wry.) Thus the movie's financial and martial machinations take place within a more elemental family drama: in order to win his daughter's allegiance and affection, Zsa-zsa must pursue a mock-Shakespearean plot of fratricidal revenge. "The Phoenician Scheme" is Anderson's most sentimental movie—the story of a merciless man so desperate for his devout daughter's love that he's willing to kill for it.

As with all Anderson's films, the design of "The Phoenician Scheme" is jubilantly exquisite. Anderson's aesthetic is one of the miracles and mysteries of the modern cinema, and "The Phoenician Scheme" is filled with some of the most eye-catching baubles and gizmos of his career, such as two corncob pipes, one plain and one fancy, that Liesl smokes; a blood-transfusion unit that works by squeeze bulb; and shoeboxes in which Zsa-zsa keeps his key documents. (Anderson's late father-in-law, a businessman named Fouad Malouf, used shoeboxes in this way, and the film is dedicated to him.) Meticulously imagined and crafted objects are central to Anderson's world, and they express more than taste and delight. He showcases them like madeleines of many flavors, summoning personal memories and associations along with broader cultural memories and archetypes.

The stylistic thrills of “The Phoenician Scheme” are inseparable from its turbulent, violent physical action, and it is here that the film proves most surprising and most original: its linear narrative lays bare Anderson’s cinephile obsessions. There’s something Hitchcockian about Anderson—albeit in reverse. Hitchcock’s movies stylize violence; Anderson makes style violent. In film after film, his onscreen ideal of beauty embodies the spirit of opposition and revolt. Paul Valéry said that taste is formed of a thousand distastes, and Anderson’s aesthetic is a furious affirmation fuelled by those many implicit repudiations. The most powerful exemplar of rebellion in Anderson’s œuvre is his vision of Zsa-zsa against the world.

Zsa-zsa has a curated aesthetic of his own. He’s an art collector and a student of antiquity who always has his nose in a book. His staff includes, as a paid companion and tutor, an entomologist named Bjorn (played by Michael Cera, using one of the most outrageous accents this side of Walter Matthau), who travels with caged insects and is entrusted with a case containing all Zsa-zsa’s cash. Zsa-zsa pursues pleasure and faces danger with the same nonchalance, but as his wounds accumulate he can no longer ignore them. With each near-death experience, he has another vision of the afterlife (including ones in which Bill Murray plays God, or vice versa), and these visions arouse fear and something like conscience. When Zsa-zsa’s spirit of opposition gets this cautionary reboot, it turns him against himself and the milieu in which he prospers.

The film cites a number of real-life models for Zsa-zsa; in addition to Anderson’s late father-in-law, there’s Calouste Gulbenkian, the Ottoman Armenian industrialist who pioneered the oil business in the Middle East, and whose nickname, Mr. Five Per Cent, is shared by Zsa-zsa. But the crucial model is a cinematic one, from Orson Welles’s 1955 film “Mr. Arkadin,” in which Welles plays a tycoon determined to keep his grown daughter from finding out that he got his start in criminal enterprises. Anderson stands the original on its head: grooming Liesl as a successor, Zsa-zsa introduces her to a world where cunning and force hold sway. To his daughter, this international man of mystery is utterly transparent. Notably, it’s Nubar, with his full, square beard and upswept hair and eyebrows, who physically resembles Welles’s Arkadin, and this resemblance provides a clue to the story that Anderson is telling about

family and identity, about truth and falsehood, about who's awaiting his comeuppance and who's on the road to redemption.

Anderson's cinematic allusions in "The Phoenician Scheme" make sharp intertextual points. When Zsa-zsa proudly raises the curtain on an enormous, electrified, mechanical diorama of his scheme's many components, the display mimics a scene in Jean Renoir's 1939 film, "The Rules of the Game," in which a rich aristocrat unveils a room-size electrical music box. Renoir's film dramatized the end of an era (of high-society frivolities, as war loomed), and so does Anderson's; namely, the end of the age of buccaneer industrialism. The bureaucrats Zsa-zsa reviles may well take over, but he may still have the satisfaction of victory on his own terms. In evoking Renoir and Welles, Anderson, born in 1969, also evokes the mores of their times, via a style that couldn't have existed then. He looks back to a harder world of blood poetry and clangorous capitalism, extracting and distilling its virtues without nostalgia and with shuddering reminders of its vices. Anderson's own intensely self-aware art represents, albeit with an awareness of loss, a sense of progress. ♦

*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."*

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# Poems

- **“Inquest”**
  By Ellen Bass | “What will you miss most about her? / Was she breathing when they found her?”
- **“An Ocean of Clouds”**
  By Garrett Hongo | “I sing for clouds, constant rains, a fern chorus / of things forgotten.”

**Poems**

# Inquest

***By Ellen Bass***

*June 2, 2025*

What did she eat for breakfast?
Why were her feet so clean?
Why are the yellow irises so luscious this spring?
When was the last time you touched her?
Where did she stash the pills?
Were there rivers in her dreams?
Did she like figs? Olives?
Why wouldn't she cut her hair?
Did she get a nose job in high school?
What made her such a bad cook?
What will you miss most about her?
Was she breathing when they found her?
Who was that married man she was once crazy about?
Why was she always saying, *Don't tell anybody*?
How did you disappoint her?
Why did she let the chickens shit all over?
Why did she stick a single gladiola
in every bouquet of zinnias?
Why did she finger her ailments like a rosary?
Explain *cosmic inconsequence*.
Why did she hold her fork in her fist?
Why couldn't she apologize?
Did she watch fog blow across the cypresses and redwoods
and across the cables of the Golden Gate Bridge?
Was there anyone she trusted?
Would gardening have helped?
She won raffles. Was she lucky?

What lullaby did she sing to her baby?
When she lay on the floor, waiting
for death, what did she think?
Was she weary of clouds?
How could she give up kisses?
Why wouldn’t she tell where she found the chanterelles?

*Ellen Bass, a chancellor emerita of the Academy of American Poets, teaches in the M.F.A. program at Pacific University. Her books include the poetry collection “Indigo.”*

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**Poems**

# An Ocean of Clouds

***By Garrett Hongo***

*June 2, 2025*

I sing for clouds, constant rains, a fern chorus
of things forgotten, ginger flowers
of sadness my mother bore, enormous
hollows of the family's past, my father

the dutiful son come to run the store
by the volcano, called by his father
promising a new life, its open door
that swung shut after barely a year.

They left, me still a newborn in their arms,
wailing in complaint for the swift travel,
headed to Kahuku, the new truck farms,
old plantation, and its steel sugar castle.

I grew to six there, a boy barefoot
on dirt and gravel roads, green temple moss
by the graveyard. There were shorebirds in suits
of slanting rain, a gray-brown surf pebble-tossed,

not fit for swimming, a tired sandspit's drift
that marked the margin of all our dreaming.
And what was that? The green folds of cliffs
chanted our imagined names, caught winds heaving

an ocean of clouds that piled like seawrack
muffling the mill's whistle, windrows of rain

gathered upon the mountain's emerald stacks,
the black crown of the day's celebration.

Hidden within the sighing sugarcane, here
I first raised my voice in harmless praise.
I lifted my eyes to the moon's white sphere
And sang a song I hoped would bless all my days.

*This is drawn from "Ocean of Clouds."*
*Garrett Hongo is the author of "The Perfect Sound: A Memoir in Stereo" and the poetry collection "Ocean of Clouds" (2025).*

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# Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the June 9, 2025, magazine.

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# Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Monday, June 2, 2025**
  By Natan Last | A challenging puzzle.

**Crossword**

# The Crossword: Monday, June 2, 2025

*A challenging puzzle.*

***By Natan Last***

*June 2, 2025*

*Natan Last, an immigration advocate and a poet, is the author of "Across the Universe: The Past, Present, and Future of the Crossword Puzzle."*