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The Vibrant Abandon of Barbara Hannigan

Also: A trio of new book bars, Mariah Carey rings in the season, an Avett Brothers musical on Broadway, and more.

December 6, 2024

[Jane Bua](#)

Bua covers classical music for Goings On.

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

It is the dream of many a musician to become a big enough star that their name comes to mind with any mention of their art form. But for someone to actually deserve this level of acclaim—within the classical world and beyond—is a rare phenomenon. **Barbara Hannigan** has earned this distinction, both for conducting and vocal performance.



Barbara Hannigan and Bertrand Chamayou.

Photograph by Luciano Romano

Hannigan, who hails from Nova Scotia, began her illustrious career as a singer, spending time at the Banff Centre, in Canada, and the Royal Conservatoire of the Hague, in the Netherlands. After years of creative success, she took a unique turn—unique, at least, for a soprano—to conducting, making her maestro début in 2011, at Théâtre du Châtelet, in Paris, at the age of forty. Nourished by a particular passion for contemporary music, Hannigan leads ensembles with vibrant abandon, her long satin hair swooping with each movement of her arms, which she opts for rather than a baton. At the podium, she has the same vigor and emotional guile that comes through in her solo vocal performances, each art form seamlessly informing and enriching the other. Her energy feels fresh, her vision clear.

On Dec. 12, Hannigan returns to New York, and to her roots, for a night of singing at the Park Avenue Armory. She and the esteemed French pianist Bertrand Chamayou will step into Messiaen’s deeply biographical “Chants de Terre et de Ciel,” Scriabin’s capricious Opus 61 and aqueous Opus 72, and John Zorn’s “Jumalattaret,” a work that Hannigan once described as akin to Simone Biles’s labyrinthine floor routine. Tickets will surely sell out, but don’t be completely discouraged—visit the standby line to claim the spot of whoever is unlucky enough to miss this show.



About Town

Off Broadway

In **“Babe,”** Jessica Goldberg’s clunky playlet, Marisa Tomei plays Abby, a long-serving record-company executive wrangling her boss Gus (Arliss Howard), an unreconstructed rock-and-roll boor. Gus just wants to be free to congratulate the new hire, Katherine (Gracie McGraw), on her “nice ass,” and Abby, her brain slushy from both chemotherapy and a certain chemistry with Katherine, can’t, or won’t, stop him. Goldberg’s play, directed by Scott Elliott, for the New Group, is another battle of generations

—recent examples include “Job” and “The Ask”—about bratty millennials and their morally compromised elders. As often happens in such stuff, characterization collapses into outline; here, Tomei’s disturbingly unsteady performance, perhaps without meaning to, hints at damage in Abby that goes beyond a sketch’s ability to portray.—[Helen Shaw](#) (*Pershing Square Signature Center*; through Dec. 22.)

Pop

Mariah Carey’s whistle register is now a harbinger of the Christmas season. Like clockwork, her infectious megahit “All I Want for Christmas Is You,” which turned thirty in October, climbs the charts once more, part of a newly established Yuletide tradition. Carey is far more than a holiday novelty, of course—one of pop music’s defining figures, her captivating, singular voice is the force behind an undeniable catalogue of hits—but she has embraced her role as the ambassador of all things tinsel, a festive responsibility that fits her extravagant persona and has extended her relevance. This year, she brings “Christmas Time,” an extended version of her recurring show, from Manhattan to Brooklyn, making space for a medley of her own classics along the way.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*Barclays Center*; Dec. 17.)

Broadway



“Swept Away,” at the Longacre Theatre.

Photograph by Emilio Madrid

The bluegrass-inflected Avett Brothers return to the subject of their album “Mignonette,” from 2004, in which a nineteenth-century shipwreck turns gruesome, for “**Swept Away**,” a ninety-minute musical about the salt-grit savagery of the sea. Fascinatingly, the book, by John Logan, focusses not on the story’s virtuous survivors, who sacrifice for one another, but on a demonic, drawling second mate (John Gallagher, Jr.), who tries to lure innocents away from the Lord. The director, Michael Mayer, and the choreographer, David Neumann, institute rollicking hornpipe dances for the ship’s crew, which Gallagher performs with evil sinuosity, but the finest onstage gesture is the way the set designer, Rachel Hauck, upends an entire whaling ship in a storm—itself an impressive example of each designer’s craft.—H.S. (*Longacre; open run.*)

Classical

A visit to the Met Cloisters often offers an escape to quietude, save for the occasional whispers between museum companions. The Fuentidueña Chapel in particular may simply be too hallowed to justify any sound, with its Catalonian fresco depicting the Virgin and Child in Majesty and the Adoration of the Magi providing a backdrop to a hanging twelfth-century wooden crucifix. But the space embraces music on special days, and this December it hosts a holiday program from the Grammy-nominated vocal ensemble **Skylark**. Featuring selections from the Italian priest Gregorio Allegri and the French composer Pierre Villette, and also Hugo Distler’s Chorale Variations on “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” the ensemble’s MetLiveArts début is sure to fill each medieval crevice with the most welcome noise.—[Jane Bua](#) (*The Met Cloisters; Dec. 14.*)

Dance



“The Hard Nut,” at the Howard Gilman Opera House.

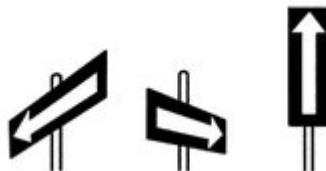
Photograph by Richard Termine

While Mark Morris’s **“The Hard Nut”**—brought to BAM by the Mark Morris Dance Group—resembles other versions of “The Nutcracker” in its E. T. A. Hoffmann story and Tchaikovsky score, it also offers some unusual treats. Set in a cartoonish swinging seventies, it is deliciously tacky and crass, irreverent about traditional gender roles, bourgeois values, and much else. But the wit often transforms into wonder; the snowflakes toss their own snow in handfuls, which is at first amusing, then amazing. The musicality and choreographic construction are seriously delightful, and the whole thing radiates holiday warmth and communal love.—[Brian Seibert](#) (*Howard Gilman Opera House; Dec. 12-22.*)

Movies

“September 5” is a vigorous but narrow fictionalization of the real-life efforts of American TV sportscasters at the 1972 Olympics, in Munich, to report on the hostage-taking attack on the Israeli team by Palestinian militants. The movie, directed by Tim Fehlbaum, blends bureaucratic struggles—internal power plays, high-level negotiations over satellite transmissions—with technical difficulties involving filmed reports and audacious maneuvers to sneak footage out of the locked-down area. The cast (headed by John Magaro, Peter Sarsgaard, Ben Chaplin, and Leonie Benesch) energetically evokes the troubled quest for scoops along with facts, but the script detaches the characters and the story from history and

politics; hints of German post-Holocaust conflicts and a brief debate over the use of the word “terrorists” suggest a better movie lurking within.—
[Richard Brody](#) (In limited release.)



Pick Three

[Jennifer Wilson](#) visits buzzy book bars.

This time of year, the evening sneaks up on you. When I’m working from a coffee shop, I never know if I should be ordering an espresso or something stronger. Thus, “book bars”—bookstore cafés that turn into book-themed bars by night—are a welcome plot twist.



Illustration by Mary Kirkpatrick

1. At **Liz’s Book Bar**, a Black-owned bookstore in Carroll Gardens, you’ll find a classic bar counter, but, instead of knocking back pints, locals

caffeinate on teas such as Dahl House (peach-flavored) and Chris Van Winkle (a botanical “with a calming energy”). When the clock strikes six, Liz’s magically turns into a wine bar (no laptops allowed). Grab a book—Liz’s has a robust politics table—and let some ideas ferment.

2. Book Club Bar, tucked away on a quiet stretch of Third Street, in the East Village, serves cocktails such as In Cold Bloody Mary and Cider House Mule. A lively calendar of events includes poetry readings, an adult spelling bee, singles’ night, and, yes, book clubs. Scan the QR code above Iris Murdoch’s “The Sea, the Sea” to join the philosophy-focussed How to Be book club.

3. The sleek **Bibliotheque**, in SoHo, will impress the literary It Girl in your life. Lounge with a juicy read, maybe from the Banned Book section, on plush sofas, or sit with your laptop on the yellow-leather banquette. In Chapter 15 of the wine list, titled “Criticism,” you’ll find “100-point wines, taste ‘perfection.’ ” I pulled “Didion and Babitz” off the shelf, and ordered a glass of red. The bartender offered me a reading light.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [Christmas with Tom Hardy](#)
 - [A space-telescope advent calendar](#)
 - [The myth of cycle breaking](#)
-

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Book Currents

What to Read This Winter, According to Tattered Cover

Kathy Baum, who curates new books for the Denver-area bookstore, shares some of her fall and winter favorites.

November 27, 2024



Illustration by Isabel Seliger

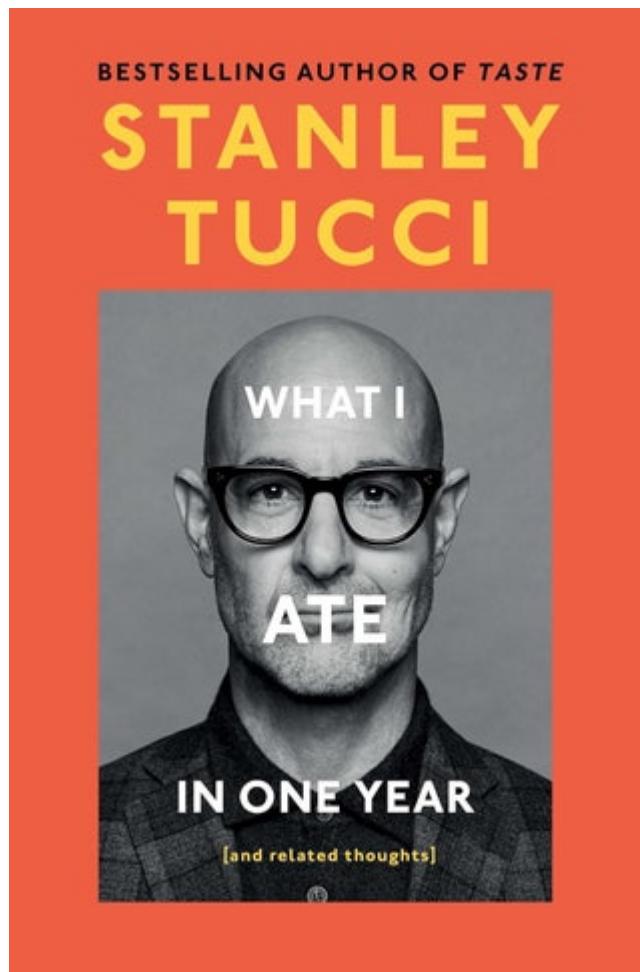
[You're reading Book Currents, a weekly column in which notable figures share what they're reading. Sign up for the Goings On newsletter to receive their selections, and other cultural recommendations, in your inbox.](#)

Tattered Cover is a Denver institution. Founded in 1971, it was an indie-bookstore darling until it was sold to Barnes & Noble this year. Kathy Baum, who oversees the store's orders for new books, curating what she thinks people might like to (or should) read, spoke with us not long ago about some of her recent and upcoming favorites. Getting her hands on

early copies of books is “a treat,” she admits, and “my pile is usually very high.” Her remarks have been edited and condensed.

What I Ate in One Year

by Stanley Tucci



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

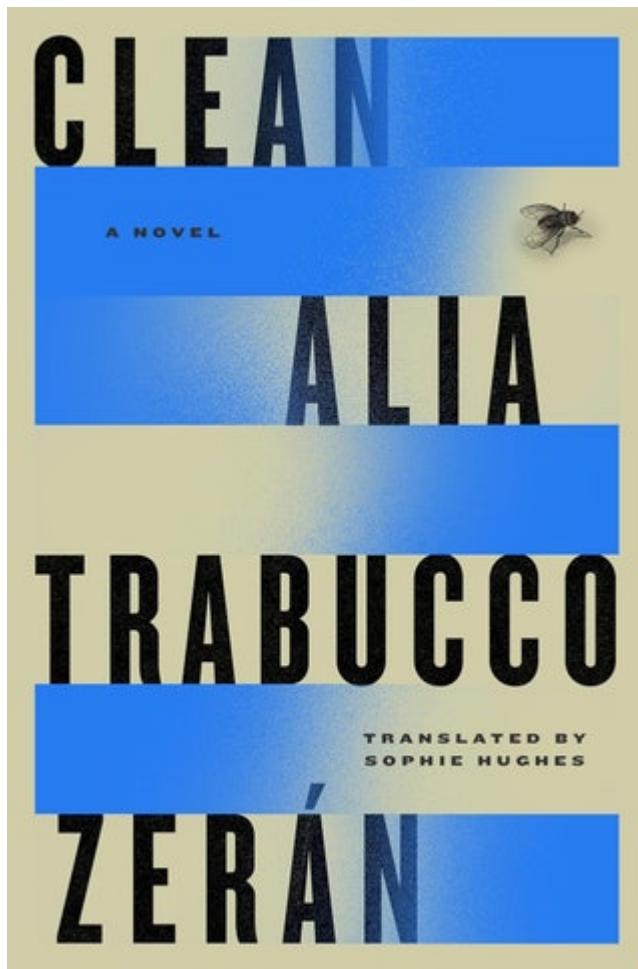
This is an obvious one to me—in a divided world, who doesn’t love Stanley Tucci? The world is very stressful, so if you want something that is warm and light and, you know, not going to strain your nervous system, this is it.

It’s written sort of in diary entries, day by day, and it offers good insights into his work, his family, his travel. There are some great celebrity cameos. He writes a bit about food and gives you a handful of recipes, but basically

he's just very charming and funny. And he reminds you of the connection between food and the people you're close with—how much we share special times over meals.

Clean

by Alia Trabucco Zerán, translated from the Spanish by Sophie Hughes



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

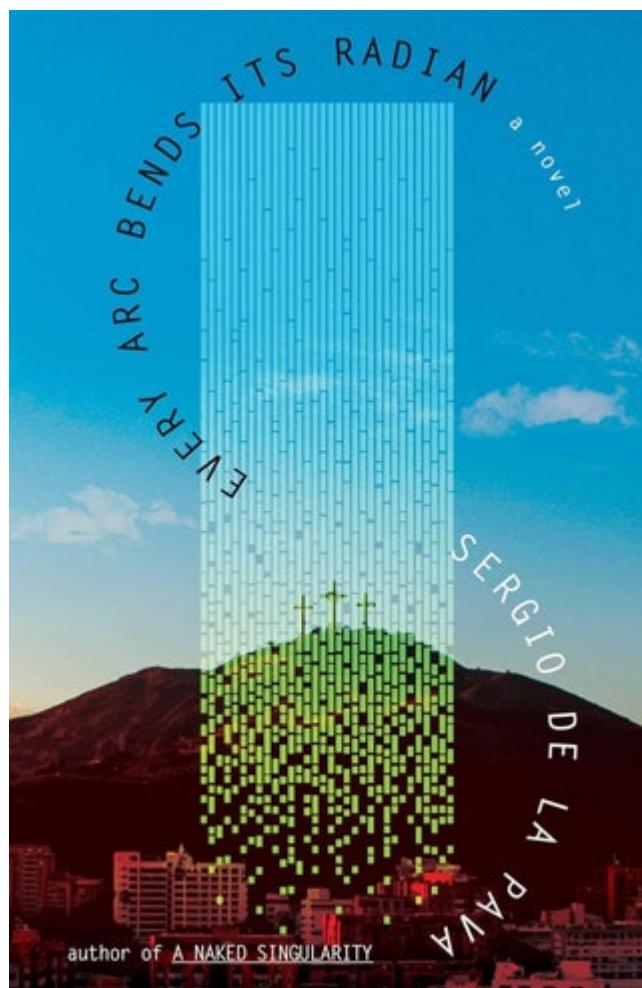
This one is a work in translation by a Chilean author who is a little bit better known internationally than she is here. “Clean” is told from the perspective of the maid of a husband and wife who are not very nice, to say the least. The book opens with the maid being interrogated by the police, and the rest of the story is sort of her confession to them. You know from the get-go that

there's been a suspicious death, but, as the book goes on, the tension builds and builds and builds.

It's definitely concerned with power dynamics and the class clash between this wealthy family and the woman who works for them, who comes from a rural background and has been living in poverty. It also makes you wonder, Why are people so nasty when they feel like they can keep everything secret?

Every Arc Bends Its Radian

by Sergio De La Pava

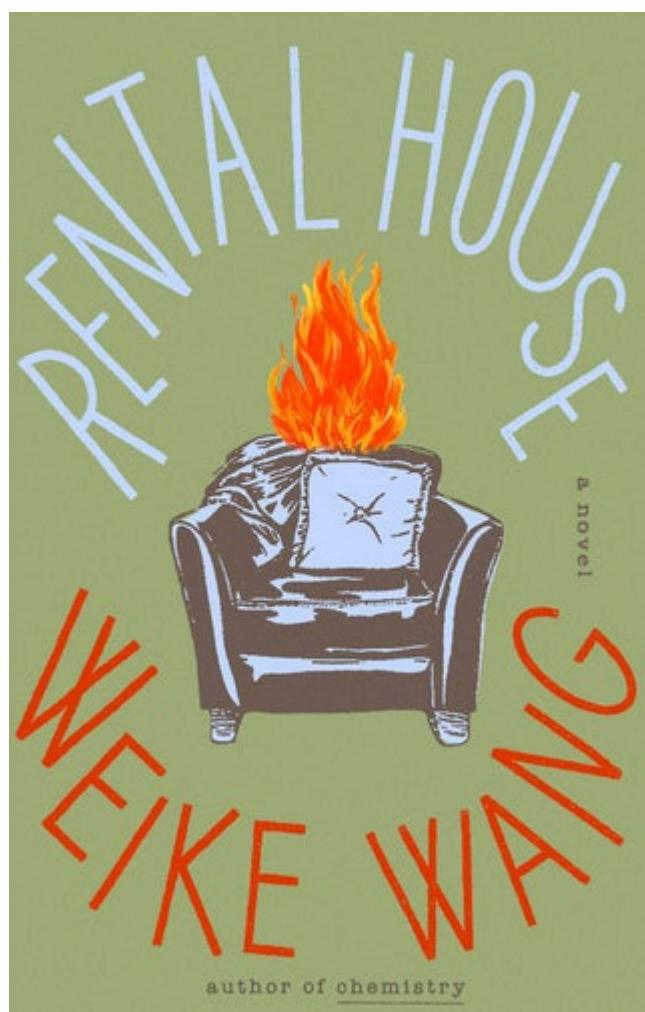


[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

This novel is about a detective who has a sort of dark past and is a very gritty person—it's not a James Bond-type situation. The detective has to solve an apparent murder-slash-disappearance, and it soon becomes clear that there are people involved in it who everyone is afraid of. My backlist buyer and I have been very intrigued by it. I think one reason is that, for me, it was giving me these very heavy “Bosch”—by Michael Connolly—or “True Detective” vibes.

Rental House

by Weike Wang



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

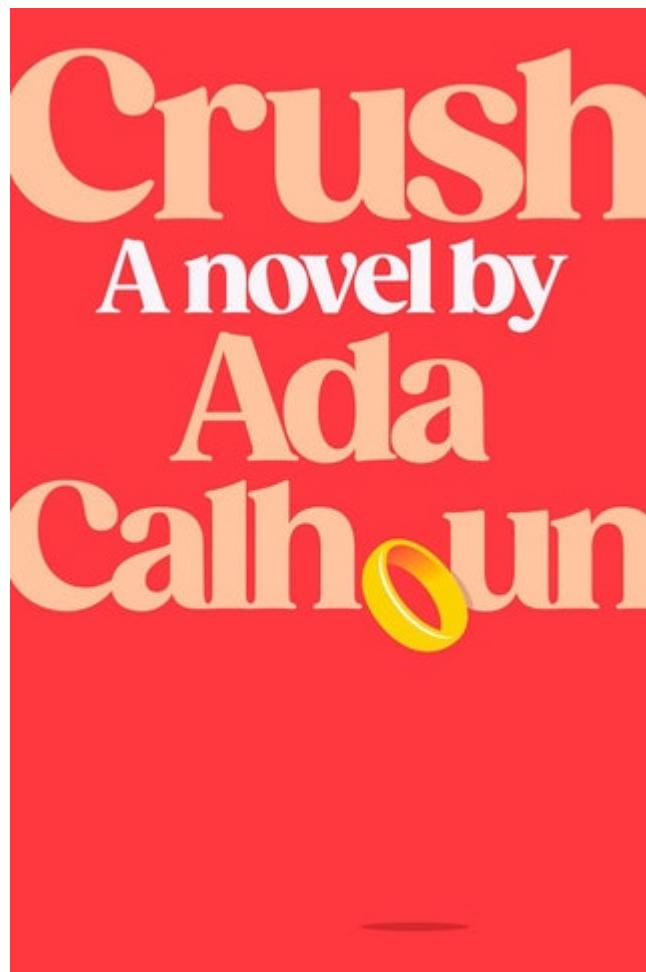
This book is about a couple who met in college. The wife is the daughter of Chinese immigrants, and the husband grew up in Appalachia, in a rural family. I think a lot of people can relate to the difference between the two families: during the pandemic, hers is double-masking and taking a road trip so that they don't have to stay in hotels, whereas his is not vaccinated.

In general, though, I think the book captures an experience that many couples face when engaging with their in-laws. Even if they're not on completely opposite ends of the spectrum, as they are in this book, people grow up with different styles of communication and emotional attachment.

Weike Wang also writes dialogue really, really well. She doesn't have to explain, explain, explain, because you get so much from just a few sentences that people say to each other.

Crush

by Ada Calhoun



[Amazon](#) | [Bookshop](#)

The reason this book stood out to me is because I read this writer's earlier nonfiction book, "Why We Can't Sleep," which is about Gen X women and the unique situation they're in, culturally and personally. Here, it feels like she's taking what she was interested in and turning it into a piece of fiction about a long marriage, which is intriguing.

A lot of the book is about desire. Nowadays, books about women's desire are way more mainstream than they used to be. For the longest time, these sorts of books have always been in the corner of the bookstore, tucked away on a small shelf amid dryer topics. I feel like now, you've got Gillian Anderson's book, "[Want](#)," and Emily Nagoski—things like that are becoming perennial sellers for us. The Anderson collection is a pink book, and it's at the very front of our store, and it's selling.

An earlier version of this article mischaracterized the ownership status of Tattered Cover.

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- **Monopoly: AI Edition!**

By Ivan Ehlers | You are awarded a military contract; collect \$100 billion and nuclear codes. And other Community Chest and Chance cards for the new monopolists.

[Comment](#)

What Will Elon Musk and Vivek Ramaswamy Accomplish with *Doge?*

Two political newcomers have arrived to slash big government, but so far the project seems less revolutionary than advertised.

By [Benjamin Wallace-Wells](#)

December 8, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

In the weeks since Donald Trump won the election, Republican Washington has been fixated on a topic that is at once familiar (for conservatives) and unexpected (for Trump): the phenomenal sprawl of the federal government

and the necessity to do something about it. In the past, Paul Ryan, the anti-Trump Speaker of the House, pressed this line of thinking. Now it comes from two political newcomers: the former Presidential candidate and biotech investor Vivek Ramaswamy, and Elon Musk, the richest man in the world. They have been appointed to lead a new Department of Government Efficiency, or *doge*—a Presidential initiative named for a meme coin—and rein in the administrative state.

If prior generations of Republicans aimed big, Ramaswamy and Musk would aim bigger. Musk set targets of up to at least two trillion dollars in cuts, from a federal budget of roughly seven trillion—the size of which had grown during Trump’s first term, along with the deficit. Ramaswamy, who is more of a natural showman, introduced a “thought experiment” about how such a large excision might be accomplished, beginning with the more than two million federal civilian employees: “If your Social Security number ends in an odd number, you’re out. If it ends in an even number, you’re in. That’s a fifty-per-cent cut right there.”

So far, so Grover Norquist. Ever since Ronald Reagan, the dream of business-oriented Republicans has been that an outsider would storm into town to eliminate the rules and fire the rule-makers. Now, perhaps a little less efficiently, the dream is that two outsiders will do it. The idea is that Musk and Ramaswamy will work in concert with budget-cutters in the executive branch, and with the support of a congressional *doge* caucus that is already forming. (As agents of government action who apparently won’t actually work for the state, the *doge* chairs’ arrangement is presumably a bit like Batman’s with the Gotham City P.D.) Musk and Ramaswamy—both fervently attentive to social media and operating seemingly without staff—are directly accessible to like-minded plutocrats in a way that politicians usually are not, and they have been taking suggestions. On Joe Rogan’s podcast, the investor Marc Andreessen claimed that the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau—a federal watchdog agency—had been “debanking” conservative entrepreneurs. “The only right answer: *shut it down*,” Ramaswamy wrote on X. “Delete CFPB,” Musk agreed.

On the Hill, *doge* has provoked ideological excitement—Mike Johnson, the pro-Trump House Speaker, enthused about a conservative “zeal” for cuts,

and Representative Jodey Arrington, the House Budget Committee chair, proposed a work requirement for recipients of Medicaid and other federal welfare programs—but also consternation about the process. A senior Republican aide told Punchbowl News, “Two people who know nothing about how the government works pretending they can cut a trillion dollars, both with decent pulpits to preach from, and the ear of an unpredictable president? Disaster.”

So far, perhaps the most unpredictable thing is that some Democrats apparently see Musk and Ramaswamy’s project as a train to jump on. Representative Jared Moskowitz, a South Florida moderate, became the first Democrat to join the *doge* caucus, proposing a rearranging of the vast homeland-security apparatus. When Musk expressed some interest in looking at the Defense Department’s gigantic contracts with private defense companies (though presumably not with companies he controls), Senator Bernie Sanders wrote on X, “Elon Musk is right.” Last Thursday, Representative Ro Khanna, the savvy Silicon Valley Democrat and progressive stalwart, posted a general message of support for *doge*’s waste-cutting mission; he later wrote that it had been viewed twenty-three million times, “the most any post of mine has had in 9 years of Congress.”

There are obvious limits, though, to how much Democrats will embrace a program of enormous budget cuts and deregulation. The Republicans’ limits are less clear. On Thursday, the *doge* chairs, equipped with a sixty-page plan, attended closed-door meetings on Capitol Hill; Musk bounced one of his many children, a son called X, on his knee. Ramaswamy, for his part, had just smoothly announced at a CNBC summit of corporate executives that hundreds of billions of dollars could be cut from Medicaid, Social Security, and Medicare—which together account for nearly half the federal budget—through “basic program-integrity measures.” But protecting the core social-welfare programs has been key to Trump’s rebranding as a different type of Republican, one devoted to the working class. This summer, he embraced labor unions (the Teamsters’ boss, Sean O’Brien, famously spoke at the Republican National Convention), pledged to impose stiff tariffs that he claimed would help protect manufacturing jobs, and inveighed against Big Tech’s ties to China. His running mate, J. D. Vance,

praised him as a leader “who is not in the pocket of big business, but answers to the working man, union and non-union alike.”

Yet the Administration now taking shape looks less likely to restrain capitalism than to supercharge it. Paul Atkins, Trump’s pick to chair the Securities and Exchange Commission, which is meant to protect investors from market manipulation and scams, is a cryptocurrency booster. Kevin Hassett, nominated to lead the National Economic Council, is a longtime Washington hand who advised the pro-business Presidential campaigns of George W. Bush, John McCain, and Mitt Romney. David Sacks, a venture capitalist and Musk ally, has been tapped for a free-floating role overseeing A.I. and crypto. For Treasury Secretary, Trump has chosen Scott Bessent, a hedge-fund manager and George Soros protégé, whose main task seems to be to try to reassure Wall Street.

Part of the dissonance of this transition period is that pundits are still mulling exactly how Trump made his historic gains among traditionally Democratic working-class voters, even as he hands the initiative for his economic program to Musk, a China-friendly industrialist, who spent some two hundred and fifty million dollars on Trump’s campaign, and who now stands to become even more powerful. The tech titans have supplied a futurist sheen to a Trumpist project that had only really been able to focus on the past. Yet there’s a familiar ring here: Republicans are back in power; deregulation and spending cuts to social programs meant to protect ordinary people are back in vogue. The Trump Republicans are beginning to seem less like a populist party—and this moment, perhaps, less like a populist time—than they had led their followers to believe. ♦



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

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Gift Ideas from the Rudy Giuliani Collection!

In need of stocking stuffers? How about a Rolex Datejust, owned by the former mayor and put up for auction after he was found liable for defaming two poll workers?

By [Dan Greene](#)

December 9, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

It was not easy, after a federal jury determined that Rudy Giuliani owed nearly a hundred and fifty million dollars to two Georgia poll workers he had defamed, for America's Mayor's victims to recoup. At first, orders for Giuliani to hand over assets were ignored. The plaintiffs' attorney was

given access to his apartment, only to report that it had been cleared of valuables. There was talk of a storage unit in Ronkonkoma which Giuliani didn't control. His lawyers dropped him. At one point, he claimed that he couldn't afford food. Luckily for anyone still Christmas shopping, however, the court has continued pressing Giuliani for his assets, which are expected to be sold at auction to pay for a portion of the damages owed to the plaintiffs, whom Giuliani libelled with false claims of election malfeasance. Thus, luxury items that belonged to the former mayor can soon be under your Christmas tree.

Perhaps someone in your life, taking cues from "Santa Baby," has been dropping hints about a convertible. How about Giuliani's navy 1980 Mercedes-Benz 500 SL, formerly owned by Lauren Bacall? "This is a good car for a second home—summer fancy," Lindsay Schey, who runs the Gift Insider, a gift-advice service, said the other day. "You're not gifting this to your son who just got his license."

Nor is your teen-ager likely pining for the framed Joe DiMaggio replica jersey that hung above Giuliani's library fireplace, or for an autographed photograph of Reggie Jackson. (Several of the latter can be found on eBay for less than a hundred dollars.) But, for Yankees fans of a certain age, consider making these part of a memorabilia array, augmented by baseball cards or other related collectibles. "That way, you're not just regifting something from someone's old home," Schey said. If you have your eye on authentic Yankees World Series rings, however, look elsewhere: Giuliani has thus far skirted forfeiting three such rings, for championships the team won while he was mayor, by claiming that he already gifted them to his son. (A trial on these and other assets is set for January 16th. Giuliani's request that it be moved so he can attend Donald Trump's Inauguration was denied.)

A court order also mandates turning over "various items of furniture." Real-estate photos of Giuliani's New York residence, possibly staged virtually, show currant-colored leather lounge seats, an upholstered swivel chair with matching ottoman, and stained-glass lampshades. When, in recent years, Giuliani filmed videos for his Web show from his library, he sat in a high-

backed chair of shiny brown leather. “Very traditional vibes,” Schey said. “You want someone who will appreciate that.”

Additionally subject to seizure: an unspecified television set, “costume jewelry.” The bulk of Giuliani’s offerings is an inventory of twenty-six watches. (During a hearing related to his disbarment in Washington, D.C., he displayed a wrist bearing two of them.) But temper expectations. A video of eighteen of the timepieces, posted from a FedEx facility by an indignant Giuliani representative (“an absolute bastardization of our justice system!”), suggested a collection that Benjamin Clymer, the founder of the luxury-watch site Hodinkee, deemed mediocre. “They’re mostly kind of inconsequential,” Clymer said. “It’s very clear he’s more of an accumulator, not a connoisseur.”

Schey recommended embellishing any Giuliani watch with a cheeky engraving referencing its provenance. “It adds an element of ‘You’ve never received anything like this before,’ ” she said. Clymer’s lone endorsement was for a Rolex Datejust with a white Roman-numeral dial, which typically sells for around five thousand dollars and is likely to retain its value. Another option, for the right giftee: a Franck Muller Cintrée Curvex that retails in the low five figures. “If I had a lot of money and I wanted to, like, fuck with somebody, that would be the watch that I would get,” Clymer said. The watchmaker’s reputation sounded familiar. “To a watch guy, it’s, like, ‘Wow, Franck Muller was everything twenty-five years ago,’ ” Clymer said. “Now the brand is still around, but a shell of what it used to be.”

If you’re feeling lavishly generous, request a viewing of Giuliani’s ten-room penthouse, at Sixty-sixth and Madison, which is being handed over to the poll workers, too. (There’s no mortgage on it.) It’s a tenth-floor corner unit with a glassed-in conservatory and a primary suite made by combining two bedrooms and two baths, and it’s just a short walk from Café Boulud and the Central Park Zoo. Last year, Giuliani listed the apartment, unsuccessfully, for \$6.5 million; before the verdict, StreetEasy had it posted for closer to \$5 million. (The listed broker also sold Bernie Madoff’s penthouse.) It’s a co-op, which could create two problems, should the poll workers want to flip it: buyers are subject to board approval and to monthly

maintenance fees, which in this case are nearly eleven thousand dollars. Also, in 2021, the place was raided by the F.B.I. Check for bugs.

That's likely too steep for most peoples' Santa budgets, even in this town. Who might give such a present, and to whom? "I don't know many people who gift apartments," Schey said. "I wish I did." ♦

Dan Greene is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

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[How-To Dept.](#)

Can You Write It Better Than Taylor Swift?

An appreciator of “Speak Now” and “Folklore” joins a roomful of young writers at the Thurber House, a literary center in Ohio, for a class inspired by the pop star.

By [Henry Alford](#)

December 9, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

Regrets, you’ve had a few. Ever since you first admired the Taylor Swift lyric “No amount of vintage dresses gives you dignity,” you’ve wished there was a way to appreciate the writerly side of Swift without the interference of postproduction wizardry or a level of screaming that

registers on the Richter scale, as was heard two summers ago at a concert in Seattle. So when you learned that the Thurber House, a literary center in Columbus, Ohio, was offering a class, open to writers of any genre, called Write Like Taylor Swift, you thought, Bingo. Still, the prospect of joining a roomful of young people to write bracingly personal accounts of love lost and wisdom gained was so daunting that you spent much of the flight to Columbus anxiously trying to think of words that rhyme with “tryna.”

The class was held in a large, fluorescent-lit classroom in a building next door to the former house of James Thurber, a humorist and a former editor at this magazine. Once the fifteen students had seated themselves at three long tables, the instructor, a forty-three-year-old local writer and editor named Shelley Mann Hite, teased out various techniques employed in the lyrics of the woman she called “the breakup artist.” These included figurative language, literary references, and the use of Easter eggs. Hite sheepishly admitted that all the songs she would be playing during the next ninety minutes were from Swift’s introspective, stripped-down 2020 album, “Folklore,” prompting a thirtysomething student in the front row to say, “That’s her best writing.”

Hite put forth the opinion (beloved by writing teachers everywhere) that the more exacting a recounting of an event, the more widespread its potential appeal: “Specificity equals universality.” As an example, she offered “Invisible String,” a song Swift wrote with Aaron Dessner, from the sad-dad band the National. She read the lines “Green was the color of the grass” and “Gold was the color of the leaves,” and suggested that the students use them as a template for a five-minute writing exercise. Directing your mind to some of Swift’s songs thought to be about her exes—Harry, Jake, Conor, Taylor, John, Joe, Joe—you wrote, “Taupe is the color that has no hope / Puce is the color that set the letter “k” loose / But what’s the color for feeling like you’re in a cage? / Cuz baby you made everything feel beige.”

In a subsequent discussion of the exercise, one of the three men in the class said it was interesting that his piece had used purple as a symbol of comfort, whereas another student had used it to evoke choking.

The other student responded, “Purple is the color of domestic violence.” Schooled.

For a second writing prompt, Hite referenced the reversal contained in the lyrics from “Cardigan” that go “And when I felt like I was an old cardigan / Under someone’s bed / You put me on and said I was your favorite.” She told the class to write about someone doing the opposite of what you thought they’d do. You wrote, “I trust you, I buy 100% into us / I do a lot of things *just because* / But now it’s time for me to board the bus / Cuz baby this relationship is totally sus.” You worried that you were leaning too hard on the construction “Cuz baby,” but you longed for your work to be called “voicey.” When the students read their lines aloud, Hite compared one contribution to a roller coaster, and another student said that the same piece reminded her of someone who’d been in a car crash.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Pointing out that Swift also sings about disruptions in non-amorous relationships, like those with her management or her fans, Hite asked the class to write about a platonic breakup. Five minutes later, one student read aloud her lines about breaking up with a friend, and an older student murmured, “My daughter’s going through that now.” Sighs all around.

At the end of class, a pupil mentioned the imminent publication of a book called “Invisible Strings,” to which a hundred and thirteen poets, including Diane Seuss, Joy Harjo, and Maggie Smith, had each contributed a poem about an unnamed Swift song without quoting it. This wasn’t specifically a

fourth writing prompt, but, in the hour after class ended, you couldn't help tackling "We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together."

The result: "Don't tell me about true love, or that there's nothin' finer / Cuz baby when it comes to loving ya, I'm no longer tryna." ♦

Henry Alford, a humorist and a journalist, has contributed to The New Yorker since 1998. He is the author of the Joni Mitchell biography "[I Dream of Joni](#)."

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The Cast of “The Blood Quilt” Learn Their Stitches

A master quilter holds a lesson for the director Lileana Blain-Cruz and five actors before the opening of the play at Lincoln Center.

By [Natalie Meade](#)

December 9, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

Lileana Blain-Cruz, who is forty years old and a Taurus, took a short break from rehearsals for “The Blood Quilt,” a new play that she’s directing at Lincoln Center’s Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre, which opened last month. She sat at a table in a room that was empty except for a piano and a ballet

barre. Her spirits were high. “I rode my bike to work,” she said. “It’s great, except when people try to run you over.”

“The Blood Quilt,” which was written by Katori Hall, is set on a fictional Gullah Geechee island off the coast of Georgia, where the Jernigans, four adult half sisters, meet to sew together, as they have since they were children. “They’re ocean people,” Blain-Cruz said. “I come from islands.” She was raised between New York City and South Florida, and her family is from Haiti and Puerto Rico. She went on, “They’re forced to reckon with a culture that is adjacent to their own, but that culture wants to diminish their power.” She related it to the Haitian experience: “Haitians were the first group that essentially kicked out their enslavers—and yet there’s this constant kind of diminishing.”

In a room nearby, the cast was gathering for a quilting lesson from the Brooklyn Quilters Guild. Walking over, Blain-Cruz said, “One of the things my grandmother did in Puerto Rico was make quilts from all these little pieces.” She recalled bright-fuchsia squares: “She quilted with her hands, and I think about the preservation of power, love, and people through art, when everything else can be taken away from you so easily.”

For the lesson, five actors sat around a wooden table strewn with fabric scraps and large spools of thread. Blain-Cruz broke the ice: “We should go around. Everyone say their name and astrological sign.”

“I am, of course, a Leo,” Adrienne C. Moore, who plays a character named Gio, said.

“I’m playing Cassan, and I’m a Scorpio,” Susan Kelechi Watson said.

“My character is Clementine, and I’m a Leo,” Crystal Dickinson said.

“I’ll play Amber, and I’m a Capricorn,” Lauren E. Banks said.

“I’m a Virgo,” Mirirai, the actor who plays Zambia, said.

The master quilter Thadine Wormly chimed in: “My astrological sign? I don’t even deal with that.”

Wormly was dressed in autumnal browns and leather pants. “I’m going to show you a couple of quilts to inspire you,” she said. “I’ve been quilting for over thirty years.” She was accompanied by Jacqueline Colson, also a member of the Quilters Guild. The pair opened a quilt that Wormly had made, revealing a mosaic of small textiles stitched together into concentric rectangles. (Some of Wormly’s quilts hang onstage, in the Jernigan house.)

“My creative DNA unconsciously directed me to cut and stitch a West African design,” Wormly said.

“What’s the secret to getting those lines even and straight?” Moore asked.

“I take a ruler, then mark the back of the fabric, and you’re following that line, just stitching,” Wormly said. “People are so anxious to get finished, they make these big stitches to rush, and big stitches will come apart like *that*.”

“That is the interesting scenario in this play, because we are trying to get this quilt done in three days,” Moore said. Wormly looked dismayed.

“Suspend your disbelief,” Banks said.

In the play, the Jernigan sisters construct a quilt with an elaborate pattern that features eight-point stars which they’ve named “The Blazing Star Quilt.” Wormly showed the women how to arrange and slice fabric with a rotary cutter. “Some people call it a pizza cutter, but it’s a very good weapon,” she said. Moore grabbed one and brandished it in the air.

As Wormly demonstrated how to knot a thread, she asked if anyone had family who quilted. “My great-grandmother,” Banks said.

“You have one of her quilts?” Wormly asked. “Don’t throw ‘em away.”

“We haven’t,” Banks said. “They are cute and raggedy and coveted.”

Wanting to get in on the action, Blain-Cruz asked someone to help her cut a diamond out of a blue cotton rectangle. She was curious about how Gullah Geechee quilting rituals compared with those of Gee’s Bend, a Black

community on the Alabama River which became famous for its quilting tradition.

“They were isolated,” Wormly, whose family is from Savannah, Georgia, said, of Gee’s Bend. She mentioned that Martin Luther King, Jr., had visited the community before the Selma-to-Montgomery march, in 1965: “When the white sheriff heard about it, he cut the ferry off.” The service wasn’t restored until 2006.

“Starved, literally,” Banks said. “Like Haiti.”

“But, even isolated and poor, it just shows the creative spirit they had,” Wormly said. “I asked my grandmother, ‘Did you quilt?’ She said, ‘We didn’t have to do that.’ I guess my grandmother was uppity.” ♦

Natalie Meade is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.

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Sketchpad

Monopoly: A.I. Edition!

You are awarded a military contract; collect \$100 billion and nuclear codes. And other Community Chest and Chance cards for the new monopolists.

By [Ivan Ehlers](#)

December 9, 2024



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By Lauren Collins | Lawmakers have toppled the government for the first time since 1962. How did we get here?

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A Feminist Director Takes On the Erotic Thriller

Halina Reijn has always loved the genre—and revelled in creating “Babygirl,” a steamy melodrama for Nicole Kidman in which the protagonist is “greedy,” “dark,” and “wrong.”

By [Alex Barasch](#)

December 9, 2024



Reijn says that she watched “9½ Weeks” “like, six thousand times,” beginning in her late teens. But, she notes, steamy films of the nineteen-eighties and nineties had “a lot of sexism in them.” Photograph by Katie McCurdy for The New Yorker

The final day of shooting for “Babygirl,” a new erotic thriller, was devoted to a sequence that the film’s writer and director, Halina Reijn, had deliberately saved for last. In the movie, which will be released on Christmas, [Nicole Kidman](#) plays Romy, the hyper-competent C.E.O. of a robotics company, who feigns pleasure in her marriage and flirts perilously with a younger man at work until he tempts her into a kinky affair. In this

scene, Romy and her paramour, Samuel (Harris Dickinson), were alone in a cheap hotel room in Manhattan, attempting to define their new dynamic. The environs were unsavory—Reijn had chosen blood-red curtains and carpeting specifically to evoke a womb—but there was a charge in the air. The end of the encounter would be the literal consummation of the couple’s mind games: Romy would orgasm.

The lead-up to this climax is long, frankly observed, and, at times, unexpectedly funny, as Samuel haltingly tries to assert dominance. Then something clicks. On set, when the moment of truth arrived, the director of photography, Jasper Wolf, crouched to capture Kidman lying on the floor, on her stomach, as Dickinson loomed over her. The first take was deemed slightly too demure, but Reijn—who turned to directing after establishing herself as one of the Netherlands’ most celebrated actresses—is practiced in the art of teasing out performances. Her advice to Kidman was cheerfully blunt: “Think of a grizzly bear.”

Reijn’s rationale, she explained later, was that a woman might instinctively restrain herself to uphold a feminine ideal; the bear prompt was shorthand for something “completely low and growly and beyond vanity.” Kidman took the note. The resulting take—a closeup that lasts for nearly three minutes—made the final cut. Its fearlessness has already been rewarded. When the movie premiered, this past summer, at the Venice Film Festival, Kidman won the prize for Best Actress. She told me recently that Reijn, in creating the role for her, “gave me something that no one’s given me.” (Last month, Kidman threw her director a forty-ninth birthday party at a Mediterranean restaurant in Tribeca, where the two shared a dance before Reijn blew out the candles.)

The intensity of their bond had been evident throughout the shoot. During production, they would hug, hold hands, and declare their love for each other; sometimes Kidman put her head in Reijn’s lap. After they wrapped for the day, the pair would stick around for an hour just to talk. “She was tender, and that’s what was required,” Kidman told me. “She’s intuitive like that. If she’d been harsh, I think I would have shut down.” Reijn rehearses and preps intensively, discusses her intentions with her cast members, then lets them loose. The process is a form of respect that also leaves room for

risk. As Kidman told me, “There’s a very structured part to it—and then there’s a free fall.”

Reijn, who has dark hair, a mischievous smile, and sculptural features, is a compulsive collaborator. She attributes the habit to her background in theatre: in an ensemble, she noted, “you can’t have too much ego—you’re like a school of fish.” She spent nearly two decades performing with the Toneelgroep Amsterdam, an acclaimed company then helmed by the director Ivo van Hove, and had leading roles in everything from Chekhov’s “Three Sisters” to Shakespeare’s “Taming of the Shrew.” As an actress, she found it essential to understand the entire production, not just her own part, and as a director she was determined to afford her cast the same opportunity. For “Babygirl,” her second film in English—she also directed the 2022 horror comedy [Bodies Bodies Bodies](#)—she talked through the whole script with her principals one-on-one, answering questions and tailoring the screenplay more closely to each actor. When Dickinson saw her chugging caffeine one afternoon as she typed on her laptop, he said, “You shouldn’t have so much coffee”—an expression of concern that struck her as “weirdly fatherly for a young man.” She incorporated it into the script. Early in the film, Samuel offers the same reproach to Romy, and the unexpected flicker of paternalism is part of what catches her interest.

Once the screenplay was done, Reijn worked out all of the blocking firsthand, on location. Wolf, the D.P., filmed her on his iPhone as she whirled from one role to another. Then she made sure that the rest of the crew was on board with her vision. In December, 2023, she assembled a team of twenty-odd people—department heads overseeing costuming, cinematography, production design—for a highly unusual PowerPoint presentation. One of the first slides featured an infographic about the “orgasm gap” between men and women, and a survey that had become an obsession of Reijn’s: it showed that, on average, a woman takes eighteen minutes to climax at the hands of a man. (Originally, she’d wanted the scene in the hotel room to last that long, but the impracticality of this notion quickly became apparent. “I was, like, ‘Put a clock in the corner!’ ” she recalled, laughing.)

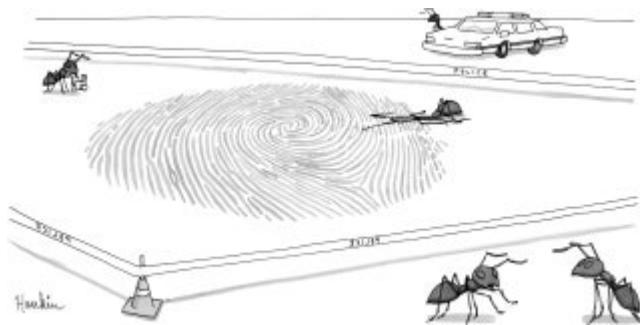
The PowerPoint functioned as a kind of mood board, featuring images from Reijn's own life. There was a photograph of her older sister's happy nuclear family, which had partly inspired Romy's seemingly idyllic husband-and-two-kids existence at the movie's outset, and a snapshot that Reijn had taken of a group of Wall Street interns in ill-fitting suits and backpacks. There were taxonomies of Romy's sexual fantasies—such as the “daddy dom–little girl” dynamic, a B.D.S.M. subculture that typically involves a dominant man taking on a caretaker role for a submissive woman—and an explanation of the avant-garde writer Antonin Artaud's concept of the theatre of cruelty, in which a director pointedly assaults the sensibilities of an audience. One slide read, simply, “*THE OFFICE IS THE KINK.*”

The presentation also included stills from such films as “9½ Weeks” and “Damage,” erotic thrillers from the nineteen-eighties and nineties that had been a revelation for the young Reijn. When we first met, over dinner, she told me that she'd watched “9½ Weeks,” the director Adrian Lyne's earliest contribution to the genre, “like, six thousand times,” beginning in her late teens. Although the S & M-tinged dynamic between its central couple, played by Kim Basinger and Mickey Rourke, created a sensation in Europe, American audiences weren't ready for it. The film was bowdlerized ahead of its U.S. release, in 1986, in response to test-screening walkouts—then bombed anyway. But, the following year, Lyne had a blockbuster with “Fatal Attraction,” which a *Time* cover story named “the zeitgeist hit of the decade.” (That era had something in common with this one: the *Time* article characterized the late eighties as a period of “retrenchment along the sexual front lines,” with “pandemic viruses imposing a puritan morality on the would-be-wild young.”) [Glenn Close's](#) performance as an unstable editor who has improbably hot sex with a married man (Michael Douglas), then responds to being dumped by boiling his family's pet rabbit, kidnapping his child, and attempting to murder his wife, is both indelible and representative of the genre's absurdities. The film's box-office success paved the way for a spate of other high-profile erotic thrillers, such as Paul Verhoeven's “Basic Instinct.” These movies were designed to turn audiences on, but their baroque plots supplied a degree of plausible deniability, while the involvement of A-list actors lent a level of prestige: Douglas's filmography alone includes intimate encounters with Close, Sharon Stone, and Demi Moore.

Reijn came to idolize directors like Lyne and Verhoeven, even as she recognized their limitations. “If you watch all of these movies now, there’s a lot of sexism in them,” she said. (Lyne has described the career women he vilified in his films, including Close’s bunny boiler, as “sort of overcompensating for not being men.”) But some of the kinkier dramas provided affirmation for Reijn, whose own submissive fantasies had been regarded by her therapist as something to “work through.” She told me, “‘9½ Weeks’ gave me the permission to even *have* these ideas that I thought were really bad.”

The trend faded as studios began catering more to families, and as onscreen sex became more readily available through other mediums. Lyne himself recently tried to revive the genre, with the Ben Affleck-led “[Deep Water](#),” but the results were poor. Reijn knew that, in 2024, an erotic thriller would have to look different. “I want to use the tropes but twist them and give them a modern touch—to have fun with them, make them a little camp,” she said. While writing the script, she read books by the relationship therapist Esther Perel, and talked to people in the corporate world about the ways gender norms had shifted since the #MeToo movement. Reijn was fascinated to learn about the media training that many female C.E.O.s receive to appear palatable—and especially by the idea that vulnerability had become something to be marketed rather than denied outright.

“‘Babygirl’ is a fairy tale,” Reijn told me. She took pleasure in folding over-the-top circumstances and “airport novel” flourishes into her screenplay. At the same time, she wanted the film’s depiction of sex to feel true. “Sexuality is often portrayed in stories, movies, and paintings as something that is so not the reality,” she said. “It looks either very glamorous or very dark—but for me it’s insanely vulnerable, very embarrassing, and sort of stop-and-go.” The office, with its rigid hierarchies and sharp power differentials, is a rich backdrop for a dom-sub relationship. (Sophie Wilde, who plays Romy’s assistant, noted to Reijn that even *her* scenes with Kidman had an element of sadomasochism.) For Samuel and Romy, conference-room meetings become a zone of flirtation; a cigarette shared outside a company party turns out to be a prelude to something more.



"We've found a fingerprint."
Cartoon by Charlie Hankin

"This movie is about identity and role-playing," Reijn said. "As a woman, you feel so much pressure to be the mother, the lover—all these archetypes. I wanted to take this almost literally with Romy. At the beginning, you see her sexually. Then you see her as the mother with the apron. Then she's the C.E.O." Absurdist smash cuts between intimate marital moments and corporate speechifying heighten the sense that both the adoring wife and the chilly girlboss are forms of drag. The film calls attention to the artifice of—and the punishing effort behind—Romy's attempts to self-optimize, which range from Botox injections to E.M.D.R. therapy. (Later, Romy's surly teen-age daughter announces that the Botox treatment makes her mom look "like a dead fish.") Nor does the story gloss over Romy's capacity to manipulate: at one point, she deploys H.R.-approved rhetoric to dissuade a junior employee from pursuing Samuel, saying, with faux concern, "You're in a position of power over him."

"I love writing scenes like that, where the female character is corrupt, is greedy, is weak, is dark, is wrong," Reijn said, of the exchange. Romy was the kind of part she had dreamed of for herself as a theatre actress embodying women who either lacked flaws or were punished for having them. "I'm in conversation both with the nineties sexual thrillers and with all the sort of mythical, iconic parts that I've played," she told me. "I sometimes feel I'm bewitched by these roles, and making these movies almost as a response—even if nobody knows it except me—is healing."

Reijn was born in Amsterdam in 1975, but her parents—a pair of hippie artists—swiftly transplanted her to the tiny village of Wildervank. When Reijn was growing up, their house guests included both fellow-artists and East German refugees, and her family was virtually off the grid. She and

her two sisters were forbidden to watch films or television, though they were encouraged in their own creative pursuits; they painted, played music, and wore homemade clothes that became fodder for their mother's art installations as soon as they outgrew them. The vibe, Reijn explained, "was basically 'Midsommar,' but not throwing old people off of cliffs."

A breach in the no-moving-images policy proved transformative. When Reijn was six, a bored babysitter took her and her older sister to the movies to see "Annie"; she instantly decided she wanted to be an actress. Her mom helped her join a youth theatre, and her dad built a stage for her at home. "If I'd said, 'I want to be a dentist,' he would have built a dentist chair," Reijn joked fondly. Soon she was writing her own plays and casting her sisters to perform alongside her.

Reijn's parents separated when she was still young. Her father was gay; he had been open with his wife about that fact, but had believed he could "transcend" his sexuality. "In the end, he did not," Reijn said. Looking back, she's happy with her unorthodox childhood, which she credits with shaping her philosophy as an artist. "I don't want to offer a moral"—an ethic that, she said, comes "purely from my parents." She went on, "The biggest thing that they told me was always put yourself in the shoes of the other. Like, when your bike is stolen, thank the thief. That is extreme, of course, but for an actor that is amazing. . . . My nonjudgmental attitude is very handy for the work I do."

At the time, though, Reijn found her upbringing maddeningly unstructured. Around the age of twelve, she insisted on attending a "normal" school in Amsterdam, only to be mocked mercilessly when she showed up with wooden shoes and unshaven legs. Once she adapted to the new setting, she thrived—and became obsessed with imposing order herself. When another student was insufficiently prepared, she bristled; when a teacher was lax or late, she scrawled disapproving callouts on the blackboard.

Upon graduating, she moved to Maastricht to attend drama school, which was a social education as much as a technical one. It was a strict, patriarchal environment: Reijn had to learn to walk in high heels, and her report cards advised her to wear more dresses. "It's unimaginable now—but I enjoyed that because I had never learned it," she said. For Reijn, conventional

femininity “was super exotic.” By her second year, she’d been offered the part of Ophelia in a professional production of “Hamlet.” She accepted and never returned to school.

After moving to Amsterdam for the role, she reconnected with Carice van Houten, another young actress she’d met on the drama-school audition circuit. They soon became inseparable, and eventually shared a doctor, a dentist, a therapist, an accountant, and a gynecologist. In 2005, Reijn and van Houten—who later found international success on “[Game of Thrones](#),” as the femme-fatale priestess Melisandre—were both cast in “Black Book,” a Dutch-language film directed by Paul Verhoeven. (The movie, a Second World War-era thriller about the Dutch Resistance, features some classic Verhoeven touches, including a scene in which van Houten bleaches her pubic hair.) The pair then got roles in a Hollywood production: Tom Cruise’s “Valkyrie.” In 2015, they founded a production company, Man Up, to make movies of their own.

Reijn began writing a film, “Instinct,” which she planned to direct, with van Houten as the star. Reijn plotted out the project in the wings of the Toneelgroep Amsterdam, between repertory performances of “Mourning Becomes Electra” and “The Taming of the Shrew.” She had seen a news segment about female therapists and psychologists falling in love with male patients who’d been convicted of violent crimes. “I thought that was an incredible metaphor for doing things in life that you know are bad for you when you’re supposed to be this enlightened, smart creature,” she told me. After all, therapists “know the red flags better than anybody else.” She arrived at a polarizing premise: a cat-and-mouse sexual relationship between a prison psychologist named Nicoline, played by van Houten, and a serial rapist under her care.

Reijn shot “Instinct” in less than a month, on a tiny budget. She worked on the edit during the day and returned to the stage every night. The result was impressively nuanced. Idris, the sex offender (Marwan Kenzari), has served five years in a correctional facility and is hailed by Nicoline’s colleagues as a reformed man. It’s not immediately clear whether their chemistry makes her more, or less, capable of assessing his fitness to reenter society—and whether she’s genuinely susceptible to Idris’s manipulations or cleverly

playing along in order to expose them. Guy Lodge, writing about the movie in *Variety*, dubbed it “the kind of hot, confrontational psychodrama you can imagine Verhoeven himself dreaming up,” even as he noted clear evidence of “a woman’s perspective behind the camera.” Among other things, Reijn decided not to linger on her heroine’s naked body. (As van Houten joked to me, alluding to her frequent nudity on “Game of Thrones,” “People have seen it by now.”)

“Instinct” was never released in U.S. theatres, but it became a calling card for potential Hollywood collaborators. Nicole Kidman sought it out on the recommendation of a friend, who’d seen it at a film festival. “It was dealing with subject matter where you’re going, ‘This is *deeply* uncomfortable for me—and I’m drawn in,’ ” she remembered. She reached out to Reijn, who wrote back. Soon they were calling each other for long conversations. “You get to know somebody’s voice through their work,” Kidman told me. “But then, talking to her on the phone, I just went, ‘Oh, *this* is a place I’ve not been.’ ”

For Reijn, “Instinct” was part of a larger crusade. The canonical roles she’d inhabited onstage had been formative; they also had dark similarities that had started to feel troubling. When we met again, at the Morgan Library, in October, she said, “I’ve been counting how many of those characters kill themselves, and how many of them go psychotic. It’s almost all!”

Whispering to match the hush of the library, but undeniably animated, she tallied up the outcomes: Ophelia drowns; Hedda Gabler shoots herself; Electra plots the murder of her own mother. Nora, the heroine of “A Doll’s House,” is a rare exception: “She walks out.”

From the moment Reijn left drama school for “Hamlet,” she began noticing her characters’ limitations. When she complained, with youthful indignation, that Ophelia had “only five scenes,” the play’s director, Theu Boermans, promised that their next collaboration would be “*her* Hamlet.” By this he meant Lulu, the protagonist of a pair of plays by the nineteenth-century German dramatist Frank Wedekind. (Modern productions often combine the two.) Lulu is rescued from the streets by an upper-class man and remakes herself according to the desires of her admirers. One suitor knows her as Mignon; another calls her Eve. Lulu, inevitably, meets a brutal

end—first reduced to prostitution, then murdered by Jack the Ripper. “She’s onstage for five hours, and all her clients come in, and she just transforms,” Reijn said. It was a showcase for her range—but the character’s lack of interiority rankled. “When Hamlet is alone onstage, he has ‘To be or not to be,’ ” she pointed out. When a man questions Lulu about her core beliefs, she collapses into a litany of “I don’t know”s.

A copy of “Lulu,” we’d learned, was somewhere in the Morgan; Reijn inquired with a docent, who directed us toward a room with three levels of bookshelves and an intricate painted ceiling. We stopped in front of an object on display—a pocket edition of “On the Secrets of Women,” a Latin work of medieval natural philosophy, which had been printed in Amsterdam. Reijn peered at a placard informing us that the text underscored “the pernicious nature of women” and had helped fuel the prosecution of witchcraft. “I need to read this book!” she exclaimed, adding wryly, “It’s very small to contain *all* the secrets of *all* women.”

We wandered into the next room, which had ornate red wallpaper and stained-glass windows. There was no sign of Lulu there, either. Reijn cast a regretful eye over rows of books behind an iron grate. “She might just be locked up!” she said.

Reijn had seen an [Ivo van Hove](#) production of “Lulu” at thirteen, seated beside her increasingly horrified mother. (“She was a hippie, but there was a lot of nudity,” Reijn recalled blithely.) Riveted by the experience, Reijn sent a long letter to van Hove, introducing herself and noting that she’d wanted to be an actress since she was six. “I feel that I might be of use for you, and I would like to audition to join your group,” she wrote, explaining that the staging had touched “the core of life.”

“It just gave me oxygen,” Reijn told me. “I felt, ‘I need to find this man, because then I can breathe.’ ” She laughed. “Well, I never heard from him!”

She was twenty-five when she had her turn as Lulu, in a production directed by Boermans. Van Hove was in the audience, and after the performance he approached her and asked, matter-of-factly, “So, when are you coming?”

The years Reijn spent at the Toneelgroep Amsterdam shaped her as both an actor and a director. She and van Hove, she said, had an instant connection, because they were both fixated on themes of “control and surrender and violence and sex.” She respected his expectation that everyone in the ensemble would subjugate themselves to the play. “He was always very businesslike,” she said. “I kind of loved that, because I could be like this”—she tossed her hair dramatically—“and I knew that the work would be structured.”

The company’s interpretations of classic texts were not without controversy. “The way we portrayed them, there was kind of a masochism, you know?” Reijn said. She chafed at any suggestion that her characters, whose willingness to obliterate themselves for love was out of keeping with modern mores, should be presented with a wink. “I would never play that with irony, because *I* have that in me,” she said. Reijn’s Hedda was unkempt and suicidal from the start; her habit of toying with the people around her—and with her husband’s pistols—suggested a death wish. (For Reijn, Hedda, not Lulu, is “the female Hamlet.”) Jude Law was so struck by the troupe’s “Hedda Gabler” that he eventually offered himself up to van Hove, too, and went on to star opposite Reijn in the director’s 2017 adaptation of Luchino Visconti’s 1943 film, “*Obsession*.” Law, who is now a close friend of Reijn’s, said, “She *shone* out of that group. I’ve never seen anyone so commanding, so comfortable and fearless onstage.”

Reijn’s most personal collaboration with van Hove was an adaptation of Jean Cocteau’s one-woman drama, “The Human Voice.” The monologue, first staged in 1930, consists of one side of a phone call between a nameless heroine and her ex. In the course of the conversation, it becomes clear that the man has left her abruptly to marry someone else—and that she has been utterly destabilized by the split. When the Toneelgroep Amsterdam first staged it, in 2009, Reijn herself was in the midst of a breakup with a fellow-actor and musician. She normally wore dresses to rehearsals; one day, deeply depressed, she arrived in Adidas sweatpants and a ratty sweater emblazoned with Mickey and Minnie Mouse. “Ivo was, like, ‘Perfect!’ ” Reijn told me. The outfit became her costume for the show.

The production was a testament to Reijn’s ability as an actress. Her character initially puts on a brave face, but she begins shifting between solicitous, confiding tones and flashes of rage or despair as she attempts to keep her lover on the line. In van Hove’s version, the man seems to have hung up before the woman’s final, furious soliloquy—if he was ever there at all. The action is set in a New York high-rise, and when the “conversation” is truly over Reijn opens a sliding glass panel that has separated her from the audience. Before a blackout, she stands on the precipice, poised to jump.

Reijn played the role on and off for a decade, and her performance changed as real-life boyfriends came and went. In her mind, she said, “I would always be on the phone with a different man.” Spectators, too, could “project their own relationships into those empty spaces,” and people responded strongly wherever the play went—Barcelona, Toronto, Hong Kong, Dublin, Sydney.



DIONYSUS, GOD OF WINE, MEETS TEDIUS, GOD OF CRAFT BEER

Cartoon by Paul Noth

At first, the rigors of the Toneelgroep Amsterdam’s repertory schedule thrilled Reijn. She prided herself on her ability to memorize lines, and to recall blocking whenever the company revived a production; her colleagues nicknamed her the Machine. As she got older, though, the parts became jumbled: “I would say, ‘I love you,’ which is a sentence that is in every classical play, and I was, like, Wait—who am I saying this to?” In her late thirties, she developed stagefright for the first time. “It had been my safest place,” she said, of the theatre. “Safer than reality. And when that started to turn on me, that was really scary.”

Early in the pandemic, she and van Hove revived “The Human Voice.” The nature of the production—a solo show in which Reijn was literally walled

off from human contact—made it both relatively *COVID*-friendly and intensely isolating. Privately, she knew that the run would be her last. On the night of the final performance, she texted a few close friends to say that she was done with acting. Then she got onstage and prepared to make her leap.

During the pandemic, A24, the indie studio behind such hits as “[Everything Everywhere All at Once](#)” and “Lady Bird,” was experiencing its own challenges. Executives there, like Kidman, had been fixated on Reijn since seeing “Instinct,” in 2019, on the festival circuit. Then *COVID* hit, and moviemaking ground to a halt. By early 2021, A24 had managed to shoot only one new film—the Ti West horror flick “X”—in the relative safety of New Zealand. The company’s first chance to resume production in the U.S. came in the form of a chamber piece that could be filmed in a single location: a bloody Gen Z satire, “Bodies Bodies Bodies,” about a house party at which one guest after another turns up dead. A staffer at A24 proposed that Reijn, with her theatre background, might be the person to direct it.

She accepted the job, which included overhauling the script, originally by the writer Kristen Roupenian, in partnership with the playwright Sarah DeLappe. In early 2021, before vaccines had been introduced, Reijn moved to New York City with the help of the studio, which had secured an artist’s visa to get her into the country. Almost immediately, she wanted to go back to Holland. “There were cockroaches everywhere,” she recalled. “I was homesick.” She’d had an amicable but painful breakup with a long-term boyfriend, who was still in Amsterdam. Recounting this period to me, she put on a singsong voice, in a parody of her own naïveté: “I thought, When I arrive in America, A24 will be waiting for me at the airport, and they will all take me to dinner—but it was *COVID!* I saw them only through Zoom. I was still working on the script. I have never felt so alone.”

She finally got to collaborate again when filming began—at a mansion in Chappaqua, New York. She bonded with her young actors, working with them as if they were in a small drama troupe, and their conversations helped enliven the screenplay, which is deliciously quotable. (As the twentysomethings bicker about who has it worse in life, one cuts through

another's ostensible rags-to-riches narrative with a withering pronouncement: "Your parents are upper . . . middle . . . class.") The experience left Reijn with an enduring interest in Gen Z sensibilities. "They do, sometimes, have better ideas about self-love, about sexuality, about identity," she said. The age gap in "Babygirl" allows for sly observations about such generational differences. Romy's husband, played by Antonio Banderas, winces at her fantasies, not wanting to "feel like a villain," whereas Samuel flatly declares such hangups to be "dated"; in his view, it's actually progressive to humiliate Romy, if that's what she wants.

"Babygirl" is one of several recent films centered on affairs between a woman and a much younger man—some of them disturbing ("May December"), others romanticized ("The Idea of You"). Reijn had wanted Samuel to be a counterintuitive love interest as well as a forbidden one. In contrast to the more conventionally masculine Banderas ("Someone where the audience is, like, 'Stay the fuck with him! ' "), Dickinson plays "someone who is incredibly vulnerable and also confused about what is expected of him," Reijn said. "As a lot of men are right now." The corporate environment adds to the sense of taboo, and creates a double-edged threat: though Romy holds sway over Samuel, he can just as readily derail her career by revealing their arrangement.

"Babygirl" not only allowed Reijn to engage more deeply with preoccupations from her previous films; it also gave her another chance to square what she called the "Lulu force" of self-destruction and the desire for personal liberation. "I was just sitting there behind my computer, thinking, What is the *juiciest*, most layered part I can make for an actress?" Reijn told me. Kidman read an early draft. It was, Reijn said, "an immediate yes."

In November, I visited Reijn at her West Village apartment, where she lived while filming "Babygirl" in the city. (She'd moved out of the place with the cockroaches.) When I arrived, she was dressed in a cropped pink sweatshirt and finishing up a phone call with a Dutch friend, attempting to confirm that everyone who needed a ticket to the movie's upcoming Amsterdam première had received one. Once she hung up, she gave me a tour, starting with a spare room crowded with bright canvases. Since childhood, she's

kept up the habit of painting, and she still finds the practice cathartic. She often gives her work away, though she's wary of pressuring friends into accepting it. "I put them in people's houses without telling them, so they can throw them away if they don't like them," she explained.

The narrow hallway to her bedroom—pink linen sheets, frilled pillows, a well-worn Teddy bear—doubled as a kitchen, where she set about slicing fresh ginger for tea as a kettle boiled. Her refrigerator was adorned with a program for "The Human Voice." Once the tea was made, we settled in the living room, at a table stacked high with books, notepads, and plays. She gestured at a box of pastries that she'd picked up. "We need to eat some chocolate!" she said, then hastened to add, "Only if you want to."

The centerpiece of the room was a fireplace, with playbills, works of art, and photographs of friends and family propped up on the mantle. She pointed to a black-and-white image of a young girl flanked by dour adults; behind them, a skeleton is mounted on a crucifix. "This is my dad, my mom, and me—I was scared," she said, laughing. There were also pictures of her sisters, whom she affectionately calls "good witches." Whereas Reijn had embraced the life of an unmarried artist, they had sought more traditional stability, and she occasionally envied their domesticity. At dinner, she'd told me, "Creating a movie like 'Babygirl' is all-consuming. At the same time, when you finish it, *that's* when you're, like, 'Hello! Where's my dog? Where's my station wagon? Where's my child?'" Although she was somewhat reluctantly swiping on dating apps, she wasn't seeing anyone at the moment. "I'm living as a nun," she joked. "I thought I was doing this film to activate myself! But that hasn't happened yet."

When Reijn grows disillusioned with single life, her siblings lovingly remind her of the less glamorous aspects of raising a family. "Part of me thinks that I'm not a real woman because I don't have children," she confessed—a dark thought that, she told me, might inform her next film. "I would love to do something with that pain, and then, on the other side of that spectrum, with the pain of women who are mothers and feel that they missed out on life in society or a life of creativity or a life of freedom."

She had already written treatments for a number of potential new projects, and she spoke of the ideas in gestational terms. "I have a couple of

embryos,” she said. “But I’m not sure which one is the one.” Lately, she said, she’d become obsessed with the question of what it means to be an American man today—not just for liberal twentysomethings, like Samuel, but also for the many men who had recently voted for Donald Trump. “But there’s a little voice inside of me, if I’m deadly honest with you, that says, ‘Should you be doing a movie about men right now?’ ”

“Babygirl” is laced with theatrical references—Romy’s husband is a director staging a distinctly van Hove-ish take on “Hedda Gabler”—and Reijn may yet return to her roots more directly. Five translations of “A Doll’s House” were sprawled on her living-room table. Flipping through one version, I found the beginnings of a pitch scrawled in the margins: “‘Marie Antoinette’ meets ‘Lady Macbeth’ meets ‘Portrait of a Lady on Fire.’ ” At the end of Act I, she’d written a question that might have been posed by Nora herself: “When you step away from the mother role, who are you as a woman?”

When we were at the Morgan Library, she’d told me, “I would love to do ‘A Doll’s House,’ but my way—with my own anger.” She’d been reading about what women in the nineteenth century had put themselves through in the name of beauty. One practice particularly haunted her: swallowing tapeworm eggs in a bid to lose weight. (Sometimes, she informed me, live tapeworms would be extracted from the women’s mouths.) Reijn said that she wanted to depict a character submitting to such gruesome measures “and make it almost horror—because it *is* almost horror.” She smiled. “And then, of course, she frees herself.” ♦

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[**Annals of Medicine**](#)

A Bionic Leg Controlled by the Brain

A new kind of prosthetic limb depends on carbon fibre and computer chips—and the reengineering of muscles, tendons, and bone.

By [Rivka Galchen](#)

December 9, 2024



Hugh Herr, left, an M.I.T. engineer whose lower legs were amputated after a climbing accident, imagines a future in which “we will be able to sculpt our own brains and bodies.” Photographs by Mark Seliger for The New Yorker

Hugh Herr, the director of an M.I.T. laboratory that pursues the “merging of body and machine,” grew up in a Mennonite family outside Lancaster, Pennsylvania. He and his brothers—he was the youngest of five children—often helped their father, a builder, lay shingles, install drywall, and strip wires. During the summer, the family visited places like Alaska and the Yukon in their camper van, and the kids frequently set out alone to hike and rock climb. “When I was eleven, I was this climbing prodigy, climbing things most adults couldn’t do,” Herr told me. “When I was fifteen and sixteen, I started climbing things that no adults had ever done. And then, when I was seventeen, the accident happened.”

Rock climbers call bouldering moves “problems,” and the most difficult section of a route is the “crux.” The young Herr spent days imagining difficult ascents, plotting a path across slots, cracks, and overhangs as one might work through a complex question in geometry or physics. Then he would go out and become the first person to ascend, say, a rock face on the Shawangunk Ridge. (By tradition, the person who makes the first ascent gets to name the route. The chosen names are often kooky: Moby Grape, They Died Laughing, Lonesome Dove, Millennium Falcon.) Herr sometimes did what’s known as free-solo climbing. “I’ll never forget the day I climbed two thousand feet without a rope,” he told me. “All your sensations are heightened. It’s a remarkable feeling of one’s physical control and power.”

In January, 1982, when Herr was a junior in high school, he and a friend, Jeff Batzer, set off to ice-climb Huntington Ravine, in the White Mountains of New Hampshire. They then planned to hike an additional mile or so to the peak of Mt. Washington, a popular destination that is notorious for fast-changing conditions. (It has been said to have the worst weather in the world.) According to the Mount Washington Avalanche Center, about twenty-five people have to be rescued each year, and more than a hundred people have died on the mountain.

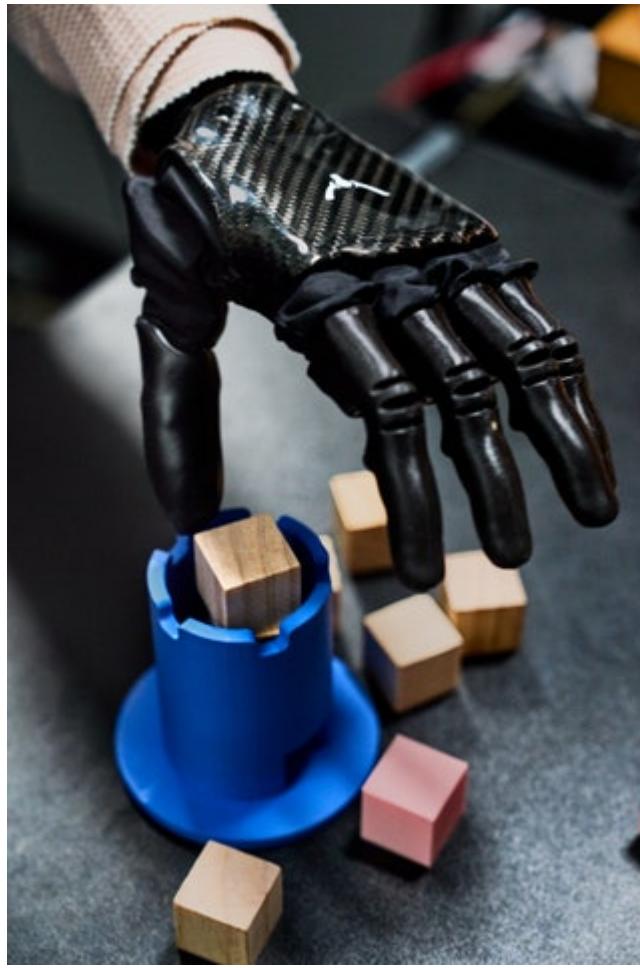
Herr and Batzer, who were experienced and very fit, ascended the ice of Huntington Ravine without much difficulty. They figured that if they had trouble on Mt. Washington they could always turn around. A few hundred feet along the trail, however, they encountered winds of up to ninety miles

per hour. Visibility was poor. They had to shout to hear each other. While retreating downhill, they lost their way. Several times, Herr's feet broke through ice into a freezing stream.

The two spent three nights in an isolated valley, in extreme cold. Herr didn't think that they would survive for even one night. But he wasn't accounting for the benefits of being with another person. "You can hug them," Herr said of the experience, in "Augmented," a documentary produced by Stat News and Nova. "You dramatically reduce the surface area of the dual body, but you double the heat source." The boys had all but given up when, on the fourth day, a woman out snowshoeing, following what she thought were moose tracks, came across the two young men. They wondered if they were hallucinating; she gave them raisins and a sweater and hurried to get help. They later learned that a search party had spent days out in the snow looking for them.

To stave off gangrene, Batzer had a thumb, several fingers, a foot, and a portion of one leg amputated. Herr had both legs removed below the knee. He was fitted with leg prostheses that had sockets made of plaster; he was warned that putting too much stress on them could crack them. "I was, like, 'We've gone to the moon, and this is it?'" he told me. When a prosthetist brought out a box of feet for Herr to choose from, Herr asked if there were any narrow enough to fit inside climbing shoes. "I wanted to get back on the horse," he told me. "Climbing was my life."

In rehab, Herr got in trouble for, literally, climbing the walls. A few months later, when he was on crutches, he and his brother Tony made their way to the base of a familiar mossy rock face in Pennsylvania, and Herr scaled it. He felt free and strong. And without his lower legs he was, he said, "like, fourteen pounds lighter." Climbing was easier for him than walking with his prostheses; it was also much less painful. "My dad was, like, If you want to climb, climb. Invent stuff."



A traditional amputation stifles the signals between the brain and a residual limb, but a breakthrough surgery can channel them into a prosthesis.

Herr had studied metal fabrication at a nearby vocational school—he had chosen his high-school classes in a way that would leave his schedule open for climbing. He started building prostheses with custom features, such as feet that could grip ice and pointed toes that could be wedged into cracks. “One year after the accident, I was climbing as well as I did before,” he said. Jim Ewing, a climbing friend who was Herr’s roommate around that time, told me, “I watched him become one of the strongest rock climbers in the world—and that was with bilateral amputations.” Herr made a first ascent of a route up Sky Top Ridge, in the Shawangunks, and he christened it Footloose and Fancy Free. (One of his prosthetic feet broke off when he fell and was caught by a rope.) He took on increasingly difficult climbs: City Park, in Washington State, and Liquid Sky and Stage Fright, in New Hampshire. In May, 1983, he appeared on the cover of *Outside* magazine. In the photo, he’s wearing a bandanna tied around his head; his prosthetic

legs are painted with red-and-blue stripes reminiscent of athletic socks. Two pairs of feet, neither attached, are nearby.

But, by 1985, Herr was worrying about the strain on his body. He thought about going to college, which would give him the education he needed to build even more advanced prostheses. “I was imagining limbs where I could run faster than a person with biological limbs,” he told me. “I was imagining non-anthropomorphic structures like legs with wings, and I could fly. I had no idea, obviously, how to do that.” He enrolled at Millersville University, a public school near Lancaster. Herr said that as a teen-ager he’d had such a limited grasp of math that he couldn’t have calculated ten per cent of a hundred. After two years of relentless studying, however, he had advanced to quantum mechanics. “What had been a climbing obsession became an academic obsession,” he said. He thought that maybe his aptitude for mathematics had come in part from all the problem-solving he did as a climber.

One summer, Herr started developing an adjustable socket for his prostheses, which tended to loosen as swelling in his legs ebbed in the course of a day. He and a prosthetist friend, Barry Gosthnian, who had been a mechanic in the Air Force, had talked about using inflatable bladders, and Herr tried to make some from various materials. Finally, after the seventeenth prototype, he had something that worked. Herr ultimately got a master’s degree in mechanical engineering, from M.I.T., and a Ph.D. in biophysics, from Harvard. He started the M.I.T. Media Lab’s Biomechatronics Group, which uses neurology and engineering to “restore function to individuals who have impaired mobility.” (He is also a director of the K. Lisa Yang Center for Bionics.) At M.I.T., he led the development of a robotic foot-and-ankle prosthesis called the BiOM, which has three microprocessors and six sensors and is tuned to a user’s gait. He started using one himself; in 2011, *Time* named him the “Leader of the Bionic Age.” Swapping out the powered ankle for a passive spring device, Herr said, felt like stepping off a moving walkway at the airport.

Still, the sophistication of prostheses was limited by the way leg amputations were performed. Surgeons traditionally sew down residual muscles when they amputate a limb. There are good reasons for this—

padding the bone is one—but it also severely restricts how much the muscles can move, leading to atrophy. Herr feels as if his legs are still there, but locked into rigid ski boots. The movements of his prostheses and his phantom limbs are out of synch.



Cartoon by Liana Finck

More recently, however, Herr's group has been working on a new type of prosthesis—one that is controlled by the brain. Not long ago, in his clutterless, white-walled office at M.I.T., he showed me a video of a woman who had undergone a novel kind of amputation that better preserves the ability of remaining muscles to contract and stretch. The signals that the brain sends to those muscles can be communicated, by way of numerous electrodes on the skin and external wires, to microprocessors in the prosthesis. I watched as the woman, simply by thinking, smoothly flexed and pointed her carbon-fibre toes. Herr told me that, when he walks with the robotic ankle he designed, “it feels like I’m in the back seat of a car. She feels like she *is* the car.”

More than a hundred people, including at least twenty at M.I.T., have now tried these brain-controlled prostheses. “They don’t typically get emotional at first,” Herr told me. “They giggle.” The prostheses are being used only for research, since they require more testing to be considered for F.D.A. approval, but research participants have already achieved a “biomimetic gait.” This makes it the first leg design that allows users to walk

approximately as quickly and unthinkingly as anyone else—a feat that Herr described as “more than I had expected in my wildest dreams.” Several labs have developed neurally controlled arm prostheses, and the Utah Bionic Leg, created by a University of Utah team led by Tommaso Lenzi, continually adjusts to a person’s gait. The M.I.T. prosthesis, however, is under full neural control. These accomplishments are not just about microprocessors, carbon fibre, and titanium. They required the engineering of much more familiar materials: muscles, tendons, and bones.

When I first met Matthew Carty, a tall plastic surgeon with gray hair and bright-blue eyes, he had just returned from a twelve-hour breast-reconstruction surgery, and I could still see the imprint of magnification glasses on his face. We were across the Charles River from Herr’s office, in the Hale Building for Transformative Medicine, at Brigham and Women’s Hospital, where Carty works. Carty is an expert in the field of microsurgery, which involves especially fine work, including the reattachment of vessels that can be smaller than a millimetre in diameter. Like many surgeons, he radiates the confidence that a person would want to see before going under the knife.

Herr had wondered whether the muscles severed in an amputation could be meaningfully connected again. (“I didn’t know if it was even possible,” he told me.) Someone he knew at a nearby rehabilitation center suggested that he speak with Carty. Carty, in turn, had been asking around about experts on advanced leg prostheses, and was told that he ought to meet Herr. Over dinner at a no longer extant Italian restaurant, they weighed the idea of leg transplants, which have never been done in the United States, against leg amputations combined with advanced prostheses. Many conversations followed.

Carty told me that, early in his career, he was troubled that amputation remained relatively primitive despite major advances in most other surgeries; the procedure not only led to muscle atrophy but also caused chronic pain, blistering, infections, and arthritis. It seemed improvable. “If I showed you a textbook from the Civil War describing the technique for a below-knee-level amputation and I showed you a textbook from right now,

they would look almost the same,” he told me. “How many things can you think of that have not evolved in two hundred-plus years?”

Other physicians were also rethinking the details of amputation. Severed nerves sometimes regenerate chaotically in residual limbs, forming painful clumps of tissue called neuromas. Gregory Dumanian, at Northwestern University, and Paul Cederna, at the University of Michigan, each developed techniques for embedding the ends of nerves into muscles, which is said to give the nerves somewhere to go and something to do; in practice, it alleviated some types of chronic pain. Carty had a further thought: a large amount of intact muscle, nerves, vasculature, and bone was often disposed of during amputations. In other procedures done by plastic surgeons, “material” was commonly repurposed for reconstruction. Couldn’t a similar inventiveness be applied systematically to amputations?

The human nervous system can be spooky. If an artery in your heart is occluded by a clot, pain may be felt in distant places such as your neck and your arm. Your gallbladder is in your abdomen, yet the pain from gallstones is sometimes felt as far away as your shoulder. Phantom-limb sensations are a very different variety of confusing messages of the nervous system. I spoke with a woman whose right leg was amputated up to the hip at Brigham and Women’s; shortly thereafter, on a hot day, she felt sweat in the pit behind the knee that she no longer had. Another patient said that pain from his phantom ankle “drives me bananas” and keeps him up at night. These sensations are not solely nuisances. They can also be useful.

Carty remembers asking Herr, early in their conversations, about his height. Herr was about five feet eleven before the accident, but his prostheses made him six feet two. Things didn’t have to be just as they were; there was room to play. Eventually, Herr and Carty began discussing the idea of amputation surgeries that would reengineer parts of the residual limb.

The key insight that emerged from their collaboration centered on muscle pairs made up of agonists and antagonists. When you bend your elbow, the biceps, an agonist, contracts; the triceps, an antagonist, stretches. When you raise your heel to walk, part of the largest muscle in your calf (the gastrocnemius) contracts, and a muscle right next to the shinbone (the

tibialis anterior) stretches; both muscles connect to bones in the foot and, in this way, move the leg.

One problem with traditional amputations is that they leave agonists and antagonists without that bone connection. What was in essence the muscles' means of communication or coördination is gone. But Carty and Herr, in close collaboration with Shriya Srinivasan and Tyler Clites, who were then graduate students in Herr's lab, started to envision ways of functionally reconnecting those agonist and antagonist muscles.

After a traditional amputation, the neural signals from severed muscles are only about three per cent of what they once were—insufficient for effective communication with a neurally controllable prosthesis. If the connections between agonist and antagonist muscles could be restored, however, the neural signals might be strengthened and clarified. The limb could then keep the brain informed about where it is and what it's doing; the brain in turn might become better at controlling the muscles in a natural way. In other words, a person's prosthetic limb could potentially be brought into close alignment with their phantom limb.

Many years of research went into this new approach to amputation. At one point, Clites spent about a year developing a way of stitching together agonist and antagonist muscles with tendons, which could slide back and forth along a bone-mounted titanium pulley. Clites told me that he had “all the ‘i’s dotted and all the ‘t’s crossed, and then that didn’t work at all.” In an experimental animal surgery, the muscles scarred down and became immobilized. “We had to ask ourselves, first, is the concept even good?” Clites told me. The titanium, which was not native to the body, seemed a likely culprit for the failure.

After many discussions, Herr, Carty, Srinivasan, and Clites went with a design that fashioned a pulley from a part of the ankle joint which in traditional amputations is basically tossed out. The idea looked good in theory, and the team presented it at a plastic-surgery conference. “The predominant feedback from surgeons was ‘That’s a really cool idea, but it will scar down and it will not move,’ ” Clites recalled.

The team tried out the surgery on human cadavers and animal models and thought that it might be working. “But you can’t get a rat to tell you what they are feeling,” Carty said. Did movement feel natural? How much could the animal sense its phantom limb or prosthesis? Did the prosthesis move in accordance with its thoughts? To answer these questions, the researchers needed a human—someone who was healthy but needed an amputation, and who was willing to receive a novel procedure. As Carty put it, they were looking for a “first astronaut.”

In the years after Herr’s accident, he had done numerous climbs with Ewing, his roommate. In the Stat documentary, Ewing recalled that, when they were about twenty, Ewing had “Life sucks” written on his left shoe; on the right, he had “And then you die.” On one climb, part of the way up the rock face, Herr asked him, “Does life really suck, Jim?” Ewing eventually married, had a child, and became a mechanical engineer, but he kept mountaineering. One day, in 2014, he was scaling a limestone cliff in the Cayman Islands with his daughter. He slipped, fell, stopped a couple of times, and then fell again—this time all the way down, about fifty feet. Somehow, he survived.

Ewing’s left foot was so badly injured that putting any pressure on it caused excruciating pain, even a year later. “As an engineer, I was researching all kinds of different things to rebuild my ankle,” he said. But he couldn’t find anything that would let him climb again. Even walking was very difficult. “I was super depressed,” he said. He knew that Herr was leading a biomechatronics lab, so he got back in touch to inquire about anything new and experimental—and, alternatively, to hear what life with an amputation might be like. He remembers Herr saying, “Well, funny that you ask—we’ve just developed this new amputation protocol.” Herr directed him to Carty, and a couple of months later Ewing decided on amputation. He would be the first person with an “agonist-antagonist myoneural interface”—AMI for short.

Precisely when people began to make and use prostheses is unknown. A prosthetic leg, fashioned from poplar and tipped with a horse’s hoof, was found in a two-millennia-old grave in present-day China, along the Silk Road. A Roman general is said to have received an iron replacement for his

right hand, to allow him to hold a shield. Ambroise Paré, a sixteenth-century French military barber-surgeon, devised a mostly metal leg with a knee joint, which could bend when a person was walking and lock when he was standing. Paré also worked on innovative surgical approaches to amputation, such as saving skin and muscle.

Throughout the years, prostheses have been reimagined in creative ways. Still, for a long time, the main difficulty for soldiers who needed amputations was surviving long after the operation. During the American Civil War, when infections killed more soldiers than artillery did, it was said that a soldier was lucky to have a limb shot off rather than cut off by a battlefield surgeon; field surgeons were unlikely to be working with a clean blade. (Advertisements from the time offered a type of ankle prosthesis that contained no metal and had a socket made from polished ivory and vulcanized rubber. It was touted as “*EXTREMELY LIGHT; MUCH LIGHTER THAN ANY OTHER.*”) For people who needed amputations, the greatest advance in care arguably was not superior prostheses but more modern surgical practices.

In the century that followed, amputation remained a neglected area of medicine. “When I was a medical student, amputations were sometimes given to the most junior member of a surgical team, and it was a contest to see how fast you could get the limb off,” David Crandell, a physiatrist in the Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation at Harvard Medical School, told me. To this day, surgeons performing amputations too often have little sense of what happens to a patient in the years after recovery.

“Part of the problem was that amputation was thought of as a failure,” Carty told me. “The thinking was, Either you salvage the limb or you fail to salvage the limb.” He brought up Ewing’s case to demonstrate how that approach can be misguided. “He had this preserved foot, but it’s painful all the time,” Carty said. “He stops climbing—he stops doing all these things that matter most to him.” For Ewing, an amputation and a fitting with a prosthesis could be more restorative than keeping the foot.

Carty and his colleagues were confident that the AMI amputation would be safe, and that Ewing would be able to use a conventional prosthesis without trouble. “Still, when you’re doing something for the first time, you’re

freaking out the whole time, because you’re wondering what you’ll find,” Carty said. They were not sure that the surgery would allow the muscles to move more freely, which was essential for a strong neural connection to a prosthesis.

According to a description of what would become known as the Ewing amputation, the surgeon makes a “stairstep incision” over the shin using a scalpel. The relevant part of the limb is “exsanguinated.” A flap of skin is peeled back to expose the leg muscles. Care is to be taken, the account notes, to isolate the saphenous vein and a nearby nerve. This is only the beginning of what is simultaneously a delicate, gruesome, and revolutionary surgical procedure; one of the required tools is a bone saw.

On July 19, 2016, Ewing spent more than five hours in the operating room. “Things went pretty well for me,” he recalled. Two weeks after the surgery, even before he had healed enough to have a prosthesis fitted, he went to a local climbing gym. “I remember feeling very liberated,” he said. “I was using just one leg, but I felt free from pain. I could propel myself up that wall dynamically.”

A few weeks later, Ewing went to the lab at M.I.T. The first thing the team wanted to know was whether the connected agonist and antagonist muscles in the amputated limb could move. An ultrasound probe showed that they could. “For a scientist, that’s Christmas morning,” Clites, who is now an assistant professor at the U.C.L.A. School of Engineering, said. “That was the big wow.” The research team then worked on picking up electrical signals from the muscle, measuring the strength of those signals, and using them to guide the movement of a prosthetic leg.

Ewing amputations are now the standard of care at Brigham and Women’s, and are performed at many hospitals. Carty frequently teaches the method to other surgeons, sometimes even by Zoom. Footage from the documentary shows one of Ewing’s later visits to the lab, the first time that the research team connected the prosthesis directly to his leg. “It’s really cool to feel it through my knee,” he says in the video. “Feels like there’s a foot there.” At first, he moves the prosthesis slowly. Later, he observes, “Literally within minutes of having it all connected, it starts becoming part of me.” We see him sitting cross-legged, with the prosthesis on top, fidgeting the foot by

flexing and pointing it repeatedly—a moment Carty remembers as astonishing. “I said, ‘Jim, do you know you’re doing that?’ ” Carty recalled. Ewing replied, “No, I was just hanging out.”

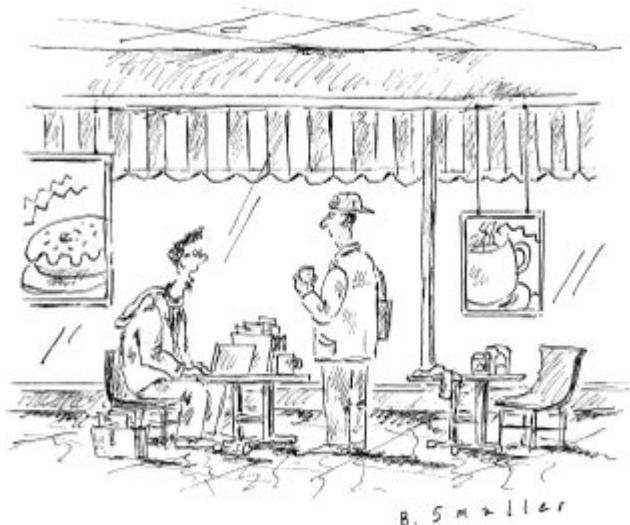
One of the many eerie elegances of our bodies is that we manage to walk without thinking much about it. We never have to study a user’s guide to our legs in order to coördinate the contraction of one muscle and the relaxation of another. Almost all of that labor is done unconsciously. I sometimes think of the conscious mind as a clueless factory boss who spends her time daydreaming while the workers on the floor operate all the necessary machinery. Every so often, the self-important boss is startled into action and sends down a message like “Step around that puddle!” or “Run faster!” But only the workers know all the detailed adjustments required to carry out the order. “Even now, we don’t fully understand walking—which surprises people,” Herr told me. His lab has spent thousands of hours filming, assessing, scanning, and mathematically modelling people as they walk.

Even the most sophisticated robotic leg prostheses are engaged in merely a rough approximation of human locomotion; they “know” only what the current science knows about how we walk or run or jump, which leaves out a considerable amount. They have microprocessors that make thousands of calculations a second, and they can convey a burst of energy that, even in the absence of a calf muscle, enables a person to lift their prosthetic heel with the appropriate amount of energy. But on uneven ground, for example, they don’t allow a person to move in a truly biomimetic way. This means that an almost incomprehensibly complex technology effectively knows less than a child.

When Clites was a Ph.D. student in Herr’s lab, he worked closely with Ewing to “tune” the prosthesis to Ewing’s perception of movement. The sensors for electromyography (EMG), which is like an EKG for muscles outside the heart, were taped to his residual limb and detected the electrical activity in his leg muscles. (The team is also researching an approach to detecting muscle movements that involves small implanted metal spheres.) If Ewing was asked to lightly flex his foot but the prosthetic foot flexed intensely, the system could be adjusted. “Maybe one philosophical concept

here is that, if the amputation is done well and the interface is done well, then the best possible prosthetic device is a really stupid one,” Clites told me. “It is one that doesn’t have to think very much at all . . . because the person’s brain and spinal cord are doing all the thinking.” Herr described this in a clarifying way: “There’s no real algorithm on the robot. It’s all from biological computation. That’s cool, because the person is in control.”

When I visited the lab, in July, I met Amy, a sporty woman with auburn hair whose leg had been severely burned in a work accident. Her turn as an astronaut came shortly after Ewing’s. The surgery alone was a breakthrough, Amy said, because “it gives back so much proprioception”—the ability to detect one’s body in space. She became very active with traditional prostheses; she runs races and rows crew. But trying the neurally controlled prosthesis in the lab, she said, was a kind of revelation.



“It’s only a conspiracy theory now, but with the right marketing it could become a widely held belief.”

Cartoon by Barbara Smaller

Amy described for me how, after EMG electrodes were taped along her residual limb, she was given instructions about how to move her no-longer-there leg. “At first, the prosthesis was mounted on the table, while I sat in a nearby chair,” she said. “It was wild. The fact that my leg is here, and this thing is over there, and then all I do is think . . . and now this thing is moving.” The researchers would ask her to point the foot quickly, and then slowly; to turn her phantom ankle inward as far as she could, and then outward as far as she could, and then inward just a little, and so on. It was

like telekinesis, and she was having fun. Sometimes, just to mess with the team, she would start tapping her phantom foot, as if with impatience.

Eventually, the bionic prosthetic leg was hooked up directly to Amy's body. Her movements were studied as she walked with it—on ramps, up and down stairs, around obstacles. If it was out of tune, she might find herself walking on tiptoes. Whenever she went home, the bionic leg remained in the lab. "You do miss it when you leave," she told me. "You just put it on and you start walking and doing everything that you could do before. It's amazing. You feel whole again." Then she revised her phrasing: "It's not that I don't feel whole. I love myself and I love being an amputee and I love my legs." But her connection to the neurally controlled prosthesis is of another order. "It's almost like I've imprinted on it," she said.

In the United States alone, more than a million and a half people use prostheses. They have run marathons, swum for miles, climbed Mt. Everest, and danced the foxtrot. In the U.S., a typical leg prosthesis can cost eight to ten thousand dollars, and custom prosthetic sockets made from materials such as carbon fibre have become reasonably common. But robotic prostheses that use microprocessors, like Herr's bionic ankle, still cost more than thirty thousand dollars and remain unusual. It will probably take five years for neurally controlled leg prostheses to be proved safe and effective and to become commercially available. (If a prosthetic arm fails to grab a cup, that's not too bad; a failure with a prosthetic leg can mean a disastrous fall.) Even then, the price is likely to be prohibitive for many.

Crandell, the Harvard physiatrist, is a funny, brainy, and upbeat clinician who treats people with amputations in the Spaulding Rehabilitation Center, a building overlooking Boston Harbor. He told me that until recently, and to some extent even now, medical students had little exposure to or knowledge of his specialty. "I would say the field changed eleven years ago, especially here in Boston, after the Boston Marathon bombing," he told me. "There were a lot of donations. We became less invisible." Still, many advances in the field have not yet reached people who need them. "If you're a veteran or if you were hurt at work, then insurance tends to cover the price of a high-end prosthesis," he said. But most others can't afford one. (Crandell is part

of a group that lobbies the Massachusetts legislature to require insurance to cover more.)

On a recent Wednesday, Crandell's first patient of the day was a former trumpet player from Russia who was in his seventies. The man's wife had to translate for him because he spoke little English. He'd had his right leg amputated below the knee four years earlier, after falling from a ladder while trimming a pine tree. "The leg is no longer fitting well," she said of his prosthesis. "He needs a smaller one."

The patient pulled up the leg of his jeans and disconnected his metal ankle prosthesis from the socket. He then removed the socket, a sort of fitted stocking that covers the residual limb. Next, he took off a large sock from the limb, then another, and then several more, finally pulling off a soft liner that was the last layer. He needed all the layers to keep the socket from falling off. "He also has foam he puts inside the socket, as padding," his wife said. The reason for the poor fit was that his residual limb had diminished in size as it lost muscle.

Crandell and the couple discussed the cost of a replacement socket, organizations that might be able to help with the co-pay, the wife's job at Whole Foods, and her husband's former work as a music teacher. With a dismissive hand gesture, he cheerfully indicated that he had quit. He couldn't adjust to the American style of back-patting and gentle encouragement, his wife said. "He wanted to push them," she said. "And they said, 'You have to say, 'It's O.K., it's very good.' " He said, 'I cannot.' " The couple laughed at the memory.

"Next time, he has to come with the trumpet," Crandell said.

Another patient that day, a father of two boys, had lost his leg to bone cancer. The cancer had returned in the form of lung nodules, but he was in remission. He had one prosthetic leg for swimming and another for playing basketball in the driveway, and he had recently gone downhill skiing with his kids. He was seeing Crandell because he wanted a replacement for his running leg.

A man who had once suffered a severe stroke arrived in a wheelchair, accompanied by an aide from his nursing home. His right leg had been amputated above the knee, but he did not want a prosthesis. He was there because of pain in the residual limb. He had trouble forming words but said a couple of times, at appropriate moments, “Awesome” and “Shit happens.” Throughout the day, the mood in the office was bright, pragmatic, and unhurried. Seven patients came through. Only one had a prosthesis that contained a microprocessor. The world of neuroprostheses, which Herr was developing just a few miles away, seemed like far-off science fiction.

In 2018, almost two years after Ewing’s surgery, he returned to the Cayman Islands, where he had fallen. A graduate student in Herr’s lab, Emily Rogers, had designed a neurally controlled leg for Ewing, tailored to the demands of rock climbers. The bionic ankle of the climbing prosthesis had “two planes of motion,” meaning it could point and flex and also move inward and outward; it was also lighter (but less powerful) than what he used in the lab. Herr and Clites joined Ewing on what was to be an emotional, and also instructional, trip: after months of laboratory tests, they wanted to assess the naturalness of Ewing’s movements when climbing.

The Stat documentary shows Ewing, wearing sunglasses with red lenses, looking up from the base of the wall. He points out to Clites the limestone formations, called tufas, near where he had fallen. He remarks on how high up he had been—and he laughs.

With the blue water of the Caribbean behind him, he ascends a pale, craggy cliff. Herr is waiting for him at the top, where the rock formations were bleached and pocked with fossils.

“I was not terribly surprised that it worked,” Ewing told me. “I was surprised at how *well* it worked.”

As a young man, Herr spoke to almost no one of the physical pain he experienced; in pictures of his early climbs with prostheses, he appears to be in high spirits, even mischievous, with his prosthetic legs pin-striped in one photo. Another leg was polka-dotted. When he is asked about his bilateral amputations, Herr often says things like “These scratches don’t bother me,” and that bionic legs are interesting, and powerful, and cool. He

did not tell his two daughters how he lost his legs until the younger one became a passionate hiker. He regrets getting lost on Mt. Washington only because Albert Dow, a young man who was part of the search team, died in an avalanche. Herr always felt that to respect Dow he needed to eschew self-pity, and to devote his life to something worthwhile.

Herr, with his traditional amputations, cannot use the magical-seeming neuroprosthesis that he helped invent. The electrical signals in his residual muscles would be too confused and too weak for the neural-control system, unless his amputation could be modified. (So far, seven people have had their amputations retroactively changed into AMI amputations, and the results have been encouraging.) “I am green with envy of Jim,” Herr says in the documentary. He often talks about “embodiment,” the feeling that a device is not a tool but a part of one’s self—or that “mechatronics are their body.”

Herr told me that his innovations are “not about rebuilding me as much as about loving technological augmentation.” He has designed artificial ankles and knees and also bionic shoes that “reduce the metabolic cost” of movement by more than twenty per cent. Instead of talking in terms of ability and disability, he speaks with boyish excitement of a future in which “we will be able to sculpt our own brains and bodies, and therefore our own identities and experiences.” Such advances, he told me, offer both tremendous possibility and tremendous risk. “If we give keys to future parents to design their future baby, that would be horrific,” he said. “Humans have too narrow a view of beauty, and of intelligence.” What appeals to him is the idea of many more kinds of bodies out there, each with its own capacities and charisma. “If I’m correct, humans will be unrecognizable in a hundred years from what we are today,” he said.

Such visions of the future can have a curiously retro feel to them. In the nineteen-seventies TV show “The Six Million Dollar Man,” a hunky former astronaut is augmented after a crash to have extraordinary levels of strength and speed. In “The Empire Strikes Back,” from 1980, a medical robot fits Luke Skywalker with a biomimetic bionic arm after a lightsabre fight. In the 1984 film “The Terminator,” Arnold Schwarzenegger, who already seemed superhuman, plays an almost unkillable cyborg. Today’s

neuroprostheses are not about superhuman powers. They're about human ones: moving without thinking much about it, experiencing one's body as one's self. The marvel is more David Attenborough than Isaac Asimov.

When I called Ewing, he was on vacation in Honduras, just back from a scuba dive. He is relentlessly active; he and his family sometimes take ski trips with Carty's family. It's climbing, though, that still means the most to him. I asked him why. "Other than the adventure and the physical challenge and the problem-solving . . ." He trailed off. He's been climbing for nearly fifty years, he said, and he is still trying to find words to explain it. "I realized recently—the only time my brain is quiet is when I'm climbing," he said. "I yearn for that." ♦

An earlier version of this article failed to credit the documentary film "Augmented."



Rivka Galchen, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, has contributed fiction and nonfiction since 2008. Her books include the novel "[Everyone Knows Your Mother Is a Witch](#)."

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[**A Reporter at Large**](#)

President Emmanuel Macron Has Plunged France into Chaos

Lawmakers have toppled the government for the first time since 1962. How did we get here?

By [Lauren Collins](#)

December 7, 2024



Messy though France's politics currently are, it is easy to trace the evolution of the turmoil, and to pinpoint when the political situation tipped from uncertain yet orderly into surrealistic and totally unpredictable. Illustration by Simon Bailly

At the end of July, Lucie Castets was planning to go to Italy with a group of friends. Every year, they rented a house and followed the same ritual: pool,

spritzes, a viewing of “Gladiator.” For the past year, Castets had worked as the finance director for the City of Paris. On July 22nd, shortly after noon, she was in the bike garage of her office building, in the Thirteenth Arrondissement, when her phone started buzzing. The caller was Olivier Faure, the head of the French Socialist Party. Just before picking up, Castets texted her wife, then took the call.

“What does he want?” her wife wrote back.

“I don’t know,” Castets replied.

“Maybe he’s gonna ask you to be Prime Minister or something.”

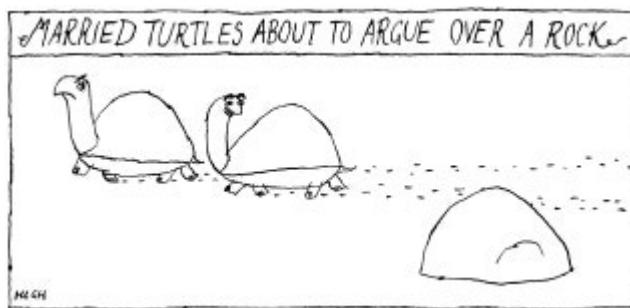
“Haha.”

After Castets hung up, the text conversation continued.

“Actually, he is,” she wrote.

“No shit?” her wife replied.

Soon, Castets would burst onto the political scene in what the French press took to calling her “Warholian summer” of instant notoriety. For the moment, however, practically no one knew who she was. After the phone conversation, Faure ran Castets’s name by his fellow party heads in the left-wing alliance known as the Nouveau Front Populaire, or N.F.P. “Who?” one of them replied. But Castets made an appealing candidate: a thirty-seven-year-old woman from civil society, fresh-faced and sincere, yet not without a streak of swagger; impeccably credentialled and indisputably of the left, but obscure enough to have neither a record that would raise hackles nor political enemies of consequence.



Cartoon by Roland High

As the party heads deliberated, Castets went on with her day. She got on her bike and pedalled across the neighborhood, arriving at a restaurant where she was supposed to meet an acquaintance. It had already been a wild summer in France. In three days, the Paris Olympics would begin, superimposing live contests of might and savvy over a grunting, deadlocked struggle for political power that had transfixed the country for weeks. Castets didn't know the person she was having lunch with very well, so she said nothing about Faure's call. "I think I had a poke bowl," she told me. That weekend, the plane to Italy took off without her.

On December 4th, members of the Assemblée Nationale, the lower house of the French parliament, passed a no-confidence vote against Prime Minister Michel Barnier, toppling the country's third government of the year only twelve weeks after it had been formed. "It's a singular moment, because the vote of no confidence is accompanied by huge questions about what happens next," Christophe Bellon, a parliamentary historian at the Catholic University of Lille, told me. Messy though France's politics currently are, it is easy to trace the evolution of the turmoil, and to pinpoint when the political situation tipped from uncertain yet orderly into surrealistic and totally unpredictable.

Back in June, a little more than a month before Castets received the unexpected call, French people went to the polls to elect representatives to the European Parliament. The outlook was not particularly good for the group anchored by President Emmanuel Macron's party. Macron had squandered a large mandate since taking office, in 2017, as a paradigm-busting centrist who would govern not from the left or the right but, as he liked to say, from the left and the right "at the same time." The promise of Macronism was social progressivism and economic liberalism. The practice of Macronism was the tenacious pursuit of economic reforms at the expense of sweeping social programs, which were always just about to materialize.

Macron had reduced unemployment from more than ten per cent to around seven per cent, made France a far more attractive place for foreign investment, and streamlined a complicated retirement system. But his comparative neglect of such areas as health care and housing, combined

with the fact that he instituted a tax policy that favored the rich and that he raised the retirement age from sixty-two to sixty-four, had eroded support in the left-leaning part of his coalition. In the eyes of many voters, he was a centrist President tacking ever rightward, hardening his stances on immigration and Islam as the extreme-right party, the Rassemblement National, or R.N., soared in polls. Many French people, whatever their politics, loathed Macron personally, citing his arrogance, exemplified by comments such as one that he made to an unemployed gardener: “I could find you a job just by crossing the street.” On a good day, his approval rating was around thirty per cent, considerably lower than Joe Biden’s.

The party that is now the R.N. was founded in 1972, in the aftermath of the Algerian War, by the torture apologist and Holocaust denier Jean-Marie Le Pen. “Tomorrow, immigrants will stay with you, eat your soup, and sleep with your wife, your daughter, or your son,” he once warned. The party is essentially a family firm, now fronted by his more politically supple daughter Marine Le Pen. It has never produced a President or a Prime Minister, but it is getting closer. Since 2022, the R.N. has constituted the largest opposition party in the Assemblée.

Domestically, the R.N. espouses a form of nationalist populism—more deportations, lower taxes on gas. In recent years, Le Pen has tried to detoxify the party’s reputation, but some members still promote colonial nostalgia and racist theories such as the “great replacement.” Regarding foreign policy, the R.N., historically a reliable friend to Vladimir Putin, could fairly be called more Europhobic than Euroskeptic. After years of lobbying to withdraw from the eurozone, the party reversed its position, but it continues to rail against, per its platform, “the woke excesses imposed by Brussels.”

Le Pen is sometimes compared to Donald Trump, but the analogy is not quite apt. Certainly, their movements share an anti-immigrant, selectively isolationist brand of nationalism—“*Les nôtres avant les autres*” (“Ours before others”) is the R.N.’s version of “America First.” Both have ties to strongmen and a taste for tariffs and fossil fuels. But Trump is more plutocratic than populist when it comes to policy. And, whereas the Republicans romanticize a bygone world, the R.N. is keen to present itself

as a forward-looking concern. Trump is a soft man obsessed with seeming tough; Le Pen is a tough woman forever trying to project a soft touch.

“With Le Pen, in France, you have a strong element of continuity with historical fascism that doesn’t exist with Trump in the U.S.,” Jean-François Drolet, a professor of politics and international relations at Queen Mary University of London, told me. But, he added, “increasingly these far-right-wing movements share a sense of global interconnectedness. They all understand that in order to pursue their domestic programs they have to destroy the liberal international agenda as we know it.”

Elections for the European Parliament are paradoxical, in that the parties that enjoy disproportionate success in them often question the value of the entire European project. Le Pen’s party has historically fared better in these races than in France’s Presidential or legislative elections. This summer’s vote was the first since the implementation of Brexit, with wars raging in Ukraine and Gaza, and the R.N. was projected to pull ahead of Macron’s group. But when the results came in, on June 9th, they were unexpectedly lopsided: 31.5 per cent for the R.N. and just 14.6 per cent for Macron’s group. This represented the R.N.’s largest victory ever in a nationwide race, and the best performance by any French party in a European election since 1984.

Libération called the results an “earthquake.” Macron’s response was to shake things up further. Just before eight o’clock that evening, his office announced that he would address the nation. Millions of screens lit up with speculation as the political class and regular citizens alike tried to figure out what the President could possibly be up to. In the control room at BFMTV, one of the country’s leading news channels, correspondents found themselves at a loss. “We joked that maybe he was going to do a referendum on banning mobile phones in schools,” Philippe Corbé, then the channel’s editorial director, told me. Roland Lescure, Macron’s industry and energy minister, was on a radio show discussing the election results when a journalist, during an ad break, asked him about a rumor that Macron was planning to call a snap election. “No way,” Lescure responded.

At nine o’clock, cameras cut to the Élysée Palace, its rooftop flag flapping melancholically under a pink-and-black sky. More than fifteen million

people—sixty-five per cent of the French viewing public—watched as Macron appeared onscreen, perched on a balcony with the plane trees of the palace gardens behind him, filtering the day’s last light. After a curt denunciation of the extreme right, Macron got to the point: he was dissolving the Assemblée Nationale and holding new legislative elections, with a first round of voting in just three weeks. “At the end of this day, I cannot act as if nothing happened,” he said. His plan, he claimed, would provide an “indispensable clarification.” Never mind that the people had just spoken, rather unmistakably. Macron, leading boldly from behind, would force them to think hard about whether they really meant what they said. “To be French,” he reminded them, is “to choose to write history rather than to submit to it.” And, with that, he was gone.

Libération called the news a “double earthquake.” The French constitution gives the President the power to dissolve the Assemblée and call new elections whenever he wants to, up to once a year. If successful, dissolution can break a stalemate or deliver a majority for the President. But the maneuver is so risky that, since the Fifth Republic was established, in 1958, it had been used only five times. The move can backfire spectacularly, leading to a rare situation that the French call “cohabitation,” in which the offices of President and Prime Minister are held by different parties. (Unlike many European countries, France concentrates power in an unusually strong President and has little tradition of coalition government. And, unlike the U.S., France has no midterm elections.) The most recent dissolution, in 1997, saddled President Jacques Chirac with a hostile Assemblée for five years.

Macron pitched the dissolution as “an act of confidence,” but it radiated desperation. “He would say it’s de Gaullian, but it’s Bonapartian,” Corbé told me. “It’s this idea that you can get on your horse and take your sword, that even when you’re stuck somewhere there’s always a way to escape.” Given the massacre of the European Parliamentary elections, Macron’s decision seemed more akin to falling off his horse, losing his sword, and still insisting he held a strategic advantage. Had he done nothing, he would have had to swallow a humiliating loss, but he could have continued to govern more or less as before. Now he was risking his group’s relative majority and opening a path for the R.N. to take power.

If the R.N. gained a majority, Macron would have little choice but to allow the party to select a Prime Minister. The R.N.’s leaders quickly announced their pick: Jordan Bardella, the party’s scrubbed and dimpled twenty-eight-year-old dauphin. Biographically, Bardella is a godsend, one that the R.N. has been searching for for decades. He was born in Seine-Saint-Denis, France’s poorest department, and grew up in a housing project, the “little white kid” dodging drug dealers, he says, while his mother struggled to make ends meet as a nursery-school assistant. His maternal grandparents were Italian immigrants from Turin, and, according to Bardella, they gratefully embraced their new country. “If Iolanda and Severino’s integration worked, it’s because it was European,” he writes in a new memoir, contrasting his family’s culture to that of “populations from the other side of the world,” particularly Muslims, some of whose ideas are “profoundly contrary to who we are.”

Bardella’s opponents point out that he has never had a job outside of politics, other than briefly working at a vending-machine company owned by his father. They dismiss him as “Monsieur Selfie,” for his constant presence on social media, where he posts videos of himself eating Haribo gummy bears. Recent reporting has complicated his backstory, establishing that he spent weekends with his father in a well-off suburb, and that his paternal lineage includes an Algerian-immigrant great-grandfather. Politically, Bardella owes everything to Le Pen, whom he calls his “second mom” (and whose niece he long dated). French commentators sometimes refer to him as “the ideal son-in-law,” though they often fail to specify of what kind of family.

Macron’s decision to call the snap election elicited shock and clichés: he was playing with fire, rolling the dice, holding a gun to the country’s head. Seemingly on a whim, he had thrown the country into political pandemonium, making more probable than ever the scenario that French voters had been fending off for decades—the ascendancy of the extreme right. Even Macron’s own people were stupefied. On television, the finance minister memorably described the clique of advisers who had urged the President to dissolve as “wood lice,” munching up “the palaces of the Republic.”

The announcement also surprised the sitting Prime Minister, Gabriel Attal, whom Macron had informed only an hour before. At thirty-five, Attal had been in office for just six months. Like Bardella, he has hardly had a job outside of politics. He is tousle-haired and mediagenic (despite a minor slipup during the Olympics, when, after meeting Lady Gaga, he accidentally disclosed her engagement). Because of their common youth and charisma, Bardella and Attal are often referred to as the “fraternal twins” of French politics, popping out of their respective party wombs at roughly the same time. But, if Bardella is the ideal political son-in-law, Attal seemed to be dealing with degenerating family ties. At a cabinet meeting shortly before the President’s public announcement, Attal sat staring at Macron with what *Vanity Fair France* described as “the look of a serial killer.” He was so stung by the betrayal that he went M.I.A. for twenty-four hours. At a later meeting, Roland Lescure, the industry and energy minister, raised his hand. “Mr. President, you said, rightly, that an election is a matter of dynamics,” he began. “Well, we just lost one.”

The twenty-one-day scramble toward the snap election promised to be chaotic, and in the wake of the announcement Macron’s popularity plunged to new lows. “It was unprecedeted, rickety, baroque,” someone close to Attal told me of the period. “Nobody knew what was going to happen.” Attal, citing a sense of duty, ultimately agreed to lead the campaign. Internally, hopes for victory were modest. The person close to Attal, borrowing a slogan from Dua Lipa, characterized the Prime Minister’s attitude as “radically optimistic.”

When Jacques Chirac dissolved the parliament, in 1997, Dominique de Villepin was one of the President’s top advisers. On a rainy afternoon, I went to see him at his office, on one of the grandest streets in Paris. Americans remember de Villepin as the most quintessentially French of politicians, publishing volumes of poetry and sparking the “freedom fries” foolishness of the early two-thousands with a now historic speech opposing the invasion of Iraq. Dressed in a suit and tie, his silver mane undiminished, he took my coat and offered me a glass of water, which an employee delivered as we settled into deep couches in a vast salon filled with sculptures and masks.



"We shoulda eaten them chickens 'fore the horses."

Cartoon by Tom Chitty

De Villepin, who later served as Chirac's Prime Minister, told me that he had long believed Macron's hauteur would be his downfall. Watching his showy, solitary stride across the Louvre courtyard on the night of his first victory, in 2017, de Villepin recalled, "I realized that we weren't in France—we were in Hollywood."

De Villepin told me, "Lots of French people voted for him not because they supported him but by default, because they didn't have a good choice. And he never understood that." Since his dramatic entry into electoral politics, Macron had explicitly positioned himself as a bulwark—the bulwark—against the extreme right. Yet although he owed both of his elections to a ramshackle coalition of voters, he had insisted on managing France "by certitude," talking much but listening little to traditional partners such as local officials and trade unions. "He doesn't change, he doesn't learn, and he doesn't draw lessons from his failures," de Villepin said.

When I asked other political observers what had just happened and how to understand it, they, like de Villepin, often wanted to talk about Macron's character. "I think he's a narcissistic pervert," Marine Tondelier, the head of the Green Party, told me. "He enjoys manipulating people. Everyone thinks it, but I'll say it out loud." At the end of the summer, Jean-Michel Blanquer published a juicy memoir of his five years as Macron's education minister, recounting how his initial appreciation for the "snake charmer" President had given way to dismay at his egocentrism, his inability to know when enough was enough, and his willingness "to fly blindly without culture,

without vision, and without values.” Blanquer writes, “Like a fallen angel of politics, Macron began to carry a black light.” Blanquer told me that the book could help people understand the masochistic side of Macron’s personality: “How could a strong, intelligent guy do something so destructive to himself?” (Macron’s office did not respond to requests for comment.)

Several interlocutors insisted that Macron was “having a midlife crisis.” Others wanted to talk about the influence of Brigitte Macron, his wife, who, as the political debacle continued, attended a Dior fashion show in a branded look and appeared on “Emily in Paris,” agreeing to a selfie with the show’s protagonist, an apparently tolerable immigrant. “Can you imagine Mrs. Nixon starring in ‘Columbo’ in the middle of the Watergate affair?” *Le Nouvel Obs* wrote.

The word I heard about Macron more than any other was “isolated.” News reports, too, drew a picture of a sequestered and susceptible leader, huddled over late-night whiskeys with a dwindling boys’ club of flatterers. This was a far cry from the progressive, transparent leadership that Macron had once promised. When I interviewed him in 2019, I was struck by his appetite for transgression. He had fallen in love with his high-school drama teacher and married her. He had backstabbed mentors and shunned traditional left-right party affiliations, blowing up the political system to launch his first Presidential bid. The dissolution seemed like confirmation of his tendency to think that he could always brazen it out. “I think we have a duty not to abandon any of our idealism but to be as pragmatic as the extremists are,” he told me in 2019. “This is a battle. And, even if you die with good principles, you die.”

Macronology could go only so far, though, in explaining why France found itself in such a fix. De Villepin spoke emphatically about the President’s disconnect from “anxieties, concerns, and situations that he largely neglected”—things like the plight of farmers and fisherman, who were fighting double crises of climate and inflation, or the prospects of residents of the banlieues, whom he had promised to “emancipate,” commissioning a major report that he then cast aside. Like many democracies, France is grappling with immigration, globalization, electoral polarization, and a

changing media landscape that concentrates power in the hands of billionaires. Many people have the sensation that their quality of life is declining, that they are working harder for thinner rewards, while plutocrats skim the foam off the *café crème*. In 2018, this phenomenon of *déclassement*, or being downgraded, real and perceived, brought hundreds of thousands of French citizens into the streets during the “yellow vests” popular uprising. Macron threw money at the problem, granting tax concessions and wage increases to the protesters. He did the same during *Covid*, promising the French people that “the state will pay.”

Macron’s strategy of blunting financial pain through profligate spending allowed him to survive in the short term. Unlike the United States government, the French government responded to inflation by capping prices on energy and some food items, and, unlike Joe Biden, Macron wasn’t widely blamed for the cost of eggs, even as French people told pollsters that purchasing power was their top priority. However, Macron’s bills were coming due. With 2025 budget deliberations approaching, officials were projecting massive shortfalls, and Macron’s ability to buy his way out of a tight spot was clearly constrained. The looming fiscal crisis cast doubt on his mastery of the economy, previously his greatest strength.

On the evening of June 10th, a third earthquake rumbled the political landscape. After hours of deliberation, representatives of the major parties of the notoriously fractured French left emerged from the Green Party’s headquarters, in the Tenth Arrondissement, and announced to a vigil-keeping crowd that they had reached a surprise accord. In tribute to the antifascist Front Populaire of 1936, they were forming a coalition, to be called the Nouveau Front Populaire. Its mission was “to avoid the trap that has been set for us”—the forced choice between technocracy and demagoguery, rightish and righter, Macron and Le Pen.

Taken together, the six main left-wing parties had garnered about thirty per cent of the vote in the European Parliamentary elections. But few people—including, putatively, Macron—had guessed that they would succeed in putting aside their stark differences. For some mainstream leftists, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, the leader of the hard-left party La France Insoumise, posed a particular obstacle. A former teacher and a Trotskyist, Mélenchon is known

for marrying erudition to aggression in fiery orations against finance, NATO, and American imperialism, while admiring Fidel Castro and Hugo Chávez. He is one of few high-profile French politicians to treat French Muslims as a desired constituency, not as a problem to be solved. One poll suggests that sixty-nine per cent of Muslim voters supported his 2022 Presidential bid. Mélenchon's detractors accuse him of antisemitism, which he has denied, and point to a worryingly autocratic tendency. In 2018, when police showed up to search his party's headquarters on funding matters, Mélenchon yelled into an officer's face, "*La République, c'est moi!*" (He was convicted on charges of "intimidation and rebellion.")

In 2023, a less ambitious leftist alliance exploded over Mélenchon's refusal, after October 7th, to denounce Hamas's acts as terrorism. (His party has called October 7th "an armed offensive by Palestinian forces" and prefers the designation "war crimes.") Yet now, in the span of twenty-four hours, every significant voting bloc to the left of Macron had joined together. "It was a miracle, even though I prefer not to use religious language," Tondelier, from the Green Party, told me, leaning back in a chair in her office at the party's headquarters. Over the summer, Tondelier emerged as one of the N.F.P.'s stars—a hard-core tactician who wasn't afraid to cry a few hot tears in public, or to wear a bright-green jacket everywhere if it helped get her point across. "We're the anti-Macron and the anti-R.N.," she told me.

Within days, the alliance settled on a single candidate for almost all of the country's nearly six hundred legislative districts and hammered out a common platform, calling for a minimum-wage hike, a price freeze on energy bills, and the reinstatement of wealth taxes that Macron had cancelled. The former President François Hollande, a Socialist who had long refused to associate with Mélenchon, emerged from political retirement to offer his benediction. Then, as *Le Monde* noted, he added "the final brick" to the coalition, announcing that he would return to public life, running in his home district as an N.F.P. candidate. The situation was "more serious than it has ever been," Hollande told reporters. "Never has the extreme right been so close to power."

Facing an unexpected threat from the left, Macron denounced the coalition as an “extreme” movement, to be ostracized and rebuffed in equal measure to the R.N. At Second World War commemorations in Brittany, Macron called the N.F.P. “totally immigrationist,” parroting a phrase used by the far right. He accused the coalition of being obsessed with identity politics, and said that it would encourage “grotesque things like going to change your sex at city hall.”

The first round of voting took place on June 30th. Turnout was enormous, the highest in more than thirty years. The R.N. emerged in first place, but another round of voting was still to come the following week, and in many districts three or four candidates qualified. Immediately, the N.F.P., joined by Macron and most of the center right, called for the deployment of a *front républicain*—a sort of electoral firewall constructed by parties all along the spectrum to retract vote-splitting candidates and encourage people who would have voted for them to throw support to anyone but the R.N.

On Election Night, the R.N. invited supporters to a swank venue in the Bois de Vincennes. They were expecting a victory party. For months, Bardella and his colleagues had been putting together a “Matignon plan” (referring to the Prime Minister’s residence), and there was hope that his group might even secure an absolute majority, giving the R.N. control of the Assemblée Nationale. The faithful gathered in cocktail attire, continually refreshing Swiss and Belgian Web sites, which aren’t subject to a rule that restricts French outlets from reporting on election results until 8 P.M. But when the hour arrived, *Le Monde* reported, “there was a great silence in the ranks.” And then disbelief made itself heard: “The French are dumbasses!” “Fuck, we’re *third*.”

Over at République, the square where the leftist coalition had gathered, a cheer went up. Not only had the *front républicain* held but the N.F.P.—the miracle alliance, the improbable and not entirely wanted child of electoral necessity—had finished in first place. Supporters scaled the base of a statue representing Marianne, the personification of the French Republic, and hung an enormous French flag bearing the words “*LA FRANCE EST TISSU DE MIGRATIONS.*” The slogan meant “France is woven from migrations,” but it played on the phrase *issu de l’immigration*, a way of saying that a

person or his parents were born abroad. The words affirmed the reality of French diversity, rebuking the R.N.’s racism and xenophobia. “Everyone hates *fachos!*” the crowd chanted. “First generation, second generation, third generation—who cares! We’re *chez nous!*”

It was a rapturous evening for the left, yet voters hadn’t handed the coalition a clean victory. The N.F.P. had won the most seats, but the new legislature was still almost evenly divided between the N.F.P., Macron’s group, and the R.N., leaving no faction with a majority. It was a three-way parliamentary stalemate. Instead of providing an indispensable clarification, the election had utterly muddied the situation.

The constitution gives the President the right to name the Prime Minister, but it specifies no criteria or timetable. Custom dictated that Macron nominate someone from the majority party, but, for the first time in the history of the Fifth Republic, there wasn’t one. The only thing constraining Macron, really, was what he could get away with. It was likely that, in nineteen days, the Paris Olympics would begin with no one at the wheel of the government. Would there be a sports minister? Or, for that matter, anyone with the power to appoint one?

In the absence of clear guidelines, Mélenchon rushed to emphasize the importance of the N.F.P.’s first-place finish. “The President must invite the Nouveau Front Populaire to govern,” he proclaimed, standing behind a lectern at his party’s headquarters, in his signature carmine tie. His deputies, arrayed behind him, looked as though they could barely contain their glee as he thundered, “The Nouveau Front Populaire will implement its program, nothing but its program, and *all* of its program!”

Instead of choosing a Prime Minister quickly, Macron dragged the process out through the summer, announcing a political “*trêve*”—a truce or rest period—to last through the Olympics. It was a revelation to learn that someone could press Pause on politics—the jockeying and squabbling and speculating—and it would just go away, at least for nineteen days. There was hardly a public mention of the crisis, save for a sign that a pair of fans held up at the men’s two-hundred-metre breaststroke final, paying tribute to the star swimmer Léon Marchand and to the rugby player Antoine Dupont, sometimes called Toto: “LÉON, PRESIDENT. TOTO, PRIME MINISTER.”



"I agree with Saskia—it was, over all, a somewhat predictable picaresque, but the part with the really big bus was good."

Cartoon by Emily Bernstein

The Olympics ended on August 11th, with Macron still no closer to resolving the dilemma of who would lead the government. At one point, Attal, the lame-duck Prime Minister, was spotted playing with a lightsabre in Matignon’s gardens. Some observers suspected that Macron was trying to run out the clock, hoping that the N.F.P. would fall apart. The coalition had first put forth Lucie Castets in late July, just an hour before Macron was scheduled to give a prime-time television interview. Asked whether he would appoint her, he brushed the possibility aside, saying that what mattered wasn’t a particular name but, rather, who could muster a working majority to pass legislation. N.F.P. leaders were livid—they had finished first, they had found a candidate, and now Macron was shooting her down on live TV without so much as a discussion. Someone Castets knew offered her a back channel to communicate with the President, but she declined.

“We took him by surprise,” she recalled. “I think he was embarrassed. Let him deal with it, right?”

When I met Castets, on a sunny terrace at a local café, she drank an espresso and reflected on her supposedly Warholian summer. It had been more of a grind than people imagined: with no formal staff or funding, she shouldered media requests and policy research largely alone, and the selection process dragged on so long that she was forced to resign from her job at city hall. The experience reminded her less of the Factory than of giving birth. “I just dissociated,” she said.

Within Macron's camp, some agreed that he should appoint Castets out of respect for the election result, even though the numbers showed that the opposing parties could, and probably would, find the votes to oust her immediately. "It's like a series," Roland Lescure told me. "If you don't have Season 1, you can't have Season 2." Another point of view held that Macron should skip straight to a viable government that might be hospitable to preserving his most cherished policies. At the end of August, Macron invited Castets to the Élysée. She arrived in black pants and boots, flanked by a dozen of her partners from the coalition. By all accounts, the ninety-minute meeting went smoothly and Castets confidently passed what the media called her "grand oral exam," answering the President's questions on everything from the budget to the French territory of New Caledonia.

Centrists accused the left of refusing to compromise. Castets told me that her most profound disagreement with Macron was about disagreement itself. "It doesn't hold up for long to pretend that the right and left can be similar and that there is no conflict or interests in politics," she said. "It's all *about* conflict and interests." Macron's attempt to create a political synthesis, she continued, had accomplished the inverse of what he aspired to. His legacy, culminating in the dissolution, would be the repolarization of the electorate. She said, "I think he's in a very bad position, and he did exactly what he wanted to avoid."

Days later, Macron announced that, seeking "institutional stability," he was eliminating Castets from the running. *Le Gorafi*, the French equivalent of *The Onion*, captured the brutal anticlimax to the left's remarkable run with the headline "Emmanuel Macron Asks Lucie Castets, Leaving the Élysée, to Take Out the Trash." As ever, personal explanations competed with political ones. Macronologists saw a control freak contending poorly with the attrition of his authority—"a shrunken, confused power, who still dreams of himself as a Machiavelli," as *Le Figaro* put it. People interested in policy pointed out that Macron was hellbent on protecting the reforms that had taken him years to pass—particularly the retirement overhaul—and that, even if an N.F.P. government was doomed to fall, Castets could have used executive orders to obstruct the reforms within weeks.

Whatever Macron's rationale, the left argued, the decision amounted to a subversion of democracy. "I think that the President has decided to declare war," Fabien Roussel, the head of the Communist Party, proclaimed. Sarah Bennani, a nineteen-year-old student who had found time between schoolwork and a nannying job to get out the vote in working-class areas like Seine-Saint-Denis, where the abstention rate had previously reached almost seventy per cent, told me that she felt "sad talking about what finally happened," and even conflicted about having urged her friends and neighbors to vote. "Those arguments aren't valid anymore," she said. "The government betrayed the people who we encouraged to give politics a chance."

Macron continued to float names. So did the media. They were all over the place, in terms of both profile and ideology: younger, older, inexperienced, experienced, rural, urban, left, right, completely out of left field. The longer he procrastinated, the less time whomever he selected would have to try to put together a budget and a working majority to push it through. Talking with voters, I heard many versions of the same complaint: He gave us twenty-one days to keep the fascists out of power, but allows himself the luxury of eight weeks of deliberation.

Finally, on September 5th, Macron announced that he had come to a decision: the new Prime Minister would be Michel Barnier, a septuagenarian political hand who had previously served as minister of the environment (1993-95), minister of European affairs (1995-97), minister of foreign affairs (2004-05), and minister of agriculture and fisheries (2007-09) before acting as the European Union's chief Brexit negotiator (2016-21). Barnier hailed from the traditional right and called himself a "social Gaullist." Statuesque and snowy-haired, he was best known to many French people as the co-president of the Albertville Olympics, which took place in 1992 in his home region of Savoie. Despite a late-career anti-immigrant turn, he was a reasonably consensual figure, with a kitsch factor that worked in his favor. It was kind of like bringing back Bob Dole.

Yet, seen from a certain angle, Barnier's appointment was a provocation. His center-right party had finished fourth in the snap election, garnering a mere five per cent of the vote. Worse still, his appointment required the

blessing of Marine Le Pen—who signalled that she wouldn’t immediately vote to oust Barnier—and the stability of his government would depend on the tacit approval of her deputies, who crowed that Barnier would have to work under their “surveillance.” Dominique de Villepin marvelled, “It proves the Gospels right—the first will be the last, and the last will be the first.” Effectively, French voters had narrowly chosen the left-wing N.F.P. only to get a right-wing government, serving at the pleasure of Le Pen.

In October, I flew to Nice to attend an R.N. rally. I started the day at the market, where a man handed me a flyer encouraging me to say “no to the explosion of real-estate taxes.” I bought a slice of *pissaladière* and a chard frittata and ate them on an embankment facing the Mediterranean Sea, then took the tram to the Palais Nikaïa, an exurban theatre where the R.N.’s stars, including Le Pen and Bardella, were set to appear for their first big event since the snap election. When I got there, another man handed me another flyer. It featured a lot of blue, white, and red and an angry-looking eagle hovering over a Marianne. “We are the best of the youth because we defend our *COUNTRY*, our frontiers, and our *PEOPLE* in the face of the system changes and the demography that lie in wait for them,” it read.

The theatre would soon be hosting a Beatles tribute band and a Celtic Legends dance performance. Inside, some five thousand people were settling into their seats as Charles Aznavour’s “Eemmenez-moi” played on the sound system. In the row in front of me, three generations of one family—grandmother, daughter, grandson—nudged one another in excitement as a blockbuster-style trailer filled the screen.

Then a handful of deputies took the stage for panel discussions. The conversations weren’t the barn burners one might have expected. They were heavy on acronyms, and on shopkeeperish concerns of neighborhood safety and personal finance. Anyone who had been following Le Pen, however, would know that this sandpapered discourse was the outcome of a decade’s work of *dédiabolisation*, or “undemonizing” the party—a campaign that had resulted in the R.N.’s legislative presence growing from eight deputies to a hundred and twenty-six in just seven years. Given these electoral successes and the unprecedented defection of mainstream politicians to the party, the *dédiabolisation* phase was effectively over. Now it was all about

désenclavement, or opening the party up to a wider audience. The journalist Tristan Berteloot writes in his new book, “La Machine à Gagner” (“The Winning Machine”), that the R.N. quietly maintains links with neo-Fascist and white-supremacist movements, but that recently it has been far more disciplined publicly as it tries “to break the ‘glass ceiling’ that, according to it, has prevented it from gaining power.” (The R.N. denied these claims through a spokesperson.)

R.N. members now undergo media training. But, in the tumult of the snap election, dubious and outright vile comments came pouring forth. “I have a Jew as an ophthalmologist and a Muslim as a dentist,” one R.N. candidate asserted, by way of refuting accusations of racism. Others called immigrants “pieces of shit” and said French people of North African descent “didn’t belong in high office,” railed against vaccines, and questioned the moon landing. Confronted in an interview, Bardella acknowledged that there were four or five “problematic” candidates, but minimized them as “casting errors,” the inevitable by-products of a rushed nomination process.

It was harder to minimize the damage inflicted by the party’s proposal to bar French citizens who hold other nationalities from certain public jobs. The party had floated the idea in the legislature early in the year, but by the summer it was obvious that the plan was widely unpopular. Le Pen then claimed that binational employment was “a completely microscopic subject” that would involve only about thirty jobs of high sensitivity, even though, in 2011, she’d advocated for doing away with dual nationality altogether. “We are Algerian or we are French,” she once declared.

Despite obvious commonalities with the U.S. Republican Party, it’s not entirely clear what stance the R.N., should it come to power, would take toward a second Trump Presidency. Le Pen—a cat lady, though not childless—holds a breeder’s diploma and lives with six feline companions: Jazz, Paloma, Shadé, Shalimar, Oural, and Piccolina. She has defended reproductive rights, writing that although she would like to reduce abortions, she finds it “ineffective and cruel to do so by coercive measures,” particularly when poor women are most likely to suffer. In 2016, she welcomed Trump’s election fulsomely, but last month she offered only a

bland tweet, and told a reporter, “At a moment when the United States is clearly going to defend its interests in an even more vigorous manner, Europe is going to have to wake up.” Drolet, the professor of politics and international relations, told me, “The French right is obviously pleased that you now have a much less Atlanticist America. Trump’s election also leaves more room for national autonomy and can be seen by the right as an opportunity for Europe to assert itself.” The belief that Le Pen and Trump hold most fervently in common is actually the one that is likeliest to keep them from ever becoming too cozy: nationalism is a zero-sum project.

At the rally, Le Pen spoke before Bardella. The fact that she was essentially serving as his opening act seemed to reflect an evolving power dynamic. Le Pen delivered a searing account of the political drama that had consumed the country since June 9th. “I’m not going to go back into the delays and the tricks of these past few months,” she said, “but I believe that the French people will remember with acuity the manner in which the political class twisted their arms during the legislative elections and has sought to invisibilize them ever since.” She paused a moment, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “The aspirations of the French have been *ghostées*

Then Bardella descended from the heavens—or such was the implication, as he emerged from the upper reaches of the auditorium and floated down through the rows, flanked by bodyguards, while cheering fans waved flags and pawed at his clothes. As he strode onto the stage, resplendent in navy tailoring, I thought of him not as a well-scrubbed son-in-law but as a kind of launderer, spot-cleaning stains of racism and nepotism so that the R.N. wouldn’t have to get new clothes.

Bardella said that he was there to speak to “all those whose heart bleeds when they look at the state of France.”

“The left to the guillotine!” someone in the audience yelled.



Cartoon by Juan Astasio

The R.N., one former high-level civil servant told me, is “at a very different and quite difficult point in its life cycle. It has to remain the party of angry people while demonstrating that it can be relied upon to govern.” Macron’s position as the party’s primary villain, it seemed, was receding along with his share of votes. Bardella spent far more time talking about the danger of Mélenchon’s “regressive left,” supposedly stuffed with asinine diversity hires and terrorism apologists swaddled in Palestinian flags.

“Dirty cunt!” the grandmother in front of me cried out, slicing a hand through the air.

The atmosphere was growing febrile. I had the weird sensation that I’d seen someone with a Confederate flag, and, indeed, it later turned out that a man had shown up in a jacket decorated with a patch featuring the Stars and Bars, posing for a picture with an R.N. deputy. “If it wasn’t for wokeism, nobody would care,” the man said. Bardella wrapped up his speech with a call for “the people” to keep pressing on, promising that “our victory is not cancelled but deferred.”

“We are impatient to govern,” he declared. “The time of power is not far off.”

The first weeks of December were supposed to be a triumph for Macron, a respite from the churning negativity of the political crisis. On the second Sunday of Advent, five years after a fire nearly burned Notre-Dame de Paris

to the ground, the fully renovated cathedral was set to reopen to the public. The restoration was Macron’s personal project; almost as soon as the flames were out, he promised that the cathedral would be rebuilt by 2024. He had fulfilled that vow, and the result was a marvel, a vindication of French aesthetic splendor and technical prowess and even, yes, a certain headstrong style of leadership. Yet, in the first days of December, from the moment that the Monday-morning talk shows kicked off and the legislative session opened, it became clear that this accomplishment was likely to be eclipsed by a rapidly deteriorating situation at the Assemblée Nationale.

The immediate problem was the budget. In the fall, it emerged that the national deficit was even bigger than anyone had admitted publicly—a gaping hundred and sixty-seven billion euros. Debt-related expenses were estimated to exceed next year’s education budget. Ratings agencies had downgraded France’s credit rating, and, at more than six per cent of the G.D.P., the deficit considerably exceeded the European Commission’s three-per-cent cap. A government spokesperson admitted in October, “The risk, for France, is to become Greece in 2010.”

The revelations only aggravated the instability of the Barnier government, built on the wobbliest base of any since the start of the Fifth Republic. The N.F.P. had already called for a no-confidence vote in early October, in protest of Barnier’s appointment. I sat down with Manuel Bompard, a deputy and the national coördinator of Mélenchon’s party, in his spartan office just before the vote. Even though the motion was almost certain to fail, and eventually did, Bompard saw it as a necessary riposte to the “democratic trauma” that he believed Macron had inflicted on the country. “The idea is not to do things only when we are sure that they will work, that they will succeed, but also to fight battles even when we’re not leading, or that we can’t win,” Bompard told me.

Because the left-wing coalition had declared itself unwilling to work with Barnier’s government from the beginning, and the centrist bloc didn’t have the numbers to go it alone, Barnier needed the support of the R.N. to pass a budget bill, which he had to do before the end of the year. He made significant concessions to the R.N., agreeing not to raise taxes on electricity, and to remove a measure that would have reduced insurance coverage for

some medications. His gestures, however conciliatory, were not enough to satisfy Le Pen. Without sufficient support, on December 2nd, Barnier resorted to a maneuver known as the 49.3, by which a Prime Minister can push a bill through without a vote. “The French have had enough of being fleeced and mistreated,” Le Pen told reporters, outside the legislative chamber. “Maybe some thought that with Michel Barnier things would change—well, it’s even worse than it was.” Her party would join the N.F.P. in voting to oust his government.

It behooved Le Pen to keep public attention focussed on the budget fight: she and twenty-four co-defendants are being tried in a Paris criminal court, accused of using the E.U. as a piggy bank for the party and funnelling funds to apparatchiks. (The defendants have denied all allegations, and some of Le Pen’s supporters have complained that she is being targeted by “a government of judges.”) In mid-November, prosecutors announced that they were seeking heavy penalties, including a two-year prison sentence for Le Pen and a ban on running for public office for five years, which would make her ineligible for the 2027 Presidential election.

After Le Pen’s announcement, time seemed to accelerate. By Wednesday, just forty-eight hours later, Barnier was up for a no-confidence vote. As the debate opened, the Assemblée was rowdy and restless, crackling with the heady feeling of history being made. The left spoke first, denouncing the government’s betrayal, its rebuff of the N.F.P.’s priorities, and its pandering to Le Pen. Then Le Pen got up, intense as ever, dismissing Barnier as an “optical illusion” and charging his group with displaying “intransigence, sectarianism, and dogmatism.” An impassioned last-minute plea by Attal to the conscience and sense of responsibility of the deputies—“It’s not too late!” he implored—did nothing to forestall Barnier’s fate. Hours later, it was official: three hundred and thirty-one deputies had voted to support the motion, toppling the government for the first time since 1962 and rendering Barnier the shortest-lived Prime Minister in the Fifth Republic’s history.

“It’s a huge waste,” the centrist deputy Mathieu Lefèvre told me. Barnier “tried to find the compromises necessary to construct a budget despite a very restricted timetable. Unfortunately, he had to face an alliance of opposites who are harmful to our country and its stability.” It remains to be

seen whether France will descend, as some experts have predicted, into a deeper chaos of financial turbulence and social unrest. The Constitution contains provisions that prevent a total government shutdown in the absence of a budget, permitting the country to carry out basic functions such as collecting taxes and paying civil servants. But French people are likely to face uncertainty about pension payments and tax rates, as well as jittery financial markets. Farmers from the Burgundy area have already announced that they will pay “a visit” to deputies who voted to bring down the government and, in doing so, deprived them of eagerly awaited measures to ease their financial plight. Still, for some deputies, the prospect of starting over is cause for optimism. “I voted without hesitation, but with a certain gravity,” Arthur Delaporte, a Socialist deputy, told me. “It’s not an anodyne gesture, to topple a government. But it’s meant to enable the return of a regime that functions differently.”

Macron will have to appoint a new Prime Minister—once again, of his own choosing. This time, he says, he will do it within days. If another government falls, however, calls for his resignation are likely to grow deafening, and he may have a difficult time justifying his viability as the head of an executive branch that changes Prime Ministers more often than many people see their hairdressers. In a recent poll, sixty-four per cent of French people indicated that they want Macron to resign, but he says unequivocally that he will finish out his term, which ends in 2027.

Le Pen professes, for now, to be uninterested in forcing Macron out, but an early election could be advantageous, given her legal problems. Already her party has begun to deploy what one R.N. deputy called “the slow poison” of suggestion, letting the idea seep into the public consciousness that Macron should step down. Mélenchon, who makes no secret of his desire to depose Macron (“Even with a Barnier every three months, Macron won’t last three years,” he quipped soon after the vote), is focussed on finally getting a left-wing Prime Minister. Only days ago, he vowed that the N.F.P. would insist that Macron appoint the candidate of its choice—Lucie Castets. But in France at the moment, today’s ultimatum is tomorrow’s obsolescence. On Friday, the Socialists declared that they were ready to negotiate with Macron’s group and the center right, throwing the fate of the N.F.P. into question and rejiggering the political landscape once again. ♦



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The Confident Anxiety of Rashid Johnson

Johnson, who is preparing for a major mid-career show at the Guggenheim, explores depths of masculine vulnerability that few of his contemporaries have touched.

By [Calvin Tomkins](#)

December 9, 2024



“I want to pivot and move and work on multiple things at once, and with that comes a lot of freedom,” Johnson says. Photograph by Dana Scruggs for The New Yorker

Conceptual art has been with us for more than fifty years, and it still defines the work of a great many contemporary artists. But what is it? The term “concept art” was first used in 1963 by the philosopher Henry Flynt; it

quickly morphed into “conceptual art” and was applied to art work in which the idea behind it is as or more important than the work itself. An early example was Joseph Kosuth’s “One and Three Chairs,” which consisted of a straight-backed chair, a photograph of that chair, and a mounted dictionary definition of the word “chair.” The idea was clear enough, and conceptual artists have been struggling ever since to make works that are not as boring as this one. Those who succeed have usually been influenced by Marcel Duchamp, the intellectual father of Conceptualism. Duchamp wanted, as he said, to “put art back in the service of the mind.” Leonardo da Vinci described art as a *cosa mentale*, and that’s what it had been, according to Duchamp, until the nineteenth century, when Gustave Courbet and the Impressionists turned it into something that was purely “retinal,” directed to the eye alone. Rather than attack the retinal consensus, Duchamp, who never bored anyone, undermined it with his “readymades,” common objects (a bicycle wheel, a snow shovel, a bottle-drying rack) transformed into art by the choice of an artist. The readymades defied any attempt to define art, and this turned out to be what contemporary artists needed most—complete freedom to “make it new.” Art became much easier for mediocre artists and a lot harder for good ones. Duchamp spent the last twenty years of his life working in secret on a three-dimensional tableau vivant of a naked, headless female body in a realistic landscape, a strangely disturbing image that is both a summary of his meta-retinal art and a total departure from it.

“I don’t think there’s an artist working today whose head Duchamp hasn’t come into,” Rashid Johnson, an artist in the midst of a groundbreaking career, told me in the spring. “The readymade is part of our critical discourse. When you question art, when you ask the sort of questions that he was able to point us toward, you are forever affected by what he did.”

Johnson, who is forty-seven, grew up in what the curator Naomi Beckwith calls “the first big era of unapologetic Blackness.” His earliest works were made when he was a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Columbia College, in the Chicago suburb of Evanston. Struck by the number of men living on the street in Chicago’s South Side, he would go up to one of them, say what he was doing, ask to take his picture, and offer a few dollars in return. When he had two dozen or so of these images, he took them to the Schneider Gallery in the city and said that he would like to have a show. “I was really

cocky,” he remembered. Martha Schneider, the gallery’s owner, looked at the work—closeup portraits of Black men who had withstood decades of hardship and pain—and immediately scheduled an exhibition, called “Seeing in the Dark.” There were no reviews, but the Art Institute of Chicago bought two of the portraits, and the *Reader*, a popular free newspaper in town, published one of them, titled “Jonathan with Eyes Closed.”

After that, he had three shows at the Monique Meloche Gallery, another Chicago venue, and then, in 2001, the Studio Museum in Harlem put three of his portraits in “Freestyle,” a hugely influential exhibition of work by a new generation of Black artists. Thelma Golden, then the Studio Museum’s chief curator, stirred controversy by describing the “Freestyle” artists as “post-Black,” meaning, as Golden wrote in the show’s catalogue, that these were “artists who were adamant about not being labeled as ‘black’ artists, though their work was steeped, in fact deeply interested, in redefining complex notions of blackness.” (When questioned about the term, Johnson likes to say, “I am currently and presently Black.”) The show included work by Trenton Doyle Hancock, Kojo Griffin, Sanford Biggers, Mark Bradford, Laylah Ali, Julie Mehretu, Camille Norment, and other emerging Black art stars (along with some under-recognized mid-career ones), and it established Johnson as someone to watch. In the years that followed, as Johnson’s work took different forms—videos, sculptures, mosaics, and eventually paintings on canvas—the constant element in all of it was a play of ideas. “I’ve always been more interested in projecting thought into space than in representing the body,” he once said. Using materials and techniques that he invented or rediscovered, he plumbed depths of anxiety and masculine vulnerability that few of his contemporaries had touched, and he did so with full awareness that, in art, ideas went nowhere without compelling visual embodiments that brought them to life.

For several years, he made photographs that he set up and posed for himself—sprawled on top of a cenotaph that marks the grave of Jack Johnson (no relation), the first Black heavyweight boxing champion; standing, frontally nude, in the same position that the artist Barkley L. Hendricks had assumed for “Brilliantly Endowed,” a 1977 self-portrait; sitting for a series of mocking “portraits” as a member of a society he had made up, called “The

New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club.” (One of them reads, “Self-Portrait as the Professor of Astronomy, Miscegenation, and Critical Theory at the New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club Center for Graduate Studies.”) “‘The New Negro’ gave me a chance to view the Black experience from a perspective that was not exclusively tragic,” Johnson told me. Poking fun at the Black experience, his own included, was an effective antidote to self-importance.

In addition to photographs, he made short videos, sometimes with professional dancers, among them “The New Black Yoga,” in 2011. He also made abstract paintings, employing such materials as African black soap mixed with melted wax, which he daubed on ceramic bathroom tiles or on mirrored panels. Some of the panels had shelves, on which he placed books, record albums, jars, ceramic bowls, and other items. For a few years, he produced what he called Cosmic Slops, by pouring the black-soap-and-wax mixture into shallow trays and then carving into the thick soup with a stick as it dried. (He liked the idea of making art by removing something.) Johnson burned, branded, and scarified oak or redwood floorboards, and hung them on walls. He made text paintings, using spray enamel to spell out messages like “Fly Away” and “Run,” and he created abstract sculptures, one of which, “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” from 2008, was eventually acquired by the Whitney Museum.

A major survey of his work—“Rashid Johnson: A Poem for Deep Thinkers”—will open at the Guggenheim Museum this April. Curated by Beckwith, who is now a deputy director and the chief curator at the Guggenheim, it will cover the whole range of his practice, from the homeless-men photographs to largely abstract sculptures and oil-on-canvas paintings. Johnson and Beckwith have much in common. They are about the same age, they grew up in Chicago, and they were raised by academics who were aligned with the Black Power movement. Beckwith described her parents and Johnson’s to me as being “very clear about the fact that when you step out into the world you are not just representing yourself—you are representing your family, your community, and in some ways the Black race.” She went on, “Is it an oversized responsibility? Probably. I think this is a great source of confidence, and also of anxiety.”

In the spring, I went to see Johnson in the Bushwick studio that he had been using for the past two years and was about to leave. He had recently bought a two-story building nearby that formerly housed the Brooklyn branch of the Luhring Augustine gallery and was renovating its large, high-ceilinged rooms to serve his expanding needs. Johnson, who is six feet three and powerfully built, is at ease with himself in a way that puts others at ease. A year or so before, he had cut off his shoulder-length dreadlocks, which had been growing since two young girls braided them on a trip that he made to Senegal when he was nineteen. “Wearing them had felt important, but they’d become, like, a relic of my youth,” he told me. He answered my questions without hesitation, often at length, while chewing a toothpick and occasionally giving his nose a vigorous rubbing. “I don’t self-protect when I open myself up to someone else,” he said. “I try not to because I believe that most people are good.”

The studio was full of new paintings for the Guggenheim exhibition and for a show he was having in October at Hauser & Wirth’s Paris gallery. His work had changed radically in 2020, when, for the first time in his career, he began painting with oil on canvas. Many of the paintings for the Paris show, with semi-abstract patterns, were surprisingly beautiful. There was also a bronze sculpture that resembled a small tree. The new work, he explained, had allowed him to explore “a sense of interior space,” something that he had long been aware of but had never developed. “These are the ‘Seascape’ paintings,” he said, pointing to two canvases on which a simplified, boat-shaped image was repeated again and again. “Some of the motifs have become more gender-specific, with images that are almost breastlike. The boat is also a smile, or an escape vessel, or eyes—it serves many gods.”

The paintings struck me as a long step away from the multidisciplinary works in ceramic, wax, soap, wood, and other materials that he was known for, and a step closer to figurative art, which he had always avoided. “I see myself as a post-medium artist,” he explained. “I don’t have the skills to represent most things well. I used the camera lens when I wanted legibility, but the lens doesn’t capture my need for gesture in the way painting does. Sculpture is a space for play and tactility. I use these methods to serve

different purposes, and some of the results come from my abilities, and some”—he was laughing now—“from my limitations.”



“And my next gift is also a drum solo.”

Cartoon by Maddie Dai

He walked me through rooms where recently finished paintings hung on the walls, and young studio assistants—he has about a dozen of them—waved or stopped him to ask a question. In his new studio, he told me, he plans to eventually set aside several rooms for “my foundation.” One room will have a permanent display of his own work across many decades. Another will be for temporary exhibitions by artists who have been important to him. That an artist in his forties would be thinking about his legacy seemed a bit startling, but Johnson, who sometimes struck me as being egoless, understands his own significance. “I think almost everything I make has some version of failure,” he said, fiercely rubbing his nose. (Johnson’s idea of failure, I came to understand, is not the same as yours or mine; it can apply to something that may be very good over all but has one or two aspects that didn’t quite live up to his expectations.) “There is no purity for me, no absolute success or failure, and no room for the masterpiece,” he added. “When I see artists who have made works that are recognized as masterpieces, I see them having to chase those works for the rest of their careers, and I just don’t want that axe to grind. I would rather be seen as an acceptable failure, as the guy that failed consistently and kept going, kept trying, kept exploring. I want to pivot and move and work on multiple things at once, and with that comes a lot of freedom. I think the whole mystery of making art is about choices that are bold.”

As a young child, Johnson was fascinated by books. There were a lot of them in his mother's library—poetry and fiction and history and criticism—and at first, before he learned to read, he saw them as mysterious objects. His mother, Cheryl Johnson-Odim, was a published poet and a professor of African history at Northwestern University, in Evanston. When Johnson was ten, he became obsessed with a book in his mother's library called "The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual," by the social critic Harold Cruse. "I didn't read it until I was nineteen or twenty," he told me, "but long before that I remember thinking, What is this crisis, and what the hell am I expected to do about it? My mother is an intellectual, and I thought that's what being an adult meant."

Jimmy Johnson, his father, is an original—not an intellectual, but smart, talkative, and happy-go-lucky. Born in a suburb of Memphis, Tennessee, he grew up in Youngstown, Ohio. He enlisted in the Army ("because I had no sense") and served two hitches in Vietnam. He met Cheryl afterward, when they were students at Youngstown State University. After graduating from college in 1972, he married Cheryl; Rashid was born in 1977. The marriage ended in the early eighties. Eventually, following an amicable divorce, Jimmy moved to a house one street away from Cheryl's, and he remained an important presence in Rashid's life. Cheryl earned her Ph.D. while she raised three children. Chaka Patterson, her first, is nine years older than Rashid; a graduate of Amherst College and Harvard Law School, he is now a lawyer at a big Chicago firm. Maya Odim, whose father is a Nigerian American lawyer, is ten years younger. She recently received an M.F.A. in poetry from the Art Institute of Chicago, and she writes and teaches poetry and dance theory at local colleges.

Until high school, Johnson did well academically, and he excelled at sports, especially baseball, where he played shortstop and pitched. "Rashid was always the best player on any team," Patterson told me. He was deeply interested in all kinds of music—particularly hip-hop and experimental jazz. "I was an amateur rapper in school," Johnson said. "I had a keen sense of awareness about the world we were going to inhabit." Midway through high school, he began hanging out with kids who drank, smoked weed, and tagged public spaces with graffiti. "I wanted to make art, but I had no natural talent for drawing," he said. "I liked to draw with my whole arm,

and graffiti gave me access to the spray can and the big marker. I was trying to figure out how to become a creative person, but I was running around skipping classes and tagging stuff and getting arrested.”



A work from Johnson's series “Anxious Men” (2015) which employs ceramic tile, black soap, and wax. Art Work by Rashid Johnson; Photograph by Martin Parsekian / Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

Johnson came close to dropping out; what stopped him was realizing that he would be the first person in three generations of his family not to get a college degree. “I kind of righted the ship, just in time,” he said. He got his high-school diploma and applied to Columbia College in Chicago, which had good art and film programs. Johnson had held a summer job working for a wedding photographer, and this gave him the idea that art photography could be a path for him. Worried that the other art students at Columbia would be way ahead of him, he spent the summer before his freshman year in the Chicago public library, studying the history of photography and, in the process, learning a fair amount about Jackson Pollock, Clyfford Still, Franz Kline, and other vanguard American artists of the nineteen-fifties.

“As a result, when I got to college I knew a lot about picture-making, but I didn’t know what being an artist was,” he said.

McArthur Binion, an artist who taught studio art at Columbia College, filled him in on that score. “He was the first person to explain to me that there was an art world, with galleries and museums and exhibitions,” Johnson said. “I took every course I could with McArthur, but he told me not to come to class. ‘You know what you’re doing,’ he’d say. ‘Just make stuff, and we can meet later and talk.’ And so I started making photographs and having exhibitions when I was nineteen.” Johnson had persuaded his mother to buy him a Hasselblad reflex camera before he started college, but he rarely used it. When he began taking his pictures of homeless Black men on Chicago’s South Side, the portraits were made with a rented, eight-by-ten-inch Deardorff view camera whose high-resolution lens captures far more detail than the Hasselblad does. Working in the college darkroom, Johnson printed some of them using a nineteenth-century process known as Van Dyke brown, which requires coating the negative with photosensitive chemicals and exposing it to ultraviolet light. This method gave the photographs a warm, antique gloss that made them look more like gouaches. These were the ones Thelma Golden showed in “Freestyle.”

“Their absolute stillness gave them a sense of the past,” Golden remembered. “They also seemed to be about history and to offer a huge amount of knowledge. But I saw something in them that would continue in Rashid’s work—that he was exploring ideas on liberation and freedom.”

When “Freestyle” opened, in 2001, Johnson was twenty-two; he had graduated from college two years earlier. Several gallery owners offered to represent him, but he turned them down. Seeing the work of other artists in the show made him realize how much he still had to learn. “I just was not ready,” he said. For the next two years, living in Chicago and supporting himself with odd jobs and the occasional sale of a photograph, he experimented with different materials and techniques, trying to figure out what kind of artist he could become. His lack of drawing skill, combined with his knowledge of what had been achieved in five hundred years of Western painting, seemed to rule out any attempt to paint on canvas in a traditional sense. Inspired, like many Black artists, by the radical innovations of David Hammons, he made paintings by sprinkling rice,

beans, and chicken bones on light-sensitive paper, spraying paint over them, and, when the paint dried, removing the beans and bones. “For a couple of years, I just worked on my own,” he said, “and let all the things I was doing bleed together. But something was missing. I had done a lot of reading in critical theory and philosophy, but, to be honest, I needed someone to talk to about it.” In 2002, he married a writer who was just out of graduate school and looking for a teaching job. “She was a year or so older than me,” he said. “I’d always dated slightly older women, interestingly. She left me after two years, thank God. I’d never felt that kind of rejection, but I learned a lot from the experience.”



“I know it’s an overpriced pile of bricks, but we’d still like you to defend it when we’re out.”
Cartoon by Frank Cotham

In 2003, he enrolled in the M.F.A. photography program at the Art Institute of Chicago. “It’s a great school,” he said. “It had a lot of the things I was interested in, such as an emphasis on critical theory.” In his first weeks there, he met Sheree Hovsepian, an Iranian-born woman who had recently graduated from the same program, at a bar in the city. “She was with a guy I had known in high school, and he introduced us,” Johnson told me. The next day, she sent an e-mail to his school account, but he didn’t see it. “At that time, I didn’t e-mail,” he told me. “I ran into her a few days later, though, and we hung out, and we’ve been hanging out for the last twenty years.”

On their first date, she asked him how old he was, and he astonished her by saying that he was twenty-six. (Hovsepian was twenty-nine.) “I really thought he was five or six years older than me,” she said. “I don’t know if

‘mature’ is the right word, but he had a way about him that didn’t seem like a twenty-six-year-old. He was just so easy to talk with, so on the ball and in charge and charismatic and fun.”

In 1976, when Hovsepian was two, she had moved from Isfahan, Iran, to Minneapolis with her parents and her younger sister. Her parents divorced two years after that, and she and her sister were raised in Toledo, Ohio, where their mother was studying at a medical college. (A few years later, her mother married Jerier Hovsepian, a nurse of Armenian descent.) “I grew up with people who were not like me, and art—which I was naturally good at—was often a refuge,” Hovsepian told me. She majored in fine arts and art history at the University of Toledo before getting her M.F.A. Her work—photo-based images of the human body combined with abstract forms—has been widely exhibited, and is in the permanent collections of the Art Institute of Chicago, the Guggenheim, and the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Johnson dropped out of the Institute in his second year. He’d gone to Italy for the opening of a show of his work in Naples and decided that it was time to start building his career. He moved to New York in 2005; Hovsepian joined him there a year later. They married in 2010. “I’m not good at life,” Johnson told me. “I mean, at things like mailing letters, paying bills, or paying off school loans.” Hovsepian took care of those things for him, quietly and without complaint. They have been actively supportive of each other’s work. She edited his early videos, and snapped the shutter for most of the photographs that he set up and posed for. He helped her navigate the art market and went to Venice when she had work in the 2022 Biennale.

This past June, Johnson celebrated Hovsepian’s fiftieth birthday with a surprise party for a hundred and eighty friends and relatives at the Pool, a Manhattan restaurant in the space that used to be the pool room of the Four Seasons. (He has a small share in it.) Johnson, who prepared for the event by taking private voice lessons for several weeks, welcomed the guests by warbling “Moody’s Mood for Love,” by the jazz singer Eddie Jefferson. He strolled around the room, holding the microphone like a seasoned lounge singer. My wife and I were there, and when the cheering and clapping subsided he pointed to us in the audience. “Those two ask me a lot of questions, one of which is why am I so self-confident,” he said. “I’m not,

really, but I've surrounded myself with so many amazing, beautiful, thoughtful, intelligent, courageous people, and I believe in them, and most of all I believe in my wife, Sheree. She convinced me that I could do anything."

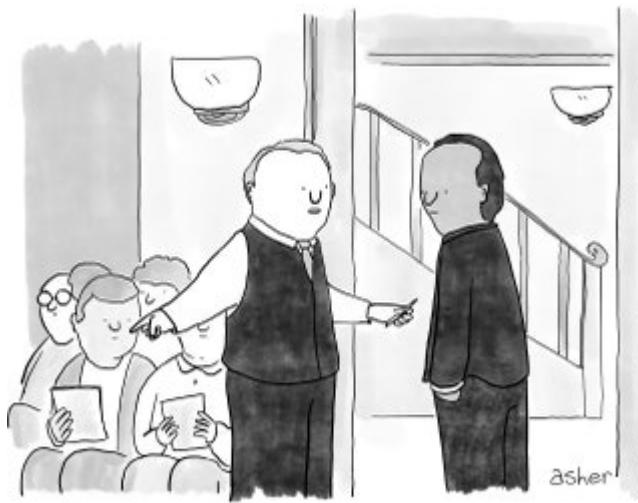
In an era when contemporary art has become an asset class, Rashid Johnson's level of success is impressive, and apparently rock solid. A recent decline in auction prices for some artists has not affected him. His paintings bring from five hundred thousand to more than a million dollars on the primary market, and in 2022 one of the white "Surrender Paintings" that he had introduced earlier that year went for three million at auction. He, Hovsepian, and Julius, their thirteen-year-old son, live in a town house in Gramercy Park; not long ago, they bought a palatial summer house in East Hampton and a vacation place on Minorca, in the Balearic Islands. All this real estate allows Johnson, who calls himself a "homebody," to spend a lot of his time at home.

For the first decade of Johnson's career, there was no indication that anything like this would happen. "Rashid was famous long before he was rich," Patterson, his half brother, told me. When Johnson and Hovsepian moved to New York, they lived in a two-room apartment on the Lower East Side. There was no closet in their tiny bedroom, so they hung their clothes on a rod over the bed. Johnson worked in a roach-infested basement studio in Chinatown. Their only regular income came from Hovsepian's job as a bartender at the Good World Bar and Grill, an artists' hangout on Orchard Street. Both of them taught at the Pratt Institute (sporadically, in Johnson's case), and he continued to find temporary jobs that helped pay the rent. His studio was under a Greek restaurant that featured belly dancers, and for a reduction in the studio rent he let the dancers change clothes there.

Alex Ernst met Johnson in 2007, when she was a twenty-year-old art student at Pratt. After taking a photography class of his, she asked whether she could intern with him, and Johnson, who had no regular studio help at the time and was preparing for his first solo show in New York, at the Nicole Klagsbrun gallery, looked at her portfolio and said yes. They bonded immediately. "We spent hours talking, and not just about art," Ernst said. "When I was starting to intern for him, I made a giant mistake. He asked me

to load the eight-by-ten film slides for his camera—something I had done many times—and I loaded them all backward. I didn’t find out until I was in the darkroom, and he was so calm about it. He taught me how to fix the problem myself. I got a master’s degree in psychology while I was working for Rashid, but in the end I was so engaged and so happy working there that I wanted to stay.” She now runs his studio and is his business partner and principal confidante.

Johnson’s Klagsbrun show in 2008 was a turning point. The fourteen works on view included the sculpture “Black Steel in the Hour of Chaos,” done earlier that year, two of the “New Negro” photos, a black-soap-and-wax shelf piece, and six of the Cosmic Slops. Only two photographs had been sold during the exhibition’s four-week run, until, in the final days, the collectors Mera Rubell, her husband, Don, and their son, Jason, came in and bought four pieces. Mera and Don had built a contemporary-art collection by buying work from future stars—Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring, Damien Hirst, Kara Walker, Charles Ray, and others—early in their careers. They had not seen Johnson’s work before, and, as Mera said to me, “We were astonished that so many things were not sold.” The Rubells were putting together an exhibition in Miami of Black artists whose work they owned. Johnson became the thirtieth, and his photograph “The New Negro Escapist Social and Athletic Club (Thurgood)” is on the cover of “30 Americans,” the show’s hardcover catalogue. Until then, Johnson told me, selling a work for a modest sum was a major event—it meant that he could pay his rent that month. “And suddenly I had a check from Klagsbrun for about twenty-five thousand dollars, which was a fortune to me,” he said. “We moved into a slightly larger apartment in the same building, with a little back yard. From that point, I started to have more resources, but I never felt more wealthy than I did with that twenty-five thousand dollars.”



"Your seat is whichever one is closest to the guy who keeps sneezing."
Cartoon by Asher Perlman

Johnson's art was finding new buyers. In 2011, he and Hovsepian bought a house near the ocean in Bellport, on Long Island. They had been married there the year before, at the home of his uncle, an investment banker, who urged them to buy a house nearby, and to get professional financial advice. Soon after that, Vito Schnabel, an engaging young art dealer and the son of the artist Julian Schnabel, introduced them to the basketball superstar LeBron James and his business partner, Maverick Carter, both of whom had recently started collecting Johnson's work. Carter arranged for his friend Paul Wachter to become the couple's financial adviser. "To make that kind of money was intimidating," Johnson told me, "and even more intimidating was the success." Becoming well known brought a new form of anxiety: he worried that success would interfere with his freedom to do what he wanted.

Johnson had a drinking problem, although for years hardly anyone thought that it was a problem. He never slurred words, or fell down, or failed to function at his usual high level. "We would all hang out in bars after work and drink Jack Daniel's, which was sort of synonymous with Rashid," said Rob Davis, an artist and an old friend who had become, with Alex Ernst, one of Johnson's two main assistants. He added that Johnson eventually switched to tequila and red wine. "I drank often, consistently, and every day," Johnson said. The drinking had started when he was fifteen, cutting classes to tag walls and trains with spray paint. "By the time I got to college, I was a veteran drinker and drug taker, cocaine mostly," he said. It

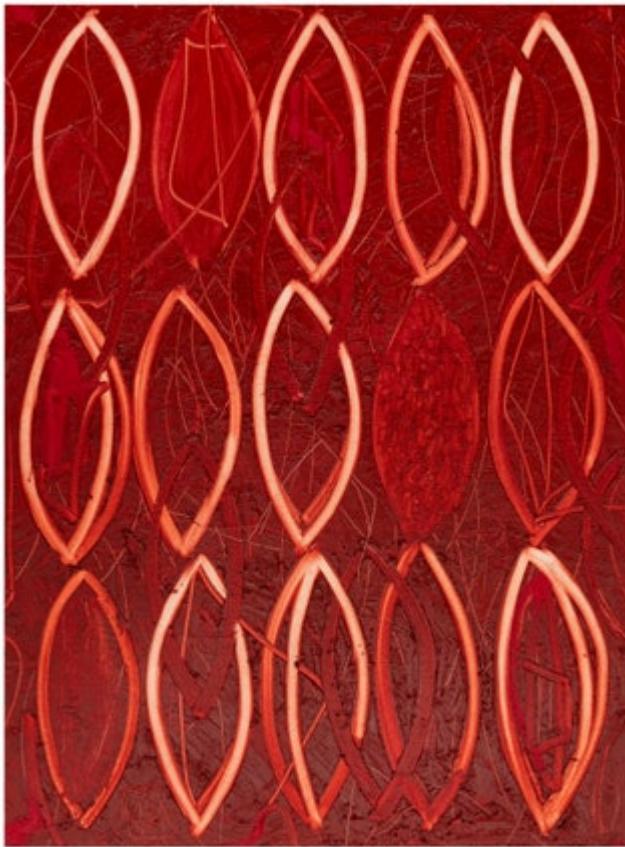
became harder and harder for him to pretend that this was not a big deal. The drinking increased, as it usually does. “It had started to take a toll on him physically. He was feeling sick a lot,” Ernst said. Hovsepian told him that the drinking had to stop, and Johnson kept saying he was going to stop, but nothing changed until Julius was born, in 2011. Johnson wanted desperately to be a good father, and he came to realize that unless he quit drinking he would lose any hope of that, and everything else he had built his life around. He went into rehab for several weeks in 2012, at the Canyon treatment center, in Malibu, where he was introduced to Alcoholics Anonymous. After two months of sobriety, he started drinking again, with predictable results. But, this time, he didn’t need rehab. He made a full commitment to A.A., and he has been sober ever since. He has also helped persuade countless others to make the same commitment.

Joel Mesler, an artist and art dealer who idolized Johnson when they were drinking buddies on the Lower East Side, was, as he put it, “kind of scared” to hear his friend say that he needed help to get sober, that he couldn’t have done it on his own. “I always thought he could do anything,” Mesler told me. Mesler kept on drinking, and getting sicker, until a year later, when he was hired as a visiting artist in the Hunter College art program. “They were going to pay me two hundred dollars per diem, and the night before it started I drank way too much and had a lot of cocaine,” he recalled. “I was having breakfast with Rashid the next day, shaking all over and wondering how I could talk to these kids, and he said he was coming with me. It ended with me in the toilet throwing up and Rashid talking to the students. After that, Rashid made me call the therapist who had helped him. I had two sessions with her, joined A.A., and haven’t had a drink since.”

In July, 2014, Johnson, Hovsepian, and a two-year-old Julius were lying on the beach in Turks and Caicos. A lot had happened in the past three years. Johnson had had his first solo museum show, at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. He was now represented by the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles, and globally by Hauser & Wirth, which was becoming one of the big four international super-galleries. “Rashid was the quarterback of our American program,” Iwan Wirth told me. “He and Mark Bradford, who came soon after him, helped us build a community of African American artists. His work was tough, not at all commercial”—

these were the years of the black-soap paintings and the Cosmic Slops —“but it sold very well in the U.S. and in Europe, at prices from thirty to fifty thousand dollars, and we had several collectors for every painting.” The *Times* critic Roberta Smith, who had panned Johnson’s 2012 Hauser & Wirth show (“his work has become slicker and emptier, losing its rough edges and layered meanings”), devoted a full page to a glowing review of his “Fly Away” exhibition, in 2016: “He sometimes walks a fine, angry line between art-making and something like vandalism, creating and destroying.”

Johnson and Hovsepian had moved out of the Lower East Side, first to Brooklyn, and two years later to a town house on Twenty-ninth Street and Lexington Avenue. On the beach in Turks and Caicos, Johnson thought about the “higher power” that A.A. told its acolytes they had to believe in. “They don’t say what it is,” he told me. “It doesn’t even have to be spiritual. Your higher power can be an elephant or a cobweb in a corner. You just have to believe in something bigger than you. I’d never had any sort of engagement with religion. My father was a strict atheist, and my mother was agnostic. My first instinct was to ask, ‘What does this higher being look like? How do you imagine it?’ Lying there on the beach, with my son and my wife, I remember closing my eyes and feeling really quiet and peaceful. There was a reddish light coming through my eyelids, and I thought, I’m just going to call that God. Something happened during this trip. I was looking for guidance, and it all kind of jelled for me at that moment, this surrender to something bigger than I was.”



"The Baths" (2024), part of Johnson's series "God Paintings." Art Work by Rashid Johnson; Photograph by Stephanie Powell / Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

The first works in a series called “Anxious Men” appeared soon after Turks and Caicos. Painted on white tiles with melted wax and black soap, they showed a semi-abstract, anguished-looking human face—the same face over and over, with slight variations—in fiercely scribbled lines. There were small images on single tiles and larger ones on many tiles joined together. “Sobriety had amplified my own anxiety,” Johnson said. “I was trying to navigate a world in which I didn’t have alcohol as a crutch, and I was a new father who was going to have to explain to his son the complexities of America’s issue with race. In a lot of ways, those paintings were a catharsis.” They débuted in a solo show at the Drawing Center, in 2015. (A *Times* review said, “Mr. Johnson’s handling of materials is visceral; the quasi-faces fill their white frames in a way that feels unavoidable, necessary.”) Johnson was showing new sculptures now, too—cagelike steel boxes—in solo exhibitions on the High Line, on Manhattan’s West Side, and at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, in Moscow. Shea butter, a natural oil that his mother brought back from trips to Africa,

made frequent appearances in the sculptures. Derived from the seeds of African shea trees, it has long been a popular moisturizer there; Johnson remembered thinking that it was like putting Africa on your body. Rectangular yellow blocks resembling the butter, some of them carved into heads or busts, turned up in the steel boxes that he stacked and transformed into large structures, filled with growing plants in clay pots he had made, along with books by Black authors, radios, television sets, and watering systems for the plants.

The “Anxious Men” evolved into “Broken Men” in 2016. At first, they were done the same way, with black pigment on white tiles, but the medium soon changed to mosaics—multicolored shards of mirrored and ceramic tiles, wax, and other materials, set in gray grout and painted over with an oil stick and spray enamel. (On a recent trip to Spain, Johnson had been struck by the mosaics in Barcelona.) Over the next five years, Johnson’s mosaics, assembled with the help of studio assistants, grew larger and more ambitious. “The Broken Five,” from 2019, is eight and a half feet tall by fourteen feet wide—a vivid, teeming assemblage of abstract but unmistakably human figures. It was inspired by the Central Park Five, the name given to the Black and Latino teen-agers who in 1989 were wrongly accused of attacking and raping a white woman in Central Park. (Donald Trump subsequently bought advertisements in New York City’s major newspapers, including the *Times*, calling for the revival of the death penalty, but, after serving thirteen years in prison, the boys were exonerated and released.) “The Broken Five,” which comes dangerously close to being a masterpiece, is now owned by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

For many years, Johnson had wanted to make a feature film, and in 2018 he signed a contract to direct an adaptation of “Native Son,” Richard Wright’s 1940 novel. “My mother gave me the book when I was young, with the caveat that she didn’t like it,” he told me. “She was really disturbed by the protagonist, Bigger Thomas. She thought Wright had created a wildly complicated Black character who was without empathy.” Johnson had been thinking about the story for a long time. He wanted to make Bigger even more complicated—“a person invested in anger and transgression, but living a life that allows you to see his kaleidoscopic experience of Blackness.”

Once he decided to make the movie, there was no lack of people ready to help him. Two producers for the film raised four million dollars—not a lot by Hollywood standards but enough for the picture he had in mind. Johnson's friend Suzan-Lori Parks, the Pulitzer-winning playwright, agreed to write the screenplay, and his indispensable studio assistant Ernst served as a working producer. "I loved the process and I hated it," Johnson said. "The collaborative aspect was new to me, and it was a steep learning curve —like being a general in the Latvian Army without speaking Latvian. But we sold the film to HBO, and it was quite successful, with a lot of positive reactions and a lot of non-positive ones, mainly by people who didn't like tampering with a classic." One of the main deviations from Wright's book came in the character of Bigger Thomas. In the book, he is a monster who murders two young women, shows no remorse, and tries to pin the blame on the first victim's white Communist boyfriend. He accidentally suffocates a girl with a pillow while trying to keep her quiet so that her blind mother won't realize she's not alone in her room. Johnson and Parks recast him as a far more tragic figure. "You're so handsome," the girl giggles, minutes before her death. She has fallen in love with him. I had trouble believing that Bigger Thomas could have accidentally suffocated the girl in thirty seconds, as he does in the film, but I kept thinking about that scene and others long after I saw them.



"My whole being, except my fingers, toes, and nose, is at one with nature."
Cartoon by Harry Bliss

“I learned a tremendous amount from ‘Native Son,’ ” Johnson told me. This was evident in a seven-minute video that he made soon afterward, called “The Hikers.” In it, two young Black men wearing masks, both of them dancers, meet on a mountain trail in Aspen. One is climbing, struggling with every step; the other, who is descending, moves freely and proudly. Their meeting lasts about a minute, and in Johnson’s virtuoso handling it conveys surprise, suspicion, gratitude, and brotherhood. “I just tried to imagine what the inner reactions to such a meeting would be for two Black men in that magnificent wilderness, using dance and movement and the African masks I created,” Johnson said. His most recent video, “Sanguine,” had its début at his Paris show in October. The five-minute work shows Julius, Jimmy Johnson, and Rashid walking on a beach, rubbing sunscreen on one another’s backs, playing chess, reading, engaged with and taking care of each other. “I’d been thinking about being simultaneously a father and a son,” he explained. “The word ‘sanguine’ is meant to include both its definitions—the color and the idea of optimism.” He is currently working on his second full-length feature. He owns the film rights to Percival Everett’s “So Much Blue,” a novel about an artist. “We have a script that we’re really comfortable with,” Johnson told me at the end of October.

The pandemic, which profoundly changed so many lives, “opened a whole new opportunity for me as a painter,” Johnson said. He and Hovsepian moved out of the city in 2020, to a house they had bought in Bridgehampton, on the eastern end of Long Island, where they homeschooled Julius (whose New York school had closed) and worked in their studios at night. A year later, they moved into the much bigger house they had bought in East Hampton. By then, Johnson, who during the pandemic was without studio assistants or anyone else to help him move large mosaics and heavy materials, had started to use oil paint on canvas. “For many years, I’d found ways to make marks and paintings without using traditional means,” he told me. “I just didn’t think I had anything to add to the history of painting. But I was always a painter, in a way, and now I saw how accessible and direct and immediate traditional painting was.” Johnson no longer thinks that he can’t draw. “I’m actually quite good at drawing,” he told me recently. “Just not in the way some people would feel is valuable.”



“Summer Days” (2024), a work in Johnson’s “Soul Paintings” series. Art Work by Rashid Johnson; Photograph by Stephanie Powell / Courtesy David Kordansky Gallery

In 2020, he began a series that he called “Anxious Red Paintings.” Although clearly related to his black-and-white “Anxious Men,” the red paintings—laid down with oil sticks (not brushes) over several layers of titanium-zinc white—had a sense of urgency that came from the paint itself, a bright crimson that he had developed with a paint company in upstate New York, and also from the murder of George Floyd. “Outside the history of public lynchings, watching a human being have his life drained away was devastating,” Johnson told me. “Anxious Red Paintings” came about after that. They were followed, in 2021, by a series of dark-blue “Bruise Paintings” (the color of “blunt-force trauma,” as he described it, and also of healing) and, a year later, by white “Surrender Paintings,” whose title refers to the “higher power” that A.A. wants its acolytes to find. In the course of the next few years, he produced a galaxy of new works—“Seascape Paintings,” “God Paintings” (with deep-red backgrounds), “Soul Paintings.” Most of these are large canvases in which a small, single motif—a boat, a skeletal human torso—is repeated again and again, on a background of subtle, atmospheric color. Not until the “Soul” series, in 2022, did he use traditional brushes, and the way he used them was decidedly nontraditional.

“I’m not accustomed to softness in mark-making,” he explained. “I use the end of the brush as much as the brush side, and I use it to grind the material into the canvas. My marking strategy tends to be quite brutal.” The new paintings are often beautiful in more familiar ways than his previous ones, and at the same time throbbing with internal energy. There is a powerful sense of Johnson reaching for new and bolder challenges in his ongoing dialogues with reality and metaphysical thinking, material and idea.

In November, a gigantic public art work by Johnson, “Village of the Sun,” opened in a park in front of the old Doha International Airport, in Qatar. On four eighty-foot-long-by-fifteen-foot-high walls, mosaics with images that resemble those found in his “Broken Men” series tell their perplexing and sometimes ominous stories. It is by far the largest thing he has done, and it arrived two years late—the work was supposed to welcome visitors to the opening of the *Fifa* World Cup in 2022. “The site wasn’t finished in time, but that was a blessing in disguise,” Johnson said. “It got its own stage, separate from the World Cup.”

The survey of Johnson’s work at the Guggenheim next year will be the largest and most ambitious exhibition of his career to date. He described it as “a before-and-after situation,” an opportunity to see where he is after twenty-eight years as a practicing artist. It will occupy the whole museum and cover every aspect of his work—“full-frontal nudity,” as he jokingly called it. “I’m a Guggenheim artist,” he said to me in the spring. “My project is deeply rooted in what the Guggenheim does—critical thinking and theory, abstraction married to philosophy and aesthetics.” Johnson served on the museum’s board of trustees from 2016 to 2023. He was the first artist to do so (unless you count Hilla von Rebay, a portrait painter who became the Guggenheim’s founding director). Racial tensions had been building up in the museum world, and Nancy Spector and several of the other Guggenheim curators convinced Richard Armstrong, then the institution’s director (he retired in 2023), that putting Johnson on the board would be a useful move.

“For the first year or so, Rashid didn’t say much in board meetings,” Armstrong recalled, “but then, in the crisis around George Floyd, everyone began asking, ‘What do you think?’ ” He was put on the executive

committee of the board, and “he really rose to the occasion.” Naomi Beckwith, the curator, told me, “Rashid was an incredibly effective trustee. His voice was essential during the pandemic, not just on aesthetic issues but on questions of social justice and leadership.” Eyebrows were raised when the museum scheduled Johnson’s survey exhibition soon after he stepped down from the board. (The preferred sequence is for an artist to have the big show before being invited to a board.) “It was kind of understood very early that the Guggenheim wanted to work with me as an artist,” Johnson explained. “At the time, I was too young for a big ambitious exhibition, so I guess we kind of put the cart before the horse.” He is also on the board of Performa, the performing-arts foundation based in New York, and Ballroom Marfa, a non-collecting contemporary-art space in West Texas. He enjoys taking on these public responsibilities. Generous by nature, he has always helped younger artists by buying their work, recommending it to galleries and collectors, and including it in shows that he curates. “I’m an artist and I’m going to make art, but I’m also trying to be thoughtful and helpful and present,” he told me.

He goes to the Guggenheim every week when he’s in town, often on Sundays. “I just walk around by myself,” he said. “I’m trying to learn more about the history of the place. The other day, I saw this great picture of John Coltrane inside the museum—one of my heroes—walking up and down the circular ramps. It was iconic. I love the opportunity to be part of that history.”

There are almost ninety works in his Guggenheim show. Since he began using oil on canvas, his paintings have become increasingly traditional in their effect, if not in their making, and this led me to ask him whether he still considered himself a conceptual artist. He thought about this, and said, “No, I don’t. I just don’t need that anymore. I don’t need defining language.” He rubbed his nose. “I probably misunderstood Duchamp,” he added. “I recognize now that Duchamp, for all his beautiful, sinister, strange, intellectual, and engaged thought, was also a man who just wanted to make art.” ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the year Rashid Johnson was born, and the year he left the Guggenheim’s board.

[Calvin Tomkins](#) is a staff writer. His books include “[*The Lives of Artists*](#),” a six-volume collection of his *New Yorker* profiles.

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **Book a Stress-Free Getaway**

By Weike Wang | Need to forget the state of the world? Escape to this city hideaway, complete with non-leaky air mattresses and easy access to the fire escape through a hidden kitchen nook!

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Shouts & Murmurs

Book a Stress-Free Getaway

By [Weike Wang](#)

December 9, 2024



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Comfort Near Water

Lacey Township, N.J.

Recently refurbished houseboat. Sleeps four guests comfortably, and many more less comfortably, but it's definitely doable and safe, though no jumping all at once, please. Adorable kitchenette with mini-fridge, electric kettle, and retro classic compact microwave. Spacious patio seating, no chairs. Luxe bathroom equipped with drainable shower, toilet, and ultra-dissolving double-ply toilet paper, extra fee for second roll (regular T.P. will clog, triggering extra cleaning fee).

The stone's-throw-away waterfront has much to offer: brilliant sunsets, live music, full-service bars and restaurants, a boardwalk, and chartered cruises.

Note: During the off-season (now), the houseboat is parked in the host's driveway. Guests will need to drive the houseboat to the marina and dock it. Host will provide necessary paperwork. Knowledge of operating heavy machinery preferred but not required.

City Paradise

New York, N.Y.

Top-floor apartment in coveted residential neighborhood of midtown Manhattan. This 1BR unit is convertible and can be tailored to your needs. At no extra charge, recyclable cardboard boxes are provided for you to stack and arrange like walls, transforming this one-of-a-kind space into your home away from home. The bath has been designed to be very upscale, with slight modifications to accommodate building codes and reality. Easy access to fire escape through a hidden kitchen nook. Air mattresses have been checked for leaks and come with manual pumps. The water bed, a unique feature and a rare vintage find, has been newly sanitized (water in bed not potable).

Experience the real N.Y.C.! Apartment is near a police station, a fire station, and two hospitals with easily audible ambulances. Get your daily steps in with the thirty-story walkup (elevator out of service, and, for the safety of other residents, deliveries are restricted to the lobby). Wi-Fi is super good. Comes with a roommate.

Experience Living History!

Lynchburg, Va.

Superbly preserved eighteenth-century Georgian manor house with adjacent log cabin can be rented together for a weekend, a week, or a month (discounts available). Rooms are tastefully decorated with antique writing desks, tall clocks, fireplaces, and a slew of haunting period paintings. You will find no TV or computer screens in this beautiful manor, and, in fact, none are allowed. Instead, find respite, history, and the authentic spectres of former occupants and their employees. Stroll corridors filled with lively conversation; hear and see in faithful detail what transpired almost three centuries ago. The onetime occupants are always happy to be in your company. Follow them from dressing room to powder room and back. Share a pot of tea. Converse over cognac. The former employees can be mercurial. Most often found in the laundry room or near the log cabin, they can seem woeful at first about their lack of benefits and pay, but, once you remind them that the plumbed but not heated log cabin is actually a two-room duplex with great windows and is much better appointed than other employee dwellings in the area, they will see that you are right and that this nation is just.

We can also accommodate special events. Great for corporate team building!

Escape Your Real Life in This Mega Castle

Location disclosed upon booking

Privately owned, gated castle surrounded by formal gardens and romantic cliffs is available for hire exclusively for riotous gatherings of family, friends, or artists in groups of ten or more. We do not accommodate corporate activities or golf tours. This property celebrates codependent joviality in all forms, and those intent on staying here should “legit” and “for real” and “we’re not playing” be ready to unplug from outside responsibilities. There is one room with Wi-Fi, which can be used only during medical emergencies or natural disasters. The castle has seven grand pianos, nineteen balconies, six turrets, and twenty-three chaise longues. It is fully staffed with three operations managers, four chefs, five housekeepers, two gardeners, a custodian, and the custodian’s cat (do not pet).

House rules: breakfast, lunch, and dinner are provided, and everyone must eat together. No meal will commence with an absence. No ice cream will be served before noon. No cappuccinos after noon. Red, white, and orange wines can be requested at most hours, though service will stop between 3 a.m. and 6 a.m. for the wine cellar to be replenished. After breakfast, please stay together and hang out. After lunch, please stay together and hang out. Happy hour is every hour. Brief rest-room breaks are allowed. Should you be caught working, you will be picked up and thrown into the fully functional dungeon for a ten-minute time-out. After dinner, light the fire pit and dance around it to very loud music. Sleep in your own room that you can decorate every inch of or leave a complete mess. Rooms have bathrooms but not locks. An N.D.A. is required upon arrival. Before leaving, don’t forget to sign the guest book! ♦

Weike Wang is an author whose books include the novel “[Rental House](#).”

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Fiction

- **“Between the Shadow and the Soul”**

By Lauren Groff | On one side of Eliza, Willie put his hand on hers, and on the other, under the table, Bet's knee pressed against her knee. She had to close her eyes and breathe.

[Fiction](#)

Between the Shadow and the Soul

By [Lauren Groff](#)

December 8, 2024



Photograph by Xuebing Du for The New Yorker

They had lived together for twenty-five years in the old stone house on a bend in the river. They were young when they first saw the place, wildly in love, and so poor they could afford only one of two dwellings in the valley: a battered trailer huddled against the cold wind, and the antique house in foreclosure, a breath from letting the weeds muscle it back into the earth. Willie had wanted the trailer; when you flicked on the lights there, no shower of sparks fell from knob-and-tube wiring. But Eliza had vision. We'll be happy in this house, she said, watching the green river slide through the willows. So they spent the first spring, summer, and fall living in a tent in the largest bedroom, cooking with a propane camper stove, and bathing in the river, and they taught themselves how to shingle the roof, to wire and plumb, to plaster and paint and scrape and refinish. Nearly every penny they made went straight into the house; nearly every spare hour was spent on house projects or finding antiques at yard sales and in thrift stores and bringing them back to life.

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

Time passed. Willie became a high-school history teacher, his students' perennial favorite. And one day Eliza realized that she'd been at the village post office for twenty-five years, she was fifty years old, and eligible for early retirement. Willie had had too much wine the night she announced she wanted to retire, and he said, recklessly, hopefully, Maybe now we have a kid? This sent an electric zap through her because the question of a kid had not been posed since they had agreed decades ago that they didn't want one. Besides, she was fifty, and did Willie, at forty-three, not understand how women's bodies worked? He saw her face and hastened to say, Oh, obviously adopt, but she was speechless, and his question lingered and began to curdle between them until Willie laughed it off, and said that of course they, just by themselves, were more than enough.

Now he was in the great gnarled apple tree, stringing up fairy lights which were already plugged in and shining on his face and arms. It was the very end of summer, and across the river the maples were touched at the edges with gold.

Eliza pulled four cherry pies from the oven and set them to cool. She could hear friends coming up the gravel drive and went into the parlor and watched

them through the wavy glass, their hands full of flowers, wine, presents. She had not wanted a party, but Willie had insisted. You only retire once, he said, and the house is finally finished—let's show it off. Plus, the new school year would begin on Tuesday, and he wanted a little something festive to mark the end of the summer.

Willie sprang down lightly out of the tree. Thanks to his running and cycling, he was still as lithe as the teen-ager she'd first loved, even as she had undergone a bit of a midlife spread. Eliza toed the dog away from the screen door and came out with the cheese board in time to overhear her husband saying ruefully, running his hand over his freshly shaved head, Yeah, Eliza told me, oh so delicately, Your golden hair made a promise your scalp could not keep.

The friends laughed—that line always got a big laugh, though it was he, not Eliza, who had said it—then they saw her and cheered. She smiled, kissed them, accepted their praise for the house. It's like cottagecore porn, her new yoga-instructor friend Nikki said. Jesus Christ, it's straight out of a fairy tale. They placed their tributes in her arms. She accepted the homemade rhubarb butter, the hand-quilted pot holders, the voucher for a master gardening class, although all she really wanted was to crawl into the clean white expanse of her bed.

Music started and beat on into the twilight; the shadows stretched from the roots of the trees. She brought out the giant poached salmon and mayonnaise, the tender green salad from their garden, the barley salad, the focaccia she'd made that morning. People arrived and kept arriving. A rowdy game of badminton began, and the shuttlecocks got lost among the bats fleeting through the dark sky above. The pies were ravaged. Dancing began, oh, God, none of their friends had rhythm, it was astonishing, only Willie danced well, her sprite, her beam of sunshine. He moved her around, and if she danced well also it was simply because she danced with him. When she had to catch her breath, he grabbed any woman close at hand; they were all happy to be spun by him. Under the tables, the dog laid his broad blond head on people's knees and gazed adoringly upward, the slut. Friends kept shouting in Eliza's ear, asking what she was going to do with her days now, and she kept shouting back, Nothing, glorious nothing!

Yes, she coveted it—letting the tea go cold on the kitchen table, the stacks of books, the lazy expanse of days. She had worked every single day since she was small: the flower farm her parents owned had run on the muscle of their three children; away at college, in California, she'd worked in a cafeteria dish room; when she dropped out only a month before graduation it was to take care of her mother who'd had a debilitating stroke; after her mother died, she worked at the post office; she'd worked on the house weekends and evenings, and she had never in her life had a day of rest.

And as she watched her husband, flushed, so beautiful, so shiny-bald, she understood with a stroke of clarity that she had worked so hard in her adult life in part because that was the way she burned off her shame. When she fell in love with Willie, he was sixteen and she was twenty-three, despondent to be back in rural New York changing her mother's diapers, working part time as a receptionist at the real-estate agent's on the corner of Main and Chestnut. She had been so pretty then that they had placed her desk in the window, as if to lure people in. Willie hadn't even got his driver's license yet; he was riding his bike to school when he saw her. He dropped the bike and stood staring at her until she shook her head severely at him, mouthing, Go away. Of course she knew who he was. The village was tiny, and there was only one family with a giant Victorian up on the hill and four blond boys in stiff polo shirts; she had gone to high school with his eldest brother, who was now a stockbroker down in the city, like their father. For the next two months, she found little nosegays, chocolates, notes on her desk until she capitulated and drove him an hour away to a diner for a date. Oh, she hated herself for starting things up with him, he was only a child, but, in her defense, who wouldn't fall in love with Willie? So bright, so funny, so kind, so handsome. Two years later, he refused to apply to any of the élite schools he could have been accepted to, and went to the state school half an hour away, so that he could move into her mother's house to help her. It caused a great scandal in the village. Some people still had not forgiven her; they would come into the post office, and, if she was the only one working, they'd leave without sending their mail.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Lauren Groff read “Between the Shadow and the Soul.”](#)

Someone put on a slow song, and Willie took her hand. His shirt was soaked, and his skin was hot. He kissed her neck. Happy retirement, love, he said. She closed her eyes, pressed her body against his, and her clothes were soon wet with his sweat. Then the music shifted back to Motown, and he shimmied away from her.

Later, when the moon had risen and some of the friends were so drunk that they were resting their heads on the table or lying heaped together in the hammock, she couldn't find Willie. She wandered to the vegetable garden, then down the path brushed by thick dark ferns, to the riverbank. The river always seemed to be speaking in many different voices in a pitch just under her hearing. She stood listening, near the small boathouse she and Willie had built together, until she heard, over the sound of the river, the rhythm, the small grunts, the gasping breaths.

Of course, she thought with a strange calm. She'd known he was too good for her for almost thirty years. And now she was lumpy, spent. It made sense that he would look elsewhere. She stood under the tent of willow branches and listened to the fucking, and her body warmed to it, she became overwhelmed with heat, until the rhythm accelerated and all at once the noises stopped. The sound of hushed laughter. The boathouse door opened. In the shadow of the tree, Eliza pressed her cheek to the bark. She saw svelte, flexible Nikki hurry up the path, flinging her cashmere shawl around her shoulders. After a minute or so, in the door, there loomed a dark shape, a man, but, wait, wait, no, he was too tall, too broad, and as he came by her, passing only a foot away, she saw in the moonlight that it was their friend Richard, who owned the hardware store in the village. Happily married, father of three small children. A complicated situation. But not Willie.

She let a few minutes dissolve in the dark, then went slowly up the path and into the house. She immediately heard her husband in the dining room, telling a story about the stone house's ghost, which had not been happy when the dog had come to them as a puppy. Willie saw her across the room, and she raised her eyes toward their bedroom and went upstairs. He had hired some of their friends' older children to drive any drunk guests home, and car headlights pulsed on the walls in the beautiful pale solitude of their room. She stripped her clothes off and went into the shower. A minute later, Willie slid in with her. Did you like your party? he said. Oh, yes, she said, and

reached for him, but he'd had too much to drink and he was not able. Still, he sank to his knees on the tile; she shielded his face from the downpour of hot water with her hand. She bit a washcloth to keep from crying out. They went to bed and held each other even as the music played outside, and the voices shouted and then the music stopped, and their friends either went home or crashed on the couches and floors throughout the house.

Willie fell asleep instantly, but Eliza stayed awake into the silent hours, watching the shimmer of moonbright river on the wall and the ceiling.

Something had started tonight. A pool of darkness had begun to well in her. Long ago, she had lain next to Willie as he slept angelically and she, wracked with misery, had sobbed as quietly as she could. Then, too, she knew she was being absurd. They were in Paris. For two years, they'd saved up money for a honeymoon week there; they'd taken out every book about the city in the village library to prepare; they'd listened to French-language CDs; Willie had taught himself all of Satie's "Gymnopédies" and "Gnossiennes"; Eliza had cooked her way through three Cordon Bleu cookbooks. Their trip was one of radical economy. They stayed in a medieval tower not far from Shakespeare & Co., in a dirty room barely large enough for its single mattress. They had viennoiseries and coffee for breakfast and supermarket picnics for lunch and allowed themselves one hedonistic meal at night, after which they stumbled back drunk over the cobblestones. Sleep like paupers, eat like kings! Willie had said. Paris filled him with manic zest. She would wait in agony all day until he was asleep, and only then would she let herself cry. For her, the glory of the honeymoon had been in the planning, the dreaming, the building up in her mind; what a letdown to find that Paris was just a place, that some days were full of chill gray drizzle, that the dull, thick bodies of other tourists blocked her from full joy. Paris had been a gorgeous dream she had embroidered in her mind—shining, empty, existing for them alone.

Tonight, she was desolate in her bed once more, fifty years old, freshly retired; there would be no children, and the house was at last finished. What she wouldn't give to be in a tight crawl space, sprinkled with squirrel turds, running wire. The profound pleasure of figuring things out, then doing them. All she had to look forward to from now on was rest. One could not build elaborate castles in one's mind out of rest; it was like drawing negative

space. Ungrateful, she knew herself to be. But, still, she felt the darkness in her grow.

The trees turned to bronze and copper, then stripped themselves skeletal; the cold somehow entered Eliza.

Enough! Willie cried out in January, on the third night in a row that he had come home from musical rehearsals at school to find Eliza sitting in the dark at the kitchen table, in the same place where he'd left her, with the same knitting barely touched on her lap. She blinked under the assault of the electric light. My God, Willie said, did you even move? What did you do all day? She shrugged. I watched the meadow, she said. So many tiny changes.

The meadow was a miracle, in fact, the dew frost on the dead brown stalks in the morning, the deer tiptoeing delicately through, the snow flurry that stayed for an hour before the sun burned it off, the birds that seemed to fall down into the grass and burst out of it in sudden sprays, the gorgeous slant of shadows in late afternoon. No purpose in explaining; Willie wouldn't understand. He let the dog out into the twilight to relieve himself. Even when she'd worked all day at the post office, she'd always had a beautiful hot dinner waiting for Willie's return, and now, with oceans of time, she did not. Well, he was capable, he could fend for himself, she thought.

He took off his sports coat, rolled up his sleeves, set to making linguine *aglio e olio*, and at last put huge plates before each of them, finishing them with Parmesan and pepper. But she could not fathom being hungry. The times she could bear to look at herself in the bathroom mirror, she felt she had gone greige, and now she was the bad kind of thin. She got dizzy going up the stairs to the bedroom.



"You've got a tear in the very fabric of reality, that's how they keep getting in."
Cartoon by Edward Steed

Baby, he said, blinking fast, I think we have one of two options. Either I take you somewhere to get help, or we find a way to make you start living again.

I am living, she said, winding a fork into her pasta, but it defeated her. She set it down.

Also, he said sternly, you have to bathe every day. You're smelly.

Oh, sorry, she said, and looked down at herself; it was true, she couldn't remember the last time she'd worn anything but Willie's old pajamas.

He launched himself at the problem with his huge energy, and it was clear he'd stayed up for much of the night when he woke her early the next morning with a cup of coffee and a plan. He had gone through the stack of gift cards the friends had given her at the party, months ago, and signed her up for the pottery class, the fibre-arts class, the master gardening class—which had already started, he said, but he had sent a pleading e-mail last night and the instructor had let her in. Also, he'd bought them both gym memberships at the fancy new place half an hour away—they couldn't afford it, especially now that she wasn't working, but oh, well, and he'd be going with her every single day before school and on the weekends, too. We have Pilates at six today, he said. We've got fifteen minutes before we leave, so drink your coffee. I made overnight oats for the car.

It was easier to submit than to resist. In an hour, she found herself with her face pressed against a blue rubber mat, her whole body shaking with the

strain, as the Pilates instructor said, Very good, Willie!, and her husband, on his own mat, winked at Eliza.

The pottery class felt like an old friend, met again after years apart—she had always been good with her hands. The fibre-arts class was artier than anything she'd ever engaged in—she had taught herself how to knit, to crochet, to quilt, even to spin thread from wool—but the instructor showed them images of medieval unicorn tapestries and Gee's Bend quilts and Sheila Hicks's waterfalls and piles of textiles. She encouraged them to think of fibre as a uniquely feminine form of art. Art! What did Eliza, a village postmaster, have to do with art? And she was deeply uncomfortable the first day of the gardening class, held at the university extension, because from the chatter everyone already seemed to know one another. She sat, hunched in her overlarge sweater, angry with Willie. Why in the world did he think this was a good idea? She'd grown up working every single day on a flower farm, for God's sake. What more could she possibly have to learn about plants?

Then the door opened, and in came some kind of young person, tall and heron-thin, in a jumpsuit dirty at the knees, wearing a buzz cut that shone golden under the fluorescents and a gender that was not immediately legible. They crouched beside Eliza and offered a rough hand for her to shake. Bet Dahl, they said and there was an accent there, intriguing. A scent of dirt and body odor, but not in a bad way. Here's last week's handouts, the instructor said, read them at your leisure at home, and gave Eliza a toothy smile that turned the austere face suddenly soft and dimpled.

Eliza was knocked out of her composure. Bet stood at the front of the class and said, Compost! Today we learn how to make it. On Thursday, in the greenhouses, we will put into practice what we have learned. Tell me what you already know. The group clamored to answer, and Eliza counted her breaths until she could hear what was being said.

Bet, it turned out, was short for Betina. She was a Ph.D. student writing a dissertation on native gardening in the North American Northeast. Originally from Utrecht. On the drive home through the dark that night, Eliza saw in her mind's eye thick rows of tulips in color blocks stretching to the horizon, like a modern painting, a bony figure on a bicycle cutting through them, a

windmill in the distance. She wondered if Bet had turned to native plants in reaction against the artificial beauty of Dutch tulips. A revolt against order. She imagined Bet in her apartment in the small university town thirty miles from her stone house: the place would have clean white walls, lots of light, plants in every window, a mattress on the floor. Bet would not care about aesthetics. She would not see the old linoleum in the kitchen. She would own only what was needed. No decades accumulated in the drawers. A life kept fresh.

At home when Eliza came in, Willie looked at her hopefully over the stir-fry spitting in the wok, and she said, keeping her voice neutral, Yes, I think I'll like the gardening class.

On Tuesdays they had in-class learning in the extension rooms; on Thursdays they had their practicums at the university greenhouses and fields. Eliza had always been strong—she'd had to be to fix up their house, to sling packages all day at the post office—but she'd let her muscles turn to goop since she had retired. She was a weak little slug now. She nearly cried in the greenhouse when she went to slide a forty-gallon citrus tree and a classmate, Don, a strangely handsome orthodontist, had to step in to help her. At the gym, in the morning, even though her whole body protested, she started staying for the session that followed Pilates, no matter what it was, *HIIT* or barbells or spin, pushing through her dizziness and nausea, averting her eyes from the mirrors when she changed in the locker room.

In each of her classes, by the second week, the mass of participants had separated into individuals. In pottery, there was a couple who owned the café in town; in fibre arts, she hit it off with a grave, soft-cheeked new mother. In the gardening class, there were orthodontist Don, retired librarians Norma and David, goofy young Eagle Scout Mikey, and a grandmother, mother, and daughter named Linda, Janet, and Julia. In the frozen months, they were each to plan a native garden; in March, they would plant; in June, there would be a field trip to visit all of their projects. Eliza wanted to use a space at the top of the stone house's meadow, south-facing, for her garden. She decided that her patch would be all edible native plants, as carefully designed as an ornamental garden; she would grow groundnuts on trellises, hibiscus like roses, jewelweed with the little green pods that explode,

dooryard violet as ground cover. What joy it was to be dreaming in pictures, to be deep in research.

In the greenhouse one Thursday in late February, as she was transferring the cuttings and poking in the seeds, the soil in the pots looked so rich that she couldn't control herself, she thrust her fingers deep into it. Warm and soft. She laughed to herself. A voice in her ear, Bet, behind her, said, Irresistible, yes, sometimes I am compelled to do that also. Eliza went so hot in the face that she had to step outside into the blustery evening to cool off. When she came back in, she avoided Bet's eye. That time of life, eh, murmured Linda, the grandmother of the trio of women. Nobody ever tells you it's hell.

No! Eliza wanted to protest; she was too young. But that was not the truth, was it? Yet another thing about her body to be ashamed of, she thought, and she felt tenderly for her poor aging self.

That weekend, at the grocery store, Eliza hovered near the cosmetics wall and, almost without looking, tossed in mascara, concealer, lip gloss, and sped to the checkout, feeling furtive. In the parking lot, she ran into Nikki, who threw her arms into the air and shouted, Jesus Christ! You've lost, like, forty pounds!, and kissed the air beside Eliza's ears, then hurried off somewhere, probably to seduce a married man. In the car on the way home, the day surprisingly mild, Eliza opened the windows and sang along to the radio, scaring the neighbor's sheep into a trot as she wailed by.

In March, after the practicum in the greenhouse, Don suggested they all go for a drink after class, and everyone but young Mikey squeezed into a booth in a tavern up the road. Eliza's leg was up against Bet's wiry thigh. Every time Bet reached for her beer, Eliza felt it in her shoulder. She laughed too wildly at Norma and David's shtick, and she drank too quickly. When she overcame her shyness enough to tell a joke, Bet squeezed her knee under the table while everyone laughed, and her body responded in a rush, and afterward, for minutes at a time, she could not hear the conversation as it moved on without her. Her hand shook when she lifted her wine to her mouth. At midnight, the dark road swerved in the windshield on the way home. When she climbed out of the car, she didn't want to go into the house, past the dog groaning on his bed in the kitchen, through the dark parlor, up the stairs, into the bedroom where Willie was sleeping. Instead, she stood for

a long while out in the clear, cold air, smelling all the new green in the world, feeling the sap rising, the trees awakening, the tender grass just now showing itself in the fields. Her old friend the river spoke loudly, swollen with snowmelt and spring rain.

She stood there for such a long time, exultant, that she began to shiver, and the dog whined at the door for her to just come in already. And she was up before Willie in the morning, so overflowing with energy that she made them fried-egg sandwiches for the ride to the gym, and the dog followed her, his forehead furrowed, as she paced from room to room, until it was time to wake her husband.

Then it was April, and when Bet gave the class her cell number so that they could call her when they were preparing and planting their native plots, Eliza put it into her phone as Florist, without explaining to herself what she was doing. As if Willie would care! Besides, she had done nothing wrong. And he had his own preoccupations, so busy with the school musical, his voice raspy from calling out corrections to the actors on the stage. The refrigerator full of takeout boxes because neither of them came home before 9 p.m. most nights. The dog bore a look of patient despondency.

One Sunday in late April, she was out in the morning mist, kneeling in the earth in her plot, when Willie knelt beside her and took up a spade and began to dig. She was startled out of her reverie—a strange erotic daydream, flesh without body, warmth without a face. Willie couldn't see inside her head, she told herself; besides, daydreaming hurt nobody. She watched his strong square hands with the golden hairs on his knuckles as he dug one giant hole for a hibiscus plant, then another. Are you all right? he said at last, chopping through a fibrous root. You've seemed so far away from me.

She rose up on her knees, brushed the hair out of her eyes with the back of her hand. Look at me, she said. I look and feel better than I have in decades.

He peered at her over his shoulder, You do, he said, but sadly.

What? she said, and waited, and her irritation with his slowness grew, and was just about to tip into anger, when at last he said, You'll tell me when you're ready.

She felt cold then, and she wondered if he had seen her texts with Bet. But there was nothing there to alarm him other than the sheer volume—it was just a lot of jokes and photos of plants, a thrilled flurry yesterday when, on a hike with the dog in the forest, Eliza found a cluster of chanterelles.

Wasn't this what he had wanted? Her, bursting with life?

Willie, she said, you told me to live, I'm living—I don't know what to say.

He in his turn said nothing more, just left the spade embedded to the handle in the ground and went back to the house, and the dog abandoned her to run off behind him.

At the tavern after gardening class now, Eliza stayed beyond the slow trickle of people going home, so that most nights it was her and Bet and Julia, the plain, sarcastic twentysomething daughter of the grandmother-mother-daughter trio, who remained until the bartender dipped the lights and began stacking the chairs. One night, Eliza and Julia stood in the parking lot, watching Bet stride off to her apartment up the street, until Julia sighed and flicked her cigarette so the sparks tumbled redly across the asphalt, and when Eliza turned away the girl said in a contemptuous voice, Don't get a D.U.I. on your way home.

Excuse me? Eliza said, and the girl said, You're excused, and vanished into her car before Eliza could tell her to grow up. Julia apologized to Eliza the next Tuesday with a cannister of peanut-butter cookies that Eliza shared with the class. I was just frustrated, Julia said, but with what Eliza chose not to ask. All class, she watched the girl out of the corner of her eye, but Bet didn't flirt with her more than she flirted with anybody, including young Mikey and the married librarians; certainly less than she flirted with Eliza.

May was upon them too soon. The leaves were vivid, the sky clear, the cherry trees so frilly they could break your heart.

For her final project in fibre arts, Eliza had decided to go overlarge, cheeky, knitting a postal-service mailbag out of hot-pink yarn and overstuffed it with junk mail until it nearly burst. Was this art? What was art, anyway? But the instructor seemed pleased and solemn and, in the end-of-class show,

hung the work where one saw it first thing. Of all her pottery creations, Eliza took home only a single large vase and a bowl; everything else seemed imperfect to her. When she left, the rest of the class was dividing up the cups and bowls and vases she didn't want. Take the advanced class in the fall? the teacher said quietly, holding the door open for her, and Eliza said, Maybe. In truth, she thought of very little these days but her plants pushing up out of the ground, the heat and steam of the greenhouse, Bet and her rain of photos of joe-pye weed and Queen Anne's lace, her affectionate touches of Eliza's waist, her arm, her back. One night in the tavern, Bet pressed unnecessarily close as she was going into the bathroom and Eliza was going out. The wicked grin, the earthy smell. Then the door closed and Eliza was alone in the hallway, lightning coursing through her.

The final class would be on the first Saturday morning of June, the class had decided. They would visit each plot of land to see how the gardens were coming along and finish at Don's house for lunch. Potluck? Janet said, and Don said, No, no, it'd be my honor to feed you, don't worry. They started at the greenhouses because Mikey, Linda, Janet, and Julie didn't have space at home for a garden. Only Linda's was interesting, Eliza thought, with its intentional clashes of color; the rest were a random scattering of droopy, unloved plants. Norma and David had converted the median strip beyond their sidewalk into a native-plant repository—Christmas fern, aster, monarda, bergamot. It was smart. It would be beautiful by August. Eliza was nervous as she led everyone over the country roads to the stone house. Willie was out on a long bike ride, she knew; she had timed it carefully. When they arrived, Norma and David were in ecstasies, young Julia had a pinched expression on her face, and Bet looked at Eliza and smiled. I could live forever in a place like this, she said.

Eliza led them up to the meadow. Her native garden hadn't grown as much as she'd hoped, but it was still quite lovely, with arching trellises she'd built and paths mowed through the design. She brought up a pitcher of homemade lavender lemonade, and people drank and exclaimed, and the dog darted around, and they lingered until Don said, at last, I'm almost reluctant to tear us away, but my wife is texting madly that lunch awaits us.

When they came down from the meadow, Willie was back from his ride and showered and standing barefoot on the slate walk. So this is the famous

group, he said, and his eyes darted from face to face, coming to rest on Don's. The more the merrier, Don said, come along with us to lunch.

Oh, Eliza started to say, Willie's got plenty to do, but he said, With pleasure!, and slipped on his shoes and put himself into the car.

Don's place was only ten minutes away. Eliza didn't know what she was expecting but certainly not a vast iron gate, a drive up through poplars, a house so massive it could have been a château. Teeth bought this? Eliza said, and Willie said thoughtfully, His name is Don Fisher? I bet he's a Fisher from the family that used to own hundreds of thousands of acres up here. So not teeth. This is generational wealth. He looked grim.

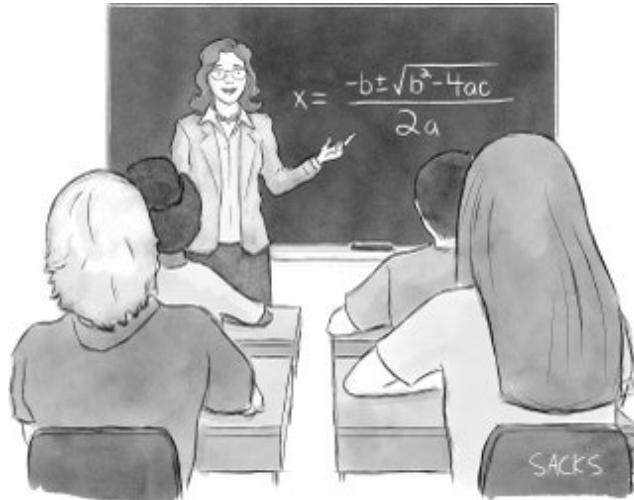
Don's wife was on the drive to meet them. She was tiny and blond, and her face was frozen stiff when she smiled. She wore a whole equestrienne outfit, down to the boots.

Don't know about you, but I'm starving, Don said, and led them through the great mirrored hallway into a very large dining room with a buffet of soups and salads and sandwiches on the sideboard. I didn't know what people liked, Don's wife said, so I had the cook make everything!

They sat, and, before they started eating, Don stood and gave a long and impassioned speech about the class, the camaraderie he had found there, about the brilliance of Bet, who had just successfully defended her Ph.D. Then Don handed around flutes of champagne, and they raised a glass to the teacher. On one side of Eliza, Willie put his hand on hers, and on the other, under the table, Bet's knee pressed against her knee. She had to close her eyes and breathe. They ate, and the cook darted behind them and filled glasses with white or red wine, even for Mikey, who drank his down in two gulps before anyone could stop him.

They were all tipsy when they went into the soft gray day to the garden. Willie walked ahead of Eliza, and Bet hip-checked her, and they laughed. Don's gardens were frankly astonishing: he had his own greenhouse full of orchids, and he had two gardeners standing there, grinning. His native-plant plot was more elaborate than Eliza's but not, she was happy to discover, more beautiful. The garden was so large that the class soon fragmented, the

trio of women going over to the rose garden in full blush, the librarian couple going to the potager with its espaliered pears, Mikey heading down to a pond where a swan glided between reeds. Eliza crouched to look at a blue lobelia, and when she looked up Willie was not beside her. She could see nobody but the librarians in the distance.



"To prepare you for how much of adult life is wasted on needless tasks, you're going to memorize this, use it a lot over the next four years, and then never see it again for the rest of your life."

Cartoon by Adam Sacks

She stood, a dark feeling spreading in her. She thought of Willie, where he would go, and hurried back to the greenhouse. She came in softly. Yes: there was his voice. She stood in the doorway, listening.

I thought it was Don, Willie was saying. All afternoon. But it's not. It's you.

Me what? Bet's voice said, sharply. They were hidden from Eliza by a palm made gaudy with orchids.

Oh, please, Willie said.

Bet said, It is always like this. But nothing happened. It's a big nothing. I flirted, yes, but I flirt with everyone. I flirt with Mikey, I flirt with Linda, who's maybe eighty. But she is so timid, your Eliza, I waited, and she flirted back, but she made no move. And, even if something did happen, what's it to you? You don't own her.

We've been together forever, Willie said. We're married.

There was a long pause, and Bet's voice changed. O.K., she said. You are suffering. I am not cruel. So I say now that I am not interested in Eliza. These old wives, they're fun for a month, then they get clingy and crazy. I promise . . .

But Eliza didn't stay to hear what Bet promised. She hurried up the path and back into the house. She ran cold water on her wrists in the bathroom, and then she came back to the dining room, where a giant glossy cake bedecked in real flowers waited on the table. She saw the champagne bottles in their frosty buckets and took a full one with her to the window seat and sat behind the velvet curtain. She gulped, letting the champagne spill onto her chin and neck. She replaced the drained bottle with a full one, and hunched over her knees behind the curtain until the others came back inside, and there was another speech by Don and the clinking of forks on plates, then voices saying goodbye. The windows darkened. She felt slightly better in the shadows. She heard Willie calling for her but did not care to respond. At last, the pale mask of Don's wife peeked around the curtain, and she called out in a voice made high-pitched with fear and relief, She's here.

Hey, Willie said, sitting next to her. He took the mostly empty bottle from her hand. Ready to go home? Everyone left a while ago.

And he helped her to stand, and said a very cheery thank-you to Don and his wife, who nodded graciously, and Willie put Eliza into the car and buckled her in and pulled back through the great gates.

She found that her face was extremely hot, but it didn't have to be shame; it could have been a hot flash. The landscape undulated by. They went across the bridge toward their house, shining in the twilight, and as they passed a boat launch she said urgently, Pull over, stop.

She got out of the car and tripped running down to the launch and skinned her hands, but she was up again before Willie could come around to help her. At the river, she stripped off all her clothes, not caring who could see her nakedness from the bridge. She jumped in.

The current was muscular, the water delicious, dark blue. Willie came in after her. She floated on her back, and Willie joined her, taking her hand,

until the current swept them past the bridge. They slowly breaststroked back in silence, and dressed, shivering, and rode with the windows down until the stone house appeared glowing down the drive.

The dog danced his happiness to see them. Willie bent to greet him. Eliza escaped upstairs, took off her wet clothes, and lay naked, splayed, grotesque on top of the covers. She didn't bother to wipe the hot tears away, and they ran into her ears.

In time, she became aware that Willie had come up to the room and was sitting in the armchair in the corner, watching her. She'd found the antique chair on the side of the road and had upholstered and refinished it herself. Everything in this house she'd touched and made her own. She hated it all. She saw herself as her husband must see her now, sloppy, spilling over the bed, old, no longer as coltishly beautiful as she'd once been; well, her legs had made a promise her genes couldn't keep. She stole a look at his face. She'd seen that expression before. Oh, yes, it had been the first time she'd become aware of Willie as a person. She'd been eleven, he'd been four or thereabouts, and her parents were having their annual Fourth of July party at the flower farm. The beer ball was submerged in ice, the table was full of other families' Tupperware, her father was not dead yet, he was presiding over the grill, making countless hot dogs and hamburgers. She was sitting on the dock of the swimming hole, so thick with thrashing children that she felt indignant; it was her water, her pond. Through the gate walked his family, his father with that swoop of blond hair, his bone-thin mother in her long skirt and cardigan on this hot day, the four little boys in matching yellow polo shirts. Willie was the youngest. The three older boys had gone to the table and were quietly wolfing down as much as they could fit in their mouths; they were wealthy, but their mother had a strange relationship with food, and there was never enough in the house. Willie had gone to the dock. He had slipped off a moccasin and stood next to Eliza, dipping a toe in the water.

His father had gravitated to the grill and was holding a pair of tongs in his hand, and now he called out in a stern voice, William, I said no swimming. Conversation lulled; the music seemed louder. Willie bit his lower lip, and then took off his other shoe.

William, his father said in a very loud voice now, and started across the grass. Just before his father reached him, Willie tipped sideways and into the pond, fully clothed.

His father reached over and yanked him out by the arm and everyone heard the crack, but the boy didn't scream, and his father carried him by the arm for ten feet, tossed aside the tongs he was still holding, put Willie down, pushed him in the middle of the back, and said in a curt voice, We're going. The mother picked Willie up, still dripping, the boy's arm doing a funny thing, his face buried in her neck. The three older sons shoved food into their pockets and ran after their parents.

Things happened in Willie's house, and the whole town knew, but nobody ever did anything about it. Those things pulsed there at the center of her husband, deep-rooted, the source of his willful goodness, what he'd wanted to avoid when he'd taken her hand early on and gently said that he was sorry, he would never have children, he would understand if this was a deal-breaker.

Just before the four-year-old Willie had let himself fall into the dark water, he had looked at Eliza, and she'd seen on his face what she saw there forty years later—sorrow, and rage, and a kind of mad, obstinate joy.

She was a fool. She could not leave this man. Who would take care of him then. Oh, but she hadn't wanted to leave him, not really, had she. She had just wanted to know what it was like to brush up against the dazzling future again. She felt the part of her that the lush spring had stirred to life go dormant, deep in her, once more. She knew that it would not awaken again in her lifetime. She opened her arms to her husband and waited. He took his time, but at last he came to her, as she knew he would. He put his head under her chin, and his breath was warm on her neck, and, like this, she held him until he slept. ♦

Lauren Groff began contributing fiction to *The New Yorker* in 2011. Her novels include “*The Vaster Wilds*” (2023).

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Great Books Don't Make Great Films, but "Nickel Boys" Is a Glorious Exception

RaMell Ross's first dramatic feature, an adaptation of Colson Whitehead's novel, gives the bearing of witness an arresting cinematic form.

By [Richard Brody](#)

December 6, 2024



Ethan Herisse and Brandon Wilson star in RaMell Ross's film, adapted from Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer-winning novel. Illustration by Diego Mallo

It's harder to adapt a great book than an average one. Literary greatness often inhibits directors, who end up paying prudent homage to the source rather than engaging in the bold revisions that successful adaptations require. And even uninhibited directors may lack the stylistic originality of their literary heroes. It's all the more remarkable, then, that the director RaMell Ross, in his first dramatic feature, "Nickel Boys"—adapted from Colson Whitehead's Pulitzer-winning 2019 novel, "The Nickel Boys"—avoids both obstacles with a rare blend of daring and ingenuity. Few films have ever rendered a major work of fiction so innovatively yet so faithfully. In a year of audaciously accomplished movies, "Nickel Boys" stands out as different in kind. Ross, who co-wrote the script with Joslyn Barnes, achieves an advance in narrative form, one that singularly befits the movie's subject—not just dramatically but historically and morally, too.

The movie's title refers to Black youths (teens and younger) who are inmates of the Nickel Academy, a segregated and abusive "reform school" in rural northern Florida—particularly to two teen-agers, Elwood (Ethan Herisse) and Turner (Brandon Wilson), who become friends while incarcerated there, in the mid-nineteen-sixties. (The institution in Whitehead's novel is inspired by the notorious Dozier School for Boys, but his characters are fictional.) Elwood, who is sixteen years old when he enters the facility, is being raised by his grandmother Hattie (Aunjanue Ellis-Taylor), who works on the cleaning staff of a hotel. He's a star student, literary and politically passionate, in a segregated school. One of his teachers, Mr. Hill (Jimmie Fails), is a civil-rights activist, and he plays a Martin Luther King, Jr., speech on a record for his students. Elwood gets his picture in a local newspaper for participating in a civil-rights demonstration, but he's only holding a sign; he longs to join in civil disobedience, but Hattie seems skeptical about the idea. Hitchhiking to a nearby college for advanced classes, he gets a ride from a flashily dressed, fast-talking Black man (Taraja Ramsess) whose car, unbeknownst to Elwood, is stolen. When the police pull the driver over, the innocent Elwood, too, is punished, resulting in his internment in Nickel.

From the start, Ross throws down a stylistic gauntlet: up until Elwood's imprisonment, the action is seen entirely from his point of view—literally so, as if the camera were in the place occupied by his head, pivoting and

tilting to show his shifting gaze, while his voice is heard offscreen. This device was famously used by Robert Montgomery in his 1947 adaptation of Raymond Chandler's "The Lady in the Lake," but it was no more than a gimmick. In Ross's hands, the device becomes something overwhelmingly expressive: the images, rather than merely recording Elwood's emotions, register the cause of those emotions and allow the viewer to partake in his inner world.

The results can be puckish, as when Elwood's reflection appears in the chrome side of the iron that Hattie is sliding across an ironing board. But Ross's technique is exquisitely responsive to the story's depth and range of experience. The viewer shares Elwood's naïve bewilderment when the driver of the stolen car, hearing a police siren, tells him not to turn around; similarly, one feels the anguished anticipation when Elwood awaits transport to Nickel. At this point, an extraordinary scene tears a hole in time, bringing the history of Black American life rushing in to overtake Elwood's own: Hattie, with an air of unusual formality and seething indignation, recalls in excruciating detail her father's death in police custody and her husband's death at the hands of white assailants. But she expects better for Elwood.

Once the police have deposited Elwood in Nickel's run-down barracks for Black inmates, Ross extends the dramatic force of his method while expanding its intellectual scope. At breakfast, Elwood meets Turner, who's from Houston and much more streetwise. The impact of this moment is heralded in a *coup de cinéma* that is a vast amplification of the story: a repetition of the breakfast-table encounter, seen, the second time around, from Turner's point of view. Once the pair become friends, both of their perspectives share the film, to mighty effect.

Elwood's wrongful detention is only the first of the Job-like litany of injustices heaped upon him. In Nickel, sucker-punched and knocked out by a bigger kid, Elwood receives the same standard and brutal punishment as his assailant. Nickel's sadistic supervisor, Mr. Spencer (Hamish Linklater), who is white, administers beatings with a strap in the so-called white house, far from the barracks. An industrial fan is used to drown out the victims'

screams, but it doesn't quite do so, and Elwood, with his view of the horrors obstructed, hears them in terror while awaiting his turn.

Hospitalized as a result of the beating, Elwood gets a surprise visit from Turner, who's also a patient (having skillfully feigned illness). Turner warns him that there are still worse punishments menacing the Nickel inmates, ranging from the sweat box—a brutally hot crawl space under a tar roof—to actual murder. (Such deaths were covered up by burial in unmarked graves and an official lie that the child ran away without a trace.) Elwood, inspired by the civil-rights movement and knowing that his grandmother has hired a lawyer, is confident that justice will prevail. He even keeps a notebook in which he records unpaid labor and which he thinks will help get Nickel shut down. Turner has no such confidence, insisting that no one gets out of Nickel alive except by getting himself out. The two teens' visual perspectives, alternating through the hospital scene, embody their diametrically opposed views of American society, of their prospects, and of the destinies that await them.

Through Elwood's and Turner's eyes, in scenes that unfold in long and complex takes, the movie offers a formidable fullness of incident, intimately physical detail, and finely nuanced observations. The corruption of Nickel's administrators and the legitimized absurdities of their cruel regime come to light as they're experienced by the two teens, as do Hattie's struggles to stay connected with Elwood and to seek legal relief. Lyrical snatches of daily life—passing moments of grace on a job outside Nickel's grounds or during free moments in a rec room—are haunted by traces of past brutality and flickers of menace. Ross stages the action with a choreographic virtuosity that's all the more astonishing given that this is his first dramatic film. (His previous feature, from 2018, is the documentary "Hale County This Morning, This Evening.") His teeming visual imagination is matched by the agile physicality of Jomo Fray's cinematography. As a first dramatic feature, "Nickel Boys" is in the exalted company of such films as Terrence Malick's "Badlands" and Julie Dash's "Daughters of the Dust." Like them, it comprehensively creates a new way of capturing immediate experience cinematically, a new aesthetic for dramatizing history and memory.

Early on, the action is set in historical perspective by means of flash-forwards. Eventually, there are revelations about the atrocities at Nickel; the grounds are excavated, and human remains discovered. One of the friends (played as an adult by Daveed Diggs) gets wind of these investigations, having in the intervening years made his way to New York, found employment as a mover, and started his own business. In this later time frame, Ross continues to rely on point-of-view images, but with a piercing difference. The camera now floats just behind the character's head, depicting work and home, love stories and painful reunions, fleeting observations and a reckoning with the past, as if from two points of view simultaneously—one visual and one spectral, bringing absence to life along with presence.

The onscreen incarnation of Elwood's and Turner's perceptions isn't only intellectual or theoretical. The moral essence of Ross's technique is to give cinematic form to the bearing of witness. Where Whitehead's novel describes his characters' physical torments in the third person, with psychological discernment and declarative precision, Ross's movie fuses observation and sensation with its audiovisual style. It suggests a form of testimony beyond language, outside the reach of law and outside the historical record. It is a revelation of inner experience that starts with the body and all too often remains sealed off there and lost to time—except to the extent that the piece of art can conjure it into existence.

The movie's twin aspects of witness and of point of view have a significance that extends beyond the drama and into cinematic history. There were no Black directors in Hollywood until the late sixties, and no Hollywood films that conveyed then what "Nickel Boys" shows in retrospect: the monstrous abuses of the Jim Crow era and its vestiges. In bringing the historical reckonings of Whitehead's novel to the screen, Ross hints at an entire history of cinema that doesn't exist—a bearing of witness that didn't happen and the lives that were lost in that invisible silence. ♦



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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Books

When the United States Tried to Get on Top of the Sex Trade

Why should American exceptionalism end at the red-light district?

By [Rebecca Mead](#)

December 9, 2024



American schemes were informed by French and British models of managing prostitution—either by regulating it or by trying to eliminate it. Illustration by Fanny Blanc

On Christmas Day in 1872, the atmosphere was restive among the forty female residents of a medical institution on the outskirts of St. Louis. The women were patients, not prisoners, so they wondered why they were obliged to spend the holiday as they would any other day: confined to their wards, knitting or chatting, without music or revelry of any kind. Half a dozen of the boldest ones took it upon themselves to defy the steward and the matron, and to circumvent the gatehouse guards, who were ostensibly there to prevent undesirable visitors. The women made a break for more entertaining precincts downtown, “bent on a regular old-fashioned

‘bender,’ ” as the *Missouri Republican* reported at the time. But the authorities quickly tracked them down. Four of them were brought back to the institution, while the remaining two—perhaps in an unruly state of intoxication—were, as the newspaper dryly put it, “left in the calaboose to ruminate upon the inscrutable ways of Providence and the police.”

The institution from which the women escaped was the Social Evil Hospital, an isolation hospital for female sex workers who had tested positive for sexually transmitted diseases. The hospital had been discreetly established in the suburbs of St. Louis the previous year, as part of an innovative attempt to regulate prostitution in the city. The furnishings of the main building, where white women dwelled, were tasteful and comfortable, albeit sparely decorated. Black women were quartered separately, on the second floor of the gatehouse. The food was plentiful if plain: no oysters were served in the dining room, to the annoyance of the residents. They also chafed at the rule against smoking, and regretted the absence of a common room. Largely, though, they were reportedly more or less satisfied with their environs.

Despite its moralistic and stigmatizing name, the Social Evil Hospital was not dedicated to reforming the characters of the women who lived within its walls, sometimes for more than a year. There was no religious instruction, no curriculum of improving lectures. The staff members were civil, even kindly, forbidden to express disapproval of the way of life that had brought their patients into their care. The two-year-old daughter of the steward and the matron, who were married, scampered around the wards and played with the residents. The prevailing atmosphere was calm, with the steward exhibiting Solomonic judgment in internal affairs: when dealing with a quarrel between two women, he ordered that the clothes and shoes of one be taken away, so that she was obliged to stay in bed, then directed the other to wait upon her.

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The Social Evil Hospital was brought into being by St. Louis's Social Evil Ordinance, passed in 1870 in response to the fact that, as the city had expanded, so had its sex trade. The ordinance, modelled on European examples, gave St. Louis the distinction of being the first city in the United States to legalize prostitution. Women who sold sex were required to register with the police, to submit to regular testing for venereal disease, and to pay a monthly fee of six dollars. More than twenty-six hundred women were registered between July, 1870, and March, 1873, and their levies funded the hospital. As a result, St. Louis's sex workers saw the hospital as their own property; some of them voluntarily retreated there to give themselves respite from their labors.

A few days after the Christmas breakout, the mayor of St. Louis, Joseph Brown, paid the hospital a visit, and offered some words to the residents. "Some of you seem to think that the city is treating you unfairly in not letting you go where you please, and do as you please," he said. "You probably have the right to think that, in view of men being permitted to do as they please and go where they please." Assuring the women that "you are no worse than the men who came to see you," he offered a frank justification for the inequity: "To control the men, as we are at present controlling you women, we should have to have a policeman at every door." There was the rub. "We cannot get at the men," he explained, "and hence we have to take charge of you."

The St. Louis episode is among the many fascinating experiments in the regulation of prostitution explored in "[Empire of Purity: The History of Americans' Global War on Prostitution](#)" (Princeton), by Eva Payne, a historian at the University of Mississippi. Payne seeks to reveal the often conflicting ways in which cities, states, and the federal government attempted to control the sale of sex, both in domestic contexts and overseas, when it was determined that American interests were at stake. (Payne

focusses almost exclusively on the sale of sex by women to men, in common with the authorities whose actions she is concerned with—the appropriate balance of attention, given the prevalence of the trade.) In most instances, the difficulty of “getting at” the male consumers of prostitution resulted in the surveillance, restriction, and sometimes punishment of the women who provided the services.

Ideas of American exceptionalism, Payne argues, extended to the sex trade. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the combined efforts of social reformers and government officials drew upon notions of sexual continence as a moral strength with which Americans were especially endowed, thereby justifying an expansion of American power in areas well beyond the governance of red-light districts. With the stationing of U.S. troops overseas, particularly in what was known as “the tropics”—the Philippines in the eighteen-nineties, the Panama Canal Zone in the first decades of the twentieth century, the Dominican Republic in the nineteen-twenties—Americans invoked an ethic of strenuous sexual self-mastery that justified their mastery over others. In 1902, President Theodore Roosevelt declared that “as a nation we feel keen pride in the valor, discipline, and steadfast endurance of our soldiers, and hand in hand with these qualities must go the virtues of self-restraint, self-respect, and self-control.”

American schemes were informed by French and British models of managing prostitution—either by regulating it or by trying to eliminate it. They were incorporated into America’s often confused sense of itself as a nation built upon red-blooded masculinity *and* upon high-minded righteousness. Where did women who sold sex—women who, even the sympathetic (and unnamed) reporter from the *Missouri Republican* suggested, tended toward idleness, frivolity, subversiveness, and the transactional—fit in?

The first efforts to contend with the issue of prostitution in America were, Payne shows, influenced by British campaigners who drew strength from incipient feminist activity but who also rooted themselves in the anti-slavery movement. Anti-prostitution campaigners referred to themselves as “abolitionists,” and likened the trade of women for sex to the transatlantic trafficking of people into slavery. Payne notes that, at first, such

campaigners were explicitly concerned with advocacy for women's rights. They opposed regulated prostitution, of the sort that would be attempted in St. Louis, because it infringed upon the liberties of women by permitting the state to interfere in their lives. These abolitionists argued that among the causes of prostitution were the social, economic, and political limitations that curtailed women's opportunities in other spheres. The flesh trade was unlikely to lessen while women like the residents of the Social Evil Hospital could earn from sex many multiples of what they could make from, for example, sewing.

Foremost among these campaigners was Josephine Butler, a fearless advocate for women's rights who lived in the British port city of Liverpool in the mid-nineteenth century. Butler was outraged at local laws that, in the name of public hygiene, permitted compulsory genital inspections of women suspected of being prostitutes, while leaving unmolested their suspected clients—surely no less a vector of potential infection. In an essay published in 1871, she asked, “Shall we have liberty in lust, or shall we have political freedom? We cannot retain both.”



“We’re looking for topnotch talent to join our team in waiting out the clock every day while we take turns droning on in jargon.”

Cartoon by Kendra Allenby

In 1875, Butler formed an organization with the cumbersome name of the British, Continental, and General Federation for the Abolition of Government Regulated Prostitution—later wisely abbreviated to the International Abolitionist Federation—which disseminated her case in the United States. Among the abolitionist victories was the repeal of St. Louis's Social Evil Ordinance, in 1874, only four years after its enactment. Toward the end of the decade, in a letter to the Annual Meeting of the National

Suffrage Association held in that city, Butler cited the coalition in England of “powerful women” and “pure, self-governed men, of the real old Anglo-Saxon type,” who together could fight against the dehumanizing acceptance of sex as a commodity.

Payne cites these words of Butler’s to highlight the easy conflation among nineteenth-century activists of the idea of sexual purity with that of racial purity—a tendency that continued into the twentieth century, when attention fell on so-called “white slave traffic,” a term predicated on ideas of untainted white womanhood. But she also acknowledges that Butler was specifically contrasting Anglo-Saxon men with Continental Europeans, among whom a different attitude toward prostitution had long obtained in public policy. (Butler’s other target for criticism was the degenerate upper-class Englishman, of whom she wrote, “There is no creature in the world so ready to domineer, to enslave, to destroy.”) As Payne demonstrates, the notion of American sexual exceptionalism set the U.S. apart from another nation accustomed to thinking of itself as exceptional: France.

The association of Frenchness with sexual libertarianism runs deep in the Anglo-American psyche. Payne observes, “Since the late nineteenth century, the ‘French’ method had been slang for fellatio, syphilis was termed ‘the French pox,’ ‘French pictures’ referred to pornography, and ‘French letters’ was a euphemism for condoms.” Licensed prostitution prevailed in France, largely supported by the general public, who, Payne writes, understood it as “necessary for the health of society, a means for men to release sexual energy while keeping their wives and children safe from the dangers of rape and venereal disease.”

The official position of the U.S. government, at least with regard to the troops it stationed in France during and after the First World War, rejected such accommodations. General John Pershing, the commander of the American Expeditionary Forces in France, argued that “sexual continence is the plain duty of members of the AEF, both for the vigorous conduct of the war and for the clean health of the American people after the war.” American soldiers were expected to be ready to sacrifice not only their lives for their country but their sex lives, too. Pershing maintained that “sexual intercourse is not necessary for good health, and complete continence is

wholly possible.” This was a turnabout for a commander who, Payne notes, previously endorsed the quiet regulation of red-light areas patronized by U.S. soldiers during the Mexican border war of 1916. (During earlier military service in the Philippines, Pershing had lived with a local woman and fathered two children with her, further evidence that sexual continence was easier recommended than performed.)

In France, the American military leadership faced the problem of enforcing sexual restraint in a country where prostitution was permitted. Unable to regulate the prostitutes, Pershing was obliged to regulate his soldiers, subjecting them to compulsory lectures on the dangers of consorting with sex workers. Payne reproduces an exhibition card that was displayed in military camps, depicting a soldier’s apron-wearing mother, besuited father, docile-looking wife, and young child clustered around a cake newly baked in his honor—about as sexless a scenario as can be imagined. Beneath the image was a lurid warning: “The Folks at Home—They are waiting for you to come back with an honorable record. *Don’t allow a whore to spoil the reunion.*” For any soldier who spurned this promise of cake and contracted a sexually transmitted infection, there was the threat of punishment by court-martial. The divergence between the French and the American approaches to prostitution was summed up by a French military doctor: “These gentlemen do individual prophylaxis, we do collective prophylaxis.” American sexual exceptionalism was accompanied by American sexual individualism—the wishful conviction that each man was morally sturdy enough to regulate and govern himself.

There was, however, considerable evidence to the contrary. In the port city of Saint-Nazaire, one prostitute reportedly serviced sixty-five Americans in a single day. U.S. officials became concerned that French prostitutes were introducing their soldiers to “unnatural methods”—that is, oral sex. Although Americans initially responded to these invitations “with disgust and contempt,” one medical officer reported, they soon came around and were “indulging in perversions almost as willingly and as frequently as the French.” There was alarm at the prospect of hundreds of thousands of soldiers returning to the U.S. with such degenerate experience under their belts, and presumably spreading these habits among hitherto innocent American wives.

The medical officer who wrote up these findings didn't lack for industriousness: he had interviewed close to two hundred and fifty sex workers in five cities. Indeed, American authorities, while they abhorred legalized prostitution, were indefatigably committed to underwriting long, sometimes international fact-finding tours to take its measure. In the mid-nineteen-twenties, under the auspices of the League of Nations—of which the U.S. was not itself a member—a number of experienced U.S. investigators took part in a three-year survey of prostitution in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas. One of them, who was charged with exploring a brothel in Havana, discovered sexual exceptionalism of another kind. He had, he reported, danced with “the most beautiful girl I have ever seen in any house of prostitution anywhere. . . . Neck of gown was cut low; breasts exposed.”

It's easy to wonder about the unconscious motivations of such upright investigators, as they set about uncovering what the targets of their probes were uncovering. But the conscious motivation was to expose and eradicate the trafficking of women for sex, a mission undertaken both for the safety of the women themselves and for the welfare of the larger population. By the nineteen-tens, anti-prostitution measures were being deployed in the name of combatting “white slavery”—the involuntary enlistment of white European and American women into sex work, often by what their defenders suggested were unscrupulous Continentals or African American pimps. Payne points out that the white-slavery narrative depended upon a paradox: prostitutes were at once “powerless victims” who were “in need of rescue” and a threat to the United States.

Federal laws intended to combat the trafficking of prostitutes assumed that all women who migrated and engaged in sex work were victims of trafficking. No space was allowed for an alternative narrative: that a woman, particularly one from a country with a ravaged economy, might decide for herself to make a living—or, in many cases, to occasionally supplement an income earned by other means—by selling her sexual services. The voices of sex workers themselves were usually drowned out by the louder voices of those seeking to exert control over them, whether through the rights-based advocacy of Josephine Butler or the growling prohibitions of General Pershing.

When they were heard, however, they were articulate and incisive about their predicament, which was also their opportunity. One streetwalker in Vienna told the American interlocutor who interviewed her for the League of Nations report, “I make good money. I am my own boss. I can walk where I want. I can pick the men I want to, and I aint [sic] got anybody to answer to.” Payne does not romanticize this self-reliance, nor does she anywhere suggest that regulated sex work—which today in the U.S. is permitted in only a handful of counties in Nevada—is an entirely delightful profession. (No one enjoys undergoing a speculum examination.) Rather, her sober scholarship reveals the extent to which would-be legislators of sexual mores remain for the most part willfully blind to the causes of the conditions they critique. The words of the *Missouri Republican* reporter who investigated the Social Evil Hospital still ring essentially true, a century and a half later: “To theorize and moralise is well enough for those who make their living by so doing, but to benefit or deal with fallen women, takes money, brains, a good heart, and a plain straightforward way of showing it.” ♦



[Rebecca Mead](#) joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 1997. Her books include “[Home/Land: A Memoir of Departure and Return](#).”

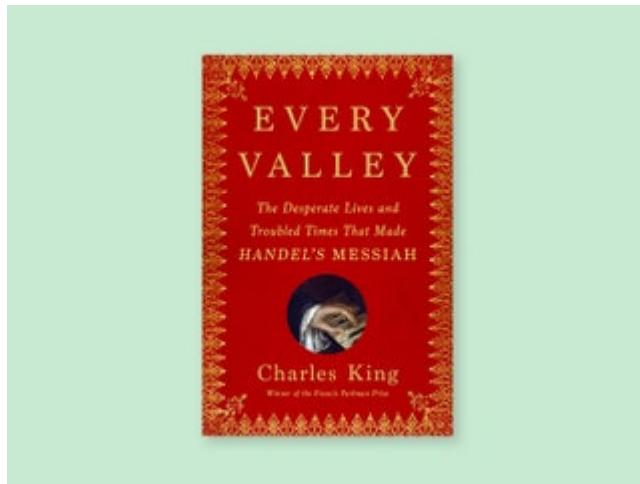
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Books

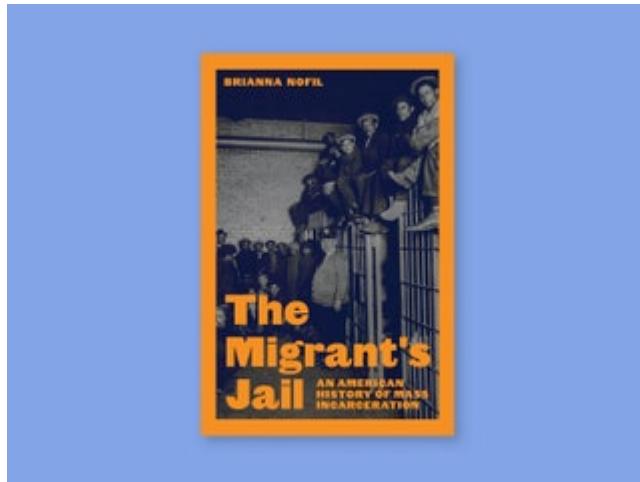
Briefly Noted

“*Every Valley*,” “*The Migrant’s Jail*,” “*The Rest Is Memory*,” and “*The World with Its Mouth Open*.”

December 9, 2024



Every Valley, by Charles King (Doubleday). This history casts Handel’s “Messiah,” which King calls the “greatest piece of participatory art ever created,” as both quintessentially of its time and an oddity; when it premiered, in 1742, its blend of secular and sacred was unprecedented. Delving into the era’s political and social turmoil, King argues that the primary theme of Enlightenment art wasn’t the triumph of reason but, rather, “how to manage catastrophe.” That theme is evident in King’s astute reading of the libretto (a collection of Bible verses that move from despair to hope), but he also locates it in the lives of key figures who had a hand in shaping and popularizing “Messiah.” The result amounts to more than an account of a piece of music. It is also, as King writes of Handel’s composition, “a record of a way of thinking.”



The Migrant's Jail, by *Brianna Nofil* (*Princeton*). Ellis Island may be the emblematic image of twentieth-century immigration to the U.S., but this academic history argues that a more accurate symbol is that of the county jail. Nofil's book, dense with archival evidence, documents how the federal government has long warehoused immigrants in local jails, and, in so doing, evaded oversight and responsibility for horrific, even deadly, conditions. Small towns and county sheriffs have reaped benefits from agreements with immigration services, often building or expanding facilities to get contracts. In the early nineteen-hundreds, officials in northern New York constructed "Chinese jails" to "attract federal business"; in the late eighties, a sheriff in Avoyelles Parish, Louisiana, personally profited from an influx of Cuban refugees.

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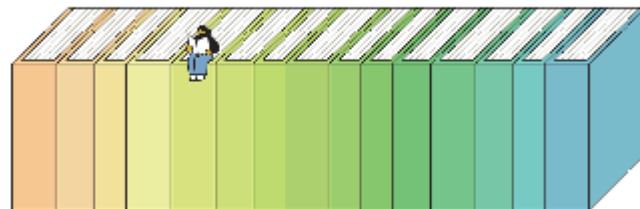
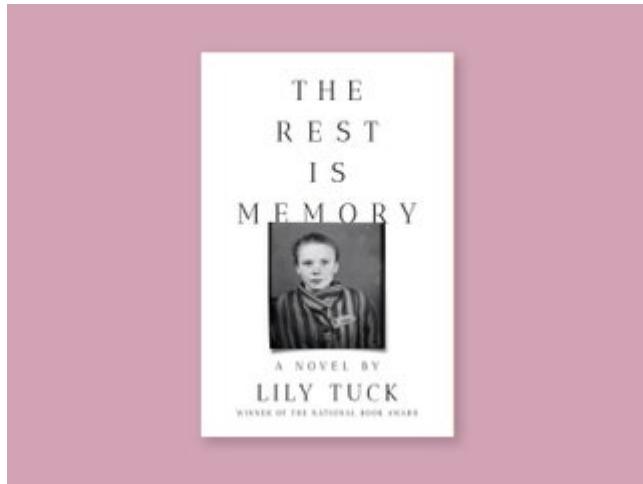
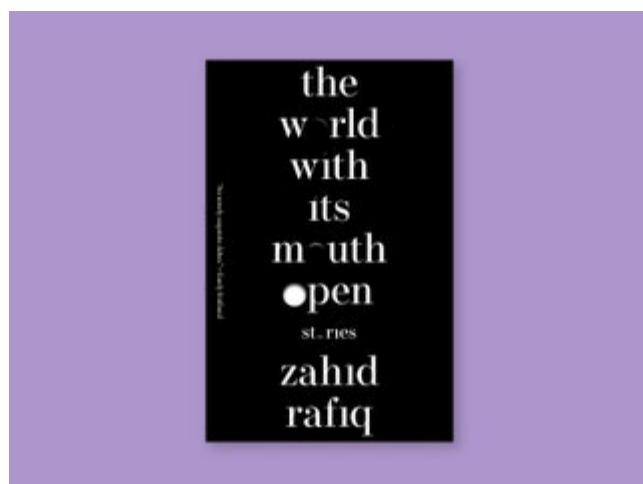


Illustration by Rose Wong

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The Rest Is Memory, by *Lily Tuck* (*Liveright*). “A work of fiction based on fact,” this slender, potent novel imagines the life of Czesława Kwoka, a Catholic teen-ager from the Zamość region of Poland, who was killed in Auschwitz in 1943. Tuck deftly animates Czesława and her family, situating their lives within the larger context of Hitler’s effort to eradicate Poland and its culture. The novel sets up a powerful contrast between its intimately rendered characters and its steady accretion of facts delineating the objective horror of life in Auschwitz. In one passage, Tuck conveys the scale of that horror by quoting the writer Tadeusz Borowski, who wrote to his fiancée, “Our only strength is our great number—the gas chambers cannot accommodate all of us.”



The World with Its Mouth Open, by *Zahid Rafiq* (*Tin House*). This absorbing début story collection is composed of quiet snapshots of life in

Kashmir. A shopkeeper grows unsettled by the anguished face of his new mannequin; a young boy who has trouble focussing endures corporal punishment at the hands of his teacher. (“Do you know what is waiting out there?” the teacher shouts. “The world . . . With its mouth open.”) A standout story centers on a community of stray dogs, scrounging for food and for peace in a world that wasn’t built for them. Throughout, characters are haunted by failures both personal and of their country, resulting in everyday heartbreak that is no less acute for being prosaic.

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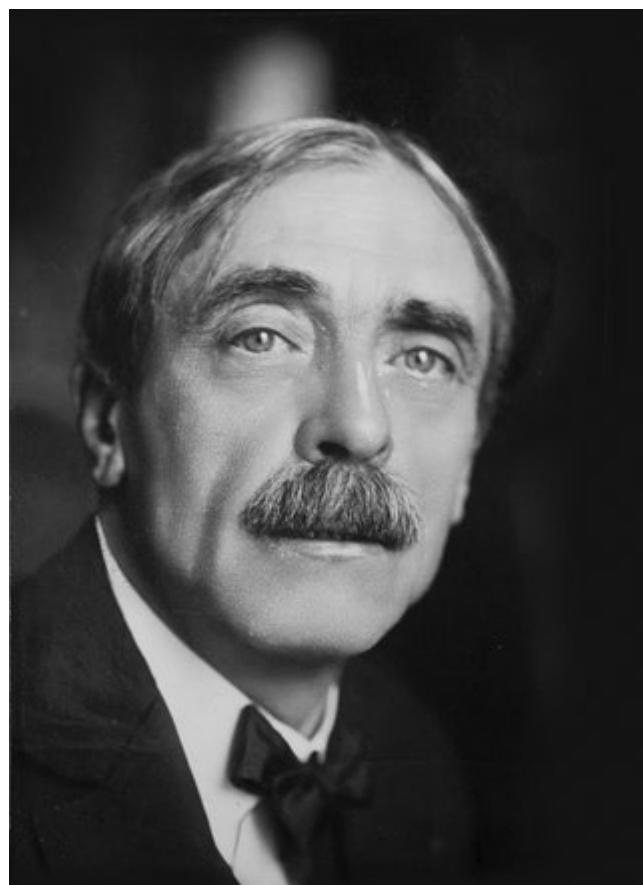
Books

Paul Valéry Would Prefer Not To

In his early novella, “Monsieur Teste,” the great French poet created an alter ego even more aloof and elusive than he was.

By [Benjamin Kunkel](#)

December 9, 2024



Edmund Wilson called Valéry “the great poet who can hardly bring himself to write poetry, who can hardly even bring himself to explain why he cannot bring himself to write poetry.” Photograph from Fine Art Images / Heritage Images / Getty

One way of being a modernist writer is to pay attention to the most saliently modern objects and experiences. So it is that Proust recounts the arresting novelty of a telephone call or an airplane sighting. For T. S. Eliot, the products of industrial capitalism can appear either literally (“a record on the

gramophone” in “The Waste Land”) or as a metaphor for inner states, as when he describes the hour of dusk at which “the human engine waits / Like a taxi throbbing waiting.” Sometimes newfangled technology seems to enter into the nature of the writing itself. John Dos Passos’s trilogy, “U.S.A.,” features passages explicitly mimicking newsreels, and even in cases where the evocation of modernity is less self-conscious something similar is often detectable: it’s not just that Hemingway’s heroes shoot a .30-06 or drive an ambulance; we also feel that Hemingway himself writes typewriter prose after an eon of longhand.

The French writer Paul Valéry’s way of being a modernist—indeed, for several generations of readers, an arch emblem and theorist of literary modernism—was different. Valéry may glancingly acknowledge a phenomenon like the railway, but his lyric poetry and his sole novel-like excursion into prose, “The Evening with Monsieur Teste,” exhibit very little interest in the mechanical paraphernalia and Edisonian impedimenta of modern times, or in the social conditions that accompany them. Among the notable subjects of his most beautiful poems are a pomegranate, a bee, a tossed wine bottle, the dawn, one’s sleeping lover—things that have existed since forever. Born (and later buried) beside the Mediterranean, Valéry had perhaps his favorite lyric subject in “the sea, the most intact and ancient thing on the globe.” Generally, the attitude of this aloof, laconic writer toward “the crazy disorder” of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe was that expressed by the imaginary Chinese sage he described in an essay from 1895, “The Yalu”: “I prefer to be ignorant of your disease of invention and your debauchery of confused ideas.”

Still, Valéry’s eminence as a modernist is indisputable. For Eliot, it was he “who will remain for posterity the representative poet, the symbol of the poet, of the first half of the twentieth century—not Yeats, not Rilke, not anyone else.” Edmund Wilson, identifying Valéry as a crucial link between nineteenth-century Symbolism and the movements that followed it, wrote, “In the reproduction, in beautiful verses, of shapes, sounds, effects of light and shadow, substances of fruit or flesh, Valéry has never been surpassed.” Almost as telling for Wilson were the long mysterious periods in which Valéry—“the great poet who can hardly bring himself to write poetry, who can hardly even bring himself to explain why he cannot bring himself to

write poetry”—published nothing at all. (In this case, a modernist aesthetic of silence concealed a private prolixity: the “Cahiers,” some thirty thousand pages of entries in notebooks, kept over fifty years, which appeared in full only after Valéry’s death.)

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How do you get to be hypermodern while turning your nose up at modernity? In this effort, Valéry had a crucial model in the figure of the scientist. After all, physicists, mathematicians, and chemists are fundamentally modern types of people whose job it is to work out those laws of the universe which operate timelessly, without regard to human history. In an early essay, “Introduction to the Method of Leonardo da Vinci” (1894), Valéry defined a work of art as “a machine intended to excite and combine individual formations” of a given “category of minds.” In another essay, he pours scorn on Romantic poets for their failure to be scientists: “They shunned the chemist for the alchemist. They were happy only with legend or history—that is, with the exact opposite of physics.” Worse yet, “they escaped from organized life into passion and emotion.” If you, like most people, associate poets with big, unruly feelings, then in Valéry—or so he tells you, perhaps protesting too much—you have a refutation of this hypothesis.

Born in 1871, in the small Mediterranean port city of Sète, Ambroise Paul Toussaint Jules Valéry was the son of a Corsican customs officer and an Italian woman. (In the “Cahiers,” this result of a binational union thinks of himself as “a grafted being”: “Grafting mathematics on poetry, rigor on free images. ‘Clear ideas’ on a superstitious trunk; the French language on Italian wood . . .”) In keeping with his inward schism between rigor and poetry, Valéry dutifully studied law as a young man in Montpellier and, at

the same time, sent off a pair of poems to the Paris address of the Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé, whose elusive, dreamlike verse is about as far from a cut-and-dried legal language as can be. Mallarmé's brief reply, saluting "*mon cher poète*" for his "gift for subtle analogy, with fitting music, . . . which is everything," was a document that Valéry, according to his biographer Benoît Peeters, could recite to the end of his days. In 1891, the young man departed for the capital, taking the train with his mother, to sit at Mallarmé's feet. (In 1900, he would marry a woman, Jeannie Gobillard, who first noticed him and his sad eyes at Mallarmé's funeral.) Valéry settled in his mentor's Paris, where he was to spend most of the rest of his life, holding down day jobs, first at the Ministry of War and later at a news agency. But the notion of literature that he elaborated when off the clock soon departed from Mallarmé's Symbolist cloudiness. The proper goal of the writer, as he explained in a letter to a friend, was to dispense with imprecision: vague words "like volition, memory, ideas, intelligence, time, etc., etc.!" might suffice for daily use, but the writer "must seek to find more subtle instruments." Valéry had it in mind to work out "a System (in the physio-chemical sense)" that accurately reflected the conservation and transformation of those forms of energy known as thoughts.

Among the major products of this intention were Valéry's youthful essays on literary technique, in which he rejects subjectivity and enthusiasm ("not an artist's state of mind") as the wellspring of literature. Instead, he sets up a sort of Newtonian mechanics of poetic language: "Whatever image or emotion is formed" in the reader's mind "is valid and sufficient if it produces in him [the] reciprocal relation between the word-cause and the word-effect." The real fireworks went off in the reader, then, not in the writer, and their exact trajectory and combustion, their bright colors and expiring patterns, were like "the mysterious bodies which physics studies and which chemistry studies: I always think of them when I reflect upon works of art." Such would-be scientific treatises in fact functioned more like manifestos, and decisively influenced Eliot and Ezra Pound's generation to favor a poetics of the objective sensuous image over one of the dramatic declamatory mood. Eliot is following Valéry's dictates when he writes of the "objective correlative" necessary to produce a given effect on the reader, while Imagism was the name Pound and his associates adopted for a movement founded on the French poet's lessons.

In Valéry's own creative work, the chief outcome of his characteristic stress on objectivity and rationality was "The Evening with Monsieur Teste," a novella (to use a familiar term for what remains a distinctly strange book) first published in 1896. The fictional Teste—the word is Old French for "head"—is a spectral rationalist, a phenomenon of pure reason compelled only by inconvenient biology to put on trousers and sit at a café. Valéry continued to pay visits to his alter ego in prose fragments that he produced for the remainder of his life. At the time of his death, in 1945, he was apparently planning a new and complete edition of "Monsieur Teste," and it's this slender posthumous compendium of observations by and about Valéry's vanishing line drawing of a man that forms the basis of the new English-language "Teste," elegantly translated by Charlotte Mandell (New York Review Books). (It suggests something of Mandell's achievement that Valéry allows that his text would "present almost insurmountable difficulties to anyone who wants to carry it into a foreign language.") Over all, it's a pleasure to meet M. Teste, even if one feels that an effort to shake his hand would leave you grasping at air.

In the preface to his short book, Valéry situates the origins of Teste in a fanatical pursuit of linguistic and intellectual exactitude, never mind the teasing hints at the French for "testicle" and "testify" that flutter about his character's surname. Mistrustful of "even the rather precise work of poetry," Valéry recalls rejecting "not only Literature but also almost the whole of Philosophy, as belonging to the Vague and Impure Things I denied myself with all my heart." (Set aside for now the paradox of putting all one's heart into such bloodlessness.) At the time of his first acquaintance with Teste, Valéry says, he could "think only with disgust of all the ideas and feelings engendered or stirred in humans merely by their ills and fears, their hopes and terrors, and not freely by their pure observation of things and themselves." Disdain for the midden of human emotions lay behind the parturition of Teste—"born one day from a recent memory of such states of mind"—from Valéry's own head. Teste emerges, full grown, as a sort of scientist of himself: "He observes himself, he manipulates, he does not allow himself to be manipulated."

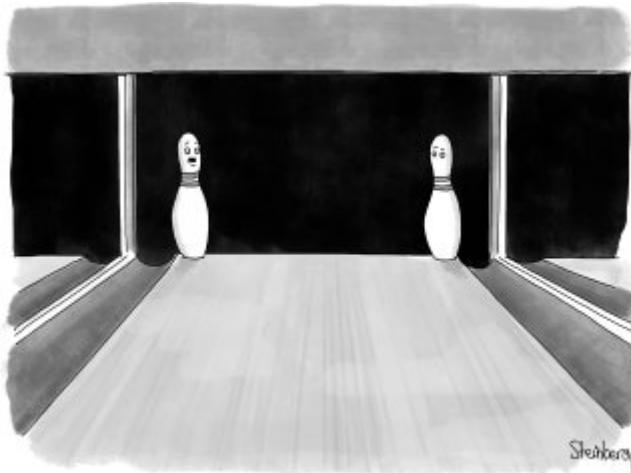
The preface may conclude with Valéry's reference to this impossibly rational man as "a monster," but such language should not deceive us as to

his attitude toward his creation. For Valéry, Teste counts as a monster only in the way that a biologist would regard a unique specimen: as a notable mutation with the potential to engender a new lineage. The reality is that Valéry overwhelmingly portrays Teste in an admiring light and an emulative spirit—an exemplar of pristine rationality who compels “the use, if not the creation, of a forced language, sometimes one that is vigorously abstract.” Teste, dispassionately interested in himself simply as the human subject most available to his investigations, studies his soul as a mathematical combinatory of possibilities. Obsessive speculation on what a person such as himself *might* feel or do meanwhile entails that Teste feels and does very little. He speaks, Valéry’s narrator notes, in “muted” tones and makes only “sober” gestures. At the restaurant Teste frequents, no one notices this man of about forty, who is neither young nor old. When he eats, it’s “as if he were taking a purgative.” Teste makes his living in the most passive way, from “modest weekly speculations on the stock market,” and is an austere conversationalist: he never smiles, he says “neither good day nor evening,” and “one noted that a large number of words were banished from his discourse.” Valéry’s narrator is enthralled: “He, so real! so new! so free of any deception or illusion. . . . How can one not feel enthusiasm for one who never said anything *vague*? ”

You will perhaps be surprised to learn that this fantastically impersonal person is a married man. But the second of the four sections of the original “Teste” consists of a letter to the narrator from Mme. Émilie Teste about her peculiar husband. It turns out that, despite M. Teste’s precise observations of his own being, he all but eludes observation by others. Mme. Teste, who should know, says that “by his profound absorption and by the impenetrable order of his thoughts, he evades all the ordinary calculations people make about the character of their fellows.” The upshot is marriage as a sort of ratification of mutual solitude and incomprehension. “Actually,” Madame notes, about Monsieur, “one can say nothing about him that isn’t wrong the moment it’s spoken!” Is this love? you might ask. Sounding very much like her spouse, Émilie Teste lodges her reservations about the hazy word “love,” which is “so undetermined in its ordinary usage and hovering between so many different images, it is completely meaningless when it comes to the relations between my husband’s heart and my person.” Predictably, perhaps, the estranged soul mates are happy together. Often,

Mme. Teste reports, “the urge to sing seizes me and soars up; I fly, dancing with improvised joy and unfinished youth.” Besides, the sex sounds good: “Monsieur Teste thinks that love consists of *being able to be animals together*—complete license for inanity and bestiality.”

The third section of Valéry’s curious portrait of his ego ideal treats us for the first time to Teste’s own unmediated reflections, excerpted from his “logbook.” Here we encounter one of the book’s more famous lines: “I confess I have made an idol of my mind, but I have found no other.” This means that Teste consecrates himself to a basically hypothetical existence. Even his thoughts are not so much thoughts as they are notions about possible ideas. He boasts or confesses that he doesn’t read the newspapers, which would only lead him “to the very threshold of those abstract problems where I am already my own ground”—but he does not cross the threshold and identify these problems. Similarly, he claims to be “infinitely aware of power” without telling what this awareness entails. A typical entry reads, “Admirable mathematical kinship of humans—What can one say of this forest of relationship and resemblances?” At any rate, he refrains from sketching any single tree within the forest.



“They’re going to try using you to get to me.”
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

The rest of “Monsieur Teste” consists of kindred *pensées* from Teste and his fond acquaintances: meditations on the grandeur of meditation itself, speculations on the noble vocation of speculation. If the entire exercise sounds very arid, so it is. There are no real characters in “Monsieur Teste,” Teste being only an abstract universal self, and his friends and his wife mere

observers of the man. Nor is there any drama or plot to this non-story of a mind testifying to its own operations. (“Monsieur Teste is the witness,” reads one entry in its entirety.) But, if we concede the book’s dryness, we also have to concede that this literary Atacama Desert is nonetheless a thrilling landscape, not least for being practically uninhabitable.

It’s not that this odd book begot no successors. Plotless and contemplative rather than narrative and descriptive, “Monsieur Teste” is certainly not a novel or novella in the ordinary sense; it’s more like a lightly fictionalized intellectual diary. But if “Teste” seems to have been the first book of its kind, it was hardly the last. In 1902, Hugo von Hofmannsthal produced his “Lord Chandos Letter,” in which a fictional seventeenth-century aristocrat confesses to Teste-like doubts about the adequacy of language to convey experience. In 1910, Valéry’s friend Rainer Maria Rilke published “The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,” first called “The Journal of My Other Self” and narrated not by Rilke but by his alter ego Brigge. Fernando Pessoa’s posthumous “Book of Disquiet,” composed from the nineteen-tens to the thirties, also comes to mind: a thick sheaf of philosophical and psychological fragments ascribed to Pessoa’s stand-in Bernardo Soares. Like Valéry, the writers of these extraordinary works of prose were poets. In each case, the fractional difference between the writer’s actual self and his alter ego seems to have given him license not so much to confess (these are not salacious or even, really, very personal books) as to *think* and *feel* as he otherwise could not, as if it were impossible to say what was happening inside oneself if one’s official self were the place where such things had to happen.

Even so, Valéry’s “Teste” did not inaugurate a new branch of literature along the lines he had laid out. The prolonged, preliminary thought of a scientific literature of pure possibility evaporated as soon as it hit the ground. The technical psychiatry and neurobiology of later times necessarily lacked Valéry’s poetry, and the poets themselves could never make good on his scientism without ceasing to write poetry.

In Valéry’s own career, too, “The Evening with Monsieur Teste” was remarkable for the sterility it appears to have imposed. After 1898, he didn’t publish a word for almost twenty years. When his long poem “The Young

Fate" came out, in 1917, Valéry, at forty-five, was no longer exactly young. A subsequent collection, "Charmes," from 1921, features the short poem "The Steps," in which the poet hears the footfalls of a lover as she approaches with a kiss. Its final stanza suggests, in hesitant octameters, a sort of key to Valéry's infatuated aloofness from experience:

Don't rush that act of tenderness,
Sweetness of being and not being,
For I have lived in expectation,
My beating heart became your steps.

The translation is by Nathaniel Rudavsky-Brody, from "The Idea of Perfection" (2020), an excellent selection from Valéry's poetry and notebooks. And the lines illustrate how much of the sweetness of being is, for Valéry, the simultaneous sweetness of not being—how far the anticipation of life goes toward constituting life's actual incarnation.

Valéry's renewed enthusiasm for poetry, in "Charmes," seems to have been occasioned by the married poet's intense love affair with a fellow-poet, Catherine Pozzi. The lapse into passion and verse of this heretofore literary positivist, inventor of the all but bodiless "man of glass" M. Teste, probably shouldn't come as too much of a surprise, even to readers of the final version of "Teste." In a last fragment, the eponymous researcher of himself speaks of "syllogisms impaired by agony, thousands of images bathed in pain, fear mingled with lovely moments from the past." *Agony, pain, fear*: these are the inexpungable residue of Teste's probabilistic exercises, an indivisible remainder that carries over from one calculation to the next—and perhaps the motivation for engaging in such desperately abstract exercises in the first place. The ultimate effect is paradoxical: the more that Valéry eliminates the ghost of pain and passion from the logical machinery of his work, the starker and more affecting the moans and cries of the ghost become. It may not be a general law of literature that the writer will end up emphasizing the strong emotions inside his or her work precisely to the extent that he or she tries to eliminate them—but Valéry the would-be scientist would probably appreciate any research into the phenomenon's wider application.

Data relevant to the investigator of his own particular case would surely include Valéry's great poem "The Cemetery by the Sea," about the graveyard in his home town of Sète, where he himself was buried, a few months after the end of the war in Europe. Little if anything is more memorable in the work of this programmatically objective and rational writer than the lines with which, in wild tones of anguish and exultation, Valéry informs the residents of the cemetery's tombs and mausoleums that the real devouring "worm," the nameless organism that "truly gnaws" on human flesh, is "not for you asleep beneath the slabs" but preys, instead, on living people like himself:

It lives on life, and will not let me be!

Could it be love, or hatred for myself?
It comes so near me with its secret tooth
That any other name would do as well!
What difference! It sees, it wants, it dreams, it touches!
It loves my flesh, and even in my bed
I only live to feed that living being.

For all that he vaunts his taste for precision, Valéry's most eloquent word is surely this stammering *it, it, it.* ♦

Benjamin Kunkel, a founding editor of n+1, is the author of the novel "Indecision" and the essay collection "Utopia or Bust."

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Musical Events

The Berlin Philharmonic Doesn't Need a Star Conductor

The musicians possess a powerful collective personality, creating an organic mass of sound.

By [Alex Ross](#)

December 9, 2024



The orchestra's players are intelligent, argumentative, self-aware. When they are of one mind, the concert stage knows nothing more potent. Illustration by Ilya Milstein

When, in 2009, the Berlin Philharmonic launched the Digital Concert Hall, a streaming-video platform for its concerts, the orchestra had no particular need to bolster its reputation. For decades, the Philharmonic had reigned as the world-champion musical heavyweight. Established in 1882, it had been led by a procession of luminaries: Hans von Bülow, Arthur Nikisch, Wilhelm Furtwängler, Herbert von Karajan, Claudio Abbado, Simon Rattle. And yet the distinctive Berlin sound—I've compared it, over the years, to a Rembrandt interior, a Russian men's choir, and deep-focus cinematography—has never relied on the elevating powers of any one maestro. Indeed, members of the Philharmonic are more likely to ask whether conductors have risen to their level. Rattle, who departed in 2018, described them as a company made up of leading actors. They are intelligent, argumentative,

self-aware. When they are of one mind, the concert stage knows nothing more potent.

Still, the Digital Concert Hall has had a pronounced influence: it has humanized a group that can intimidate audiences as much as it does conductors. Olaf Maninger, a member of the cello section, came up with the initial idea for the platform, and over the years the setup has grown increasingly sophisticated, with eight stationary cameras, two control rooms, and banks of monitors. During the Philharmonic's most recent American tour, in November, I could tell that some spectators around me were Digital Concert Hall regulars. "There's Sarah Willis," someone would say, as the French horns took their seats. "There's Stefan Dohr." The cameras often focus on the principals, but they also show the collective personality of the various sections: the double-basses, with their eerily unanimous pizzicatos, or the violas, with their smoldering tremolos. What distinguishes the Berliners from other orchestras is that they seem to dig into each phrase a little more. You can see this as readily as you can hear it.

On the November tour, the Philharmonic presented eight concerts in five cities. One program consisted of Rachmaninoff's "Isle of the Dead," Korngold's Violin Concerto, and Dvořák's Seventh Symphony; the other was given over to Bruckner's immense Fifth Symphony. I saw both programs at Carnegie Hall and the Bruckner again at Boston's Symphony Hall. The tour took place against a troubled financial backdrop: in Germany, the Berlin Senate had announced a roughly twelve-per-cent cut to the cultural budget, affecting the Philharmonic along with many other institutions.

The Philharmonic is worth protecting at all costs, because it preserves a singular performance style that harks back to the Romantic era. According to this philosophy, which Furtwängler perpetuated, the orchestra should avoid lockstep exactitude; instead, it should function as an organic mass, a crowd of like-minded but non-identical voices. This impression of calculated imprecision made for an entralling "Isle of the Dead." At the outset, cellos, double-basses, timpani (Wieland Welzel), and harp (Marie-Pierre Langlamet) established an oar-stroke rhythm that dragged ever so slightly as other instruments joined in and pushed ahead. Yun Zeng, a

brilliant young horn player who this year assumed a co-principal position alongside Dohr, delivered a spectral solo that glowed through the murk and then was swallowed up in it. What emerges from such playing is an acoustic three-dimensionality. Sounds are seen in perspective, attain height and depth, cast shadows.

Music of a gloomy cast seems to suit the Berliners best. The prowling viola-and-cello figures at the outset of Dvořák's Seventh become a cohesive, visceral gesture. The downside is an intermittent awkwardness with dancing, carefree music. There was little syncopated swing in Dvořák's Scherzo and finale. Yet the Korngold concerto, with Vilde Frang as the soloist, showed lightness and effervescence. Frang avoided the syrupy tone that has prevailed in this concerto since Jascha Heifetz gave the première, in 1947. The orchestra foregrounded glistening timbres of harp, celesta, and vibraphone. The clarinettist Matic Kuder, another recent addition to the ranks, enlivened both the symphony and the concerto with limpid, puckish solos.

As for the Bruckner, the Berliners succeeded in animating a figure who is too often treated as an impassive statue. This year, the bicentennial of the composer's birth, the Philharmonic has been holding an extended Bruckner seminar. By year's end, the orchestra will have performed all nine of his numbered symphonies, as well as two apprentice works. The Fifth, lasting more than seventy minutes, is probably the hardest to bring off. Austere and relentless, it culminates in a finale that piles theme atop theme in towering fugal sequences. Although the climaxes invariably raise goosebumps, the symphony also contains many hazardous stretches of exposed solo writing. The horns are constantly exchanging figures with the winds at soft dynamics. At Carnegie, Dohr, a legend in the profession, squelched a note or two, and the veteran oboe-and-clarinet team of Albrecht Mayer and Wenzel Fuchs fell momentarily out of synch in the Adagio. Two nights later, in Boston, everything snapped into place as the orchestra revelled in the bright, lush acoustic of Symphony Hall.

During that second outing, I realized that the Berliners were treating this symphony as a kind of conceptual comedy—not funny per se, but intellectually playful. At the beginning of the finale, Bruckner lays themes

out like pieces from a kit to be assembled. Fuchs put a prankish spin on the descending octaves that tootle above the reprise of the symphony’s solemn opening. Cellos and basses then took up that figure with lusty force, like a rugby scrum pushing downfield. When the full brass blared forth, they had a hint of marching-band exuberance. Underpinning the festive atmosphere was the bravura timpani playing of Vincent Vogel, who joined in 2022. Vogel has a way of unleashing climactic Bruckner rolls at ostensibly maximum volume and then making a crescendo in the final seconds. This going-to-eleven effect isn’t in the score, yet it pays off.

The conductor was Kirill Petrenko, who took over from Rattle in 2019. That I’ve waited so long to mention him might seem a slight. In fact, it’s the highest compliment I can think of. Petrenko made crucial decisions in an unobtrusive way, shepherding the orchestra toward its best instincts. His first outings as artistic director struck me as interpretively fussy, and his tastes appeared to be conservative. But Petrenko has melded with the Philharmonic to a remarkable degree, and, although he is not a new-music maven in the vein of Rattle, he has delved into neglected twentieth-century repertory, with an emphasis on the music of German Jewish émigrés. (Petrenko, who is of Russian and Ukrainian Jewish descent, immigrated to Austria when he was eighteen.) Watching the Digital Concert Hall, I notice a merry glint in his eyes. That unexpectedly rollicking Bruckner Fifth bore his signature.

Three days after the Berliners vacated Carnegie, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, another indisputably world-class ensemble, arrived to play two concerts under Klaus Mäkelä, its twenty-eight-year-old chief conductor designate. One program paired Mahler’s First Symphony with Schoenberg’s “Verklärte Nacht.” The other consisted of Ellen Reid’s new “Body Cosmic,” a richly evocative tone poem of gestation and birth; Prokofiev’s Second Violin Concerto, with Lisa Batiashvili as the soloist; and Rachmaninoff’s Second Symphony.

If Petrenko is inconspicuous, Mäkelä is inescapable. He currently leads the Oslo Philharmonic and the Orchestre de Paris; in 2027, he will move on to the Concertgebouw and the Chicago Symphony. He possesses considerable talent, but his confidence is outpacing his experience. He commandeers the

podium with an often musically superfluous ballet of jabbing, pointing, bouncing, and crouching. Although his primary beat is vital and clear, he tends to become distracted by side matters, allowing tension to drain away while he dissects some timbral detail: over-prominent harp notes here, artificially cosseted string pianissimos there. The Rachmaninoff went on for sixty-four minutes, verging on the interminable. The Mahler had gripping moments alongside groggy ones. Dance sections lacked charm; lyric passages were spiritless; the klezmer episodes in the third movement were strictly goyish. Mäkelä tended to mishandle the balances, resulting in cluttered textures and crude climaxes. The Concertgebouw is a historically great Mahler orchestra, yet here its playing sounded bizarrely unidiomatic.

Loud ovations greeted the Carnegie performances, and the musicians themselves applauded their future leader. Mäkelä's swaggering charisma is not to be denied, even if it leaves some of us cold. What purpose, though, does this brand of maestro worship still serve? Petrenko is tracing a different path, one that young conductors should emulate. His charisma is indistinguishable from that of the orchestra itself. He has not blurred his musical profile by assuming myriad commitments. This season, he has taken on one opera engagement—a run of “Der Rosenkavalier” at La Scala—and two weeks of guest-conducting, at the Israel Philharmonic and at the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia. Otherwise, he has concentrated his energies on the one orchestra in Berlin. That restive beast on the edge of the Tiergarten would presumably expect nothing else. ♦



Alex Ross has been the magazine’s music critic since 1996. He is the author of “[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music](#).”

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Are We Going to Leave the Reception or What

By [Lee Upton](#)

December 9, 2024

I really wish people
would dance at receptions.
It's awful, trying to make conversation
and hard to forgive one another.
A valiant person should dance,
and let anyone else stand and watch
like someone judgmental out of Milton.
It's like we're just so much baggage to our skeletons
even though we climbed them
our whole lives long.
I like those videos where the chimpanzee mother
slings her baby onto her back
for him to hold on to nothing but hair.
I'm trying to remember if I ever
had a good time at a reception.
I've wanted to be like my friends
with beautiful chest tattoos
who go topless in blizzards.
They know they're a form of art
and the world's worst wine
can't ruin them.
I imagine a goatherd
at the reception.
Dance like that.
Have you ever held

in your palm the hoof
of a baby goat? I bet you have.
It's like holding a perfect spoon made of hair.
Should we leave?
We shouldn't leave.
Someone is going to say something
regrettable,
and one of us will choke.
It's all we can do
to save one another.

Lee Upton is the author of the novel “[*Tabitha, Get Up*](#)” and the poetry collection “[*The Day Every Day Is*](#).”

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Snow

By [Rosanna Warren](#)

December 9, 2024

“Your heart is photogenic, but it’s shy,” the nurse announces, sliding her jellied wand over my left breast and under, along the ribs

as the bright green line of my life scoots and blips and scoots in reassuring intervals on the TV monitor affixed to the wall.

“I’m truly posthumous,” my favorite enfant terrible declared, “and no extra charge,” but I packed up an entire apartment like practicing

for death. From an old passport, my younger self stares at me: full-cheeked, with anxious eyes, she wonders at the crepe-paper crinkle above my upper lip,

my cheekbones carved by shadow, my wisping hair. And I stare back: there’s nothing I can tell her, no warning or advice she’d hear. Em dashes

scar my diaries. The doctor’s screen shivers in the blizzard static of an ancient black-and-white TV where snow, once started, falls and falls.

This is drawn from “Hindsight.”

[Rosanna Warren](#) is the author of the biography “[Max Jacob: A Life in Art and Letters](#)” and the poetry collection “[So Forth](#).”

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The Crossword: Tuesday, December 3, 2024

A moderately challenging puzzle.



By [Wynna Liu](#)

December 3, 2024



[Wynna Liu](#), a crossword editor for the New York Times and the writer of its game Connections, began contributing puzzles to The New Yorker in 2020.

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