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Goings On

Richard Brody’s New York Film Festival Picks

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By Richard Brody, Sheldon Pearce, Helen Shaw, Vince Aletti, Jane Bua, Marina Harss, Taran Dugal, and Kelefa Sanneh

September 26, 2025

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

When I started attending the New York Film Festival, in the nineteen-eighties, it was a sprint to watch as many films as I could afford because many of them would never see a U.S. release. In this year’s edition (Sept. 26-Oct. 13), several of the films will come out soon after the festival ends, thus replacing urgency with sheer festivity. With its many sections and venues, the N.Y.F.F. seemingly turns Lincoln Center into a cinema city. This year, the festival’s glow is even more self-reflective than usual: some of its best offerings were made just a short jaunt from where they’ll be screened.

Ben Whishaw in “Peter Hujar’s Day.”Photograph courtesy Janus Films

The “New York Shorts” program includes Nathan Silver’s documentary **“Carol & Joy,”** which was filmed in the Upper West Side apartment that the actress Carol Kane shares with her mother, Joy Kane, who’s ninety-eight. Joy speaks at length about growing up in a culturally sophisticated yet oppressive family and holding her artistic temperament in check, before achieving a belated liberation. The film’s devastating revelations of intimate betrayals dispel nostalgia and sentiment down to the last shreds.

Ira Sachs’s feature **“Peter Hujar’s Day”** is an ingenious dramatization of a 1974 interview, by the writer Linda Rosenkrantz, in her uptown apartment, with the photographer and gay-liberation activist. Rebecca Hall plays Rosenkrantz and Ben Whishaw plays Hujar, who offers a detailed account of his previous day’s activity, involving such idiosyncratic eminences as Susan Sontag and Allen Ginsberg—and the sorts of gamesmanship and intimate tensions that ensnare and frustrate artistic energies.

Art-house veterans in the foreground of the festival’s offerings include Hong Sangsoo, who latches on to an especially passionate story in **“What Does That Nature Say to You.”** It’s centered on a thirtysomething poet who drives his girlfriend to her parents’ house; there, meeting her family for the first time, he endures the crossfire of familial interrogation and its challenge to his firm principles. The situation is a cliché; Hong revitalizes it pugnaciously and poignantly.

The Brazilian director Kleber Mendonça Filho’s ambitious new film, **“The Secret Agent,”** is set mainly in 1977, in the city of Recife, where a widowed young father (Wagner Moura), a scientist who has run afoul of the authoritarian regime, is on the run from hired guns. The teeming drama burrows deep into a network of resistance organizers and looks tensely at the dangers they face, while also leaping boldly in time to dramatize the legacy of such clandestine heroism.

Kelly Reichardt’s **“The Mastermind”** presents a similarly bold view of ambient political pressures. It’s set in a small Massachusetts town during the Nixon Administration, and shows a failed art student (Josh O’Connor) organizing a heist from a local art museum and finding himself bumped from suburban anomie into a fugitive life amid a tumult of protest and persecution.—*Richard Brody*

About Town

Avant-Pop

The Anglo-French experimental-pop group **Stereolab**—spearheaded by the co-founders Tim Gane and Lætitia Sadier—reunited in 2019 after nearly a decade away, and has not toured America since 2022. In February, the band announced that it would reissue seven of its albums and hit the road again, but the big news was a long-awaited new LP called “Instant Holograms on Metal Film,” its first in nearly fifteen years. The early Stereolab albums, from “Transient Random-Noise Bursts with Announcements” (1993) to “Dots and Loops” (1997), built a seamless yet boundary-pushing sound that transformed music of the sixties and seventies into neoclassical post-rock. The new album slots neatly into this lineage, as a heady kind of retro-futuristic easy listening that can put a spell on any room.—*Sheldon Pearce (Brooklyn Steel; Oct. 1-2.)*

Off Broadway

In the musical “**Saturday Church**”—directed by Whitney White—Damon Cardasis and James Ijames adapt Cardasis’s film from 2017: a lonely teen-ager, Ulysses (Bryson Battle), finds acceptance at a queer youth service despite the badgering of his homophobic aunt (Joaquina Kalukango). Repurposed songs by Sia and Honey Dijon pulse with ballroom energy, and Battle and Kalukango’s voices soar like larks, but the script sashays desultorily along as if it plans to add details later. Only when J. Harrison Ghee appears, playing a double role as a fan-snapping Black Jesus and a sympathetic pastor, do we sense the radical possibilities of a trans gospel. What if Christ said *this* is my body? What rapture!—*Helen Shaw (New York Theatre Workshop; through Oct. 19.)*

Art

“Här Steichen Version I,” from 2025.Art work by Lisa Oppenheim / Courtesy the artist / Tanya Bonakdar Gallery

Lisa Oppenheim pays homage to the artist Edward Steichen with a series of what appear to be solarized and psychedelically tinted studies of iris flowers. Since there are no photographs of the variety that inspired the work—the Monsieur Steichen iris, created in 1910 and now extinct—Oppenheim’s blooms are A.I. dreams, realized as dye-transfer prints with a decidedly acidic bite. With their flared, fringed petals, the flowers have a carnivalesque presence, but Oppenheim’s spare installation cuts the comedy. Freestanding screens, covered in fabrics printed in a nature-themed style that Steichen favored, are hung with framed prints appropriating or echoing his work, including several elegantly gesturing female hands. There’s magic here: Oppenheim brings a flower back to extravagant life, tricking and entrancing the viewer, who’s only too glad to fall under her spell.—*Vince Aletti (Tanya Bonakdar; through Oct. 23.)*

Classical

When Franz Liszt was at the zenith of his fame in the nineteenth century, his fans were so enthralled by his good looks and talent that his mere presence created an atmosphere of mass hysteria. Some devotees fainted at the sight of him. Others fought over locks of his hair. Will the winner of this year's New York **Franz Liszt International Piano Competition** have the same effect? We'll have to wait and see. The grand finale will take place this month, with four finalists vying for the twenty-five-thousand-dollar prize. The repertoire is limited to Piano Concertos No. 1 and No. 2, with accompaniment by the Orchestra of St. Luke's. The next star may be rising. *—Jane Bua (Carnegie Hall; Oct. 3.)*

Off Broadway

Julia McDermott stars in "Weather Girl."Photograph by Emilio Madrid

In Brian Watkins's breathless one-woman play "**Weather Girl**," directed by Tyne Rafaeli, the extraordinary Julia McDermott plays Stacey, an immaculately coiffed (but secretly alcoholic) morning-show personality, who cheerily informs her Central Valley audience about rising temps and falling air quality. After smiling through forecasts for a burning Los Angeles, Stacey's shellacked surface cracks, and her storytelling spirals into a bizarre shaggy-dog story, in which she encounters her own estranged mother on the street, a lost woman who may know the miraculous answer to California's killing dryness. Inevitably, the show's end is apocalyptic, but it's the beginning that hits harder. No supernatural fantasy can be as frightening as the hell we already know.*—H.S. (St. Ann's Warehouse; through Oct. 12.)*

Dance

Gerald Arpino, a co-founder of the Joffrey Ballet, for which he served as house choreographer for more than two decades, did not get much respect from critics during his lifetime. His work, however, is having something of a comeback. Arpino's interest in popular culture, athletic technique, and unapologetic emotionalism has found a new audience in the post-Balanchine world. His dances are particularly pleasing to those who find classical ballet stiff and unrelatable. The fortnight-long **Arpino Dance Festival** offers two programs, including the mournful "Round of Angels"—created in the early days of *AIDS*—and more classically inclined pieces such as "Birthday Variations" and the hippy-dippy (and very popular) "Light Rain."—*Marina Harss (Joyce Theatre; Sept. 30-Oct. 12.)*

Bar Tab

Taran Dugal hits happy hour in Williamsburg.

Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

Sometimes names are misleading. Arabic numerals originated in India, Chinese checkers are German, white chocolate isn't chocolate at all. The same does not hold for **Pokito,** a cozy dive in Williamsburg whose name is a misspelled version of the Spanish word for "little." On a recent Monday, two patrons walked in during happy hour to find the place empty. An abundance of kitschy wall decorations (fuzzy dice, fake flowers, party streamers) gleamed under flashing lights, casting the room in lurid shades of pink and green. Behind the bar, a creaking dumbwaiter transported dishes up from the basement kitchen. Yelling over the jaunty wails of "Davy Crockett," by Thee Headcoatees, the guests ordered from a menu of Latin- and Asian-inspired cocktails and small plates and, under sensory attack, opted to sit outside. First came the Toki Highball, a tart mix of Japanese whiskey, plum wine, and lemon-basil tea, topped with a lip-shaped ginger gummy. Thirst piqued, the duo stepped back in to request the Frozen Yuz + Me, a smoky, salt-and-cayenne-rimmed margarita, and chips with a zingy, carrot-based hot sauce. As the sun set and happy hour waned, the dedicated customers raced to the bar for a thirteen-dollar combo of Orion, a refreshing Okinawan lager, and a shot of Suntory whiskey. The drinks settled—perhaps too quickly—and the pair remembered that they had work the next morning. Groaning, they made yet another pilgrimage for one final, cautionary order: hummus, with tangy slices of sourdough from the Brooklyn-based Howling Bread bakery. Licking their fingers, they were

soon joined by the bartender, on a smoke break. “Before you run back in,” he smirked, “can I get you anything else?” Red-cheeked and reticent, the duo shook their heads and took their sheepish leave.

This Week with: Kelefa Sanneh

Our writers on their current obsessions.

Chappell Roan at Forest Hills Stadium.Photograph by Ragan Henderson

This week, I loved seeing Chappell Roan at Forest Hills, on the first night of her eight-night, three-city mini-tour—and, apparently, the first night of Halloween. In front of what looked like a haunted house, she sang, strutted, slithered, caught an unexpected view of her own backside on the video monitor (“Oh, my God, I forgot my bottom was just a thong,” she said), and generally acted like the most entertaining pop star on the planet.

This week, I cringed at the uncomfortable face-off between Gervonta (Tank) Davis, the virtuosic lightweight boxer, and Jake Paul, the social-media star who has built a lucrative boxing career by having a punchable face, and also by being a better puncher than you might think. Davis is about five feet five and weighed 133.8 pounds before his most recent fight, while Paul is six-one and weighed 199.4, but no matter: they are scheduled to meet in November for a boxing match that is officially just an “exhibition,” to be aired on Netflix. Paul, shirtless, hulked over Davis, who

had his hands in his jacket pockets and feigned boredom, as if the whole thing were beneath him. Maybe it is.

This week, I'm listening to "PACIFIC MODE mix003," a mix by the Tokyo-based d.j. known as YELLOWUHURU, which is the musical equivalent of that emoji with two spirals for eyes and a squiggly-line mouth. For more than two hours, YELLOWUHURU cycles through warm and woozy variants of house music, with an emphasis on echoing sound, gentle cacophony, and noises that seem to be melting. Apparently, this mix was recorded at 5 *A.M.*, but it's perfect for any time you feel like getting lost.

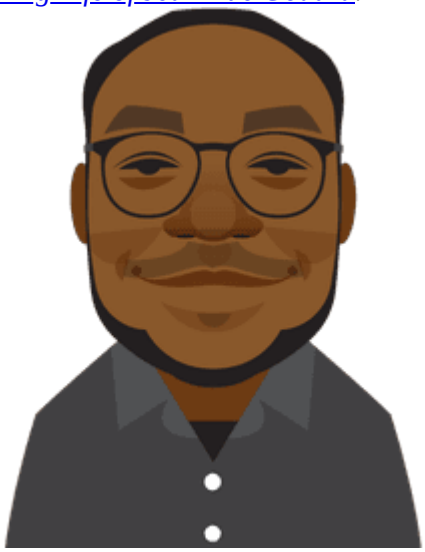
This week, I'm still thinking about "Interesting Times," the mesmerizing podcast from Ross Douthat, the New York *Times* columnist, which also earns that spiral-eyes emoji—but for very different reasons. Douthat talks to a wide range of guests, nudging them toward unexpectedly cosmic discussions of good and evil and the future of humanity. He asked Noor Siddiqui, the founder of a company that does genetic testing on embryos, what the human race might lose if we stop making babies the old-fashioned way. And he asked the technologist Peter Thiel if he ever worried about hastening the arrival of the Antichrist.

Next week, I'm looking forward to YoungBoy Never Broke Again—also known as N.B.A. YoungBoy—the Baton Rouge rapper whose mournful and sometimes beautiful tracks evoke a reckless life; videos of the chaotic atmosphere at his concerts have been going viral. I'll be out of town when he hits New York (Saturday, Sept. 27), but I'm hoping to make it to the Prudential Center, in Newark, on Monday, Sept. 29.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- *It's O.K. to be a luddite*
- Drift away
- *The cut and switch*

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."



Sheldon Pearce is a music writer for The New Yorker's Goings On newsletter.

Helen Shaw joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.
Vince Aletti is a photography critic and the author of "Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines."
Jane Bua is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff who covers classical music for Goings On. Previously, she wrote for Pitchfork.
Marina Harss has been contributing dance coverage to The New Yorker since 2004. She is the author of "The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky's Life in Ballet."
Taran Dugal is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff.

Kelefa Sanneh has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2008. He is the author of "Major Labels: A History of Popular Music in Seven Genres."

The Food Scene

The Four Horsemen Team Rides Again

I Cavallini sits right across the street from its sibling establishment, but charts a course of its own.

By Helen Rosner

September 21, 2025

The Italian menu includes panzanella, handmade pastas, a hulking rib eye for two, and tiramisu.Videos by Sam Wolson and Ian Loring Shiver for The New Yorker

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

When the Four Horsemen opened, ten years ago, on a quiet stretch of Williamsburg, it became the rare celebrity joint that almost entirely transcended its celebrity associations. Co-owned by James Murphy, of the band LCD Soundsystem, it called itself a wine bar but was a restaurant, really, with an impeccably easygoing air, great music, and an ever-changing constellation of Cali-European small plates. The natural-wine list, built by the late Justin Chearno, won a James Beard Award for best beverage program in America. The food, made by the chef Nick Curtola, earned a Michelin star. No pressure, then, for the team's new project: I Cavallini (the name is Italian for "little horses"), a restaurant that opened this summer right across the street.

Wisely, instead of trying to replicate the Four Horsemen's magic, I Cavallini charts a fresh course. With outdoor seating, the restaurant accommodates twice as many diners as its tiny older sister. The room buzzes with more than just heat-seeking curiosity—there's a sense of excitement for the place on its own terms. I Cavallini is undeniably an Italian spot, offering antipasti, contorni, primi, secondi, an entirely Italian wine list, and tiramisu fluffy as Po Valley fog. But the kitchen, overseen by Curtola along with the chef de cuisine Ben Zook, seems more interested in

conjuring an authenticity of atmosphere than in adhering strictly to traditional recipes or preparations. You can start your meal with a slab of focaccia, served with creamy whipped ricotta and jammy roasted tomatoes, and then move on to, say, snappy lamb sausages, gamy and a little rough, and served with cherries and shaved avocado squash. The dish is evocative of nowhere in particular yet feels entirely in harmony with the Italian-ish-ness around it.

As at Four Horsemen, where an *oeuf mayonnaise* is zebra-striped with squid ink and humble beans are treated like precious gems, Curtola trusts his diners to venture beyond obvious crowd-pleasers. I was impressed to see how many tables around me had ordered the *nervetti*, a chilled salad of beef tendons, cut sliver-thin, with shaved white onions and pickled chive blossoms. To my palate, the dish isn't entirely successful—tendons are a textural ingredient more than a flavorful one, slippery and jiggly-wiggly, so over all it tastes like a scoop of marinated onions destined for an Italian sub—but folks seemed to be thrilled by it anyway. The pleasures of chewy textures are on better display in a shallow bowl of *trofie*, teeny-tiny handmade pasta twists cooked to a lovely springiness. They're tossed in a shocking-green pesto, which is typically herbaceous and cheesy and has the unmistakable buttery-soft flavor armature of pounded pine nuts. Forget caviar, forget truffles: true luxury is sweet and resinous Italian *pinoli*, an increasingly precious crop that can run to more than a hundred dollars a kilo.

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

Those dreamy pine nuts show up again, whole this time, and paired with golden raisins in an agrodolce that adheres a fried fillet of eel to a piece of crackly toast. It summons Sicily, but also the Apennines, and Venice, and a little bit of China, too, in the airy way the eel is fried. I was skeptical of the addition of unshelled mussels to a classic panzanella, then almost immediately conceded: against a juicy mess of tomatoes and vinegar and fried bread, the little tender blobs of meat nearly—but, crucially, don't quite—disappear, their toothsome softness almost mushroom-like. A different

kind of surprise came with the *farfallone*, giant pasta bow ties that are tossed in an amber-dark chile butter with batons of smoky pancetta the size of a pinky finger and a generous shower of bread crumbs. I felt an unexpected swell of emotion at first bite, the pink-tinged melancholy of memory, then realized: somehow, inexplicably, the dish had evoked the precise salty-sweet savoriness of a can of SpaghettiOs with sliced franks, but lusciously complex and tingly with heat. (To be very clear, in my book the resemblance is a marvellous plus.) Sip something from the extensive list of natural wines—a gravelly Dolcetto from a teen-genius winemaker, maybe—or a nicely balanced cocktail, boozy or zero-proof, and feel, for once, happy to have grown up.

Italian pine nuts are the star of trofie with pesto.

Like its across-the-street sibling, I Cavallini wears its coolness with total disregard, giving off not a whiff of snobbery or pretension: its charisma seems arisen, not cultivated. At both places, getting in the door can be a challenge—I'll be honest, I haven't made it past the gates of the Four Horsemen in years, but I had great luck at I Cavallini showing up at 5 *P.M.* as a walk-in. Once you're in, a meal is smooth and unhurried, with warm service overseen by the partner and managing director Amanda McMillan. The room, woodsy and *rustico*, with checkerboard floors and occasional Scandi flourishes, feels built for living in and for poking around, a please-touch museum of artful objects and accents. Even the wine lists are delightful physical specimens, bound in corrugated cardboard in homage to the nineteen-seventies Italian cookbook series In Bocca, and découpaged with psychedelic illustrations from the books. Still, however gemütlich the vibe, there's no denying that you are in a status restaurant—celebrities! Wait lists!—and, inevitably, the kitchen recently introduced a status dish: an enormous and sublime rib eye, on the bone, girded with a ribbon of pearlescent fat and topped with a melting scoop of caramelized-onion butter. Only a few are available each evening, but if you aren't lucky enough to land one there's plenty of consolation to be found in the chicken. It's a heritage half-bird pan-roasted and served in pieces, with the leg still attached to the foot, its toes elegantly flexed, high-kicking off the edge of the plate—the ol' razzle-dazzle, exquisitely scented in garlic. ♦

Helen Rosner, a staff writer at The New Yorker, received a 2025 James Beard Award for her Profile of the food personality Padma Lakshmi.

The Talk of the Town

- **Grace and Disgrace**
  Hope lies not in expecting a late-in-life conversion experience in the Oval Office but in carrying out the ordinary work of civic life.
- **The New York Historical Looks Down East for Its Facelift**
  Along with a general rebrand, the Central Park West institution is getting clad in pink granite, found—and quarried by manly men—on a wild island in Maine.
- **An Italian Geek in King Charles's Court**
  Federico Marchetti, a fashion entrepreneur, was a confidant of Giorgio Armani, but he's stumped by whether it's O.K. to wear a kilt around the king.
- **As Siberia Gets Another Round, Fallon's a No-Show**
  The dive bar hidden in a subway entrance was the go-to spot for Anthony Bourdain and Quentin Tarantino. After a two-decade hiatus, it's popped up in Columbus Circle.
- **Disney World's New Rides Are Sick**
  Make sure to wash your hands after Viruses of the Caribbean.

Comment

Grace and Disgrace

Hope lies not in expecting a late-in-life conversion experience in the Oval Office but in carrying out the ordinary work of civic life.

By David Remnick

September 27, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

On a humid Charleston evening ten years ago, a ninth-grade dropout with a bowl haircut named Dylann Roof walked into a Bible-study class at Mother Emanuel A.M.E. Church, home to the oldest historically Black congregation in South Carolina. Roof, twenty-one, carried a .45-calibre Glock semi-automatic and eight magazines of hollow-point bullets. He settled into a seat near Clementa Pinckney, the church's pastor and a state senator, who was leading a discussion of a parable from the Gospel of Mark. Around them sat a dozen parishioners, all Black, mostly women decades older than Roof.

Roof had set down his creed on a website he called “The Last Rhodesian”: a lonely, seething hatred of Black people, Jews, Asians, and Hispanics. He posted photographs of himself holding a Confederate flag and standing at Sullivan’s Island, where hundreds of thousands of Africans had once been sold into bondage. “We have no skinheads, no real K.K.K., no one doing anything but talking on the internet,” he wrote. “Well someone has to have the bravery to take it to the real world, and I guess that has to be me.”

In the Bible-study class, Roof sat quietly for forty-five minutes. When the assembled bowed their heads in prayer, he stood, drew the Glock, and began to fire—pausing only to reload, then firing again. He loosed some seventy-five rounds. Tywanza Sanders, a young barber who had come with his mother, collapsed to the floor. As he lay dying, he asked, “Why are you doing this?”

“Y’all are raping our women and taking over the country,” Roof replied.

He spotted a woman praying under a table. “Shut up. Did I shoot you yet?”

“No,” she said.

“I’m going to let you live,” he told her, “so you can tell the story of what happened.”

What lingers in memory from Charleston, beyond the horror of the massacre, are the funerals that followed—above all, Barack Obama at the service for Clementa Pinckney, closing his eulogy by singing the first verse of “Amazing Grace.” That unscripted hymn may have been the most moving moment of his Presidency. Yet another moment was still more poignant, and, for many, beyond comprehension. Two days after the murders, at Roof’s bond hearing, the families of the dead spoke through their grief. They did not renounce him. They forgave him.

Felicia Sanders, Tywanza’s mother, addressed Roof directly: “We welcomed you Wednesday night in our Bible study with open arms. You have killed some of the most beautiful people that I know. Every fibre in my body hurts, and I will never be the same. But, as we say in Bible study, we enjoyed you. May God have mercy on you.” The daughter of Ethel

Lance, who died at the age of seventy, told him, “You took something very precious away from me . . . but I forgive you.” Obama later said that the “decency and goodness of the American people shines through in these families.”

It was impossible not to recall those words of mercy while watching the memorial service, last Sunday, for Charlie Kirk, the conservative activist assassinated this month as he spoke at Utah Valley University. Tens of thousands of people filled a stadium in Glendale, Arizona, to honor him. Kirk was thirty-one, with a wife and two small children. The service lasted more than five hours, but the moment that stilled the crowd came when his widow, Erika, spoke of her husband’s killer in the language of absolution. “That man, that young man, I forgive him,” she said. “I forgive him because it was what Christ did and is what Charlie would do. The answer to hate is not hate. The answer we know from the gospel is love and always love—love for our enemies and love for those who persecute us.”

President Donald Trump, who spoke next, embraced Erika Kirk, but at the microphone he all but rebuked the spirit of her forgiveness. Charlie Kirk, he said, in the course of a self-regarding and vengeful ramble, “did not hate his opponents. He wanted the best for them. That’s where I disagreed with Charlie. I hate my opponent. And I don’t want the best for them.” Other Administration speakers, including J. D. Vance and Stephen Miller, echoed Trump, not Erika Kirk. Retribution, division, grievance—this is the official language of the regime.

At the start of Trump 1.0, the journalist Salena Zito wrote in *The Atlantic* that the press took him literally but not seriously; his supporters took him seriously but not literally. The line was meant to suggest how out of touch the press was. Trump himself told Zito that his true aim was, in her words, to “bring the country together—no small task.”

Of course, this was never the case, and each week brings fresh evidence of the darkness we are being led into: the attack on the rule of law, the weaponization of the state against the President’s enemies, the erosion of civil liberties, the colossal Trump-family grift. The assault is relentless. In the days after the memorial, Trump managed to “unite” the country by renewing his threats against Jimmy Kimmel, a comedian guilty of nothing

more than making fun of him; by pushing through a last-minute indictment of James Comey; by convening a press conference where he pronounced on the science of autism—“based on what I feel”—in a manner so reckless that it was guaranteed to sow confusion and anguish among parents desperate for clarity; and by informing the United Nations that America is “the hottest country anywhere,” that he deserves Nobel Prizes for ending “seven unendable wars,” that the U.N. is a useless organization, and that climate change is “the greatest con job ever perpetrated on the world.” We look forward to next week.

It is not easy to reconcile the act of forgiveness with some of the positions Charlie Kirk once took. They were in moral opposition to the civil-rights-era spirit that infused the parishioners of Mother Emanuel. But his instinct to argue, to engage, left open the possibility of evolution. Trump is long past that horizon. His appetites and his animosities only deepen. Hope lies not in expecting a late-in-life conversion experience in the Oval Office but in carrying out the ordinary work of civic life—in persuading neighbors, friends, even family who have supported Trump to reconsider their decision, one hard conversation at a time. Grace is not weakness but resolve, the Charleston families believed, and politics, too, depends on a willingness to coax one another toward better ground. In that work of persuasion, of politics—slow, imperfect, yet necessary—we attempt to close the distance between what we are and what we might still become. ♦

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

Down East Postcard

The New York Historical Looks Down East for Its Facelift

Along with a general rebrand, the Central Park West institution is getting clad in pink granite, found—and quarried by manly men—on a wild island in Maine.

By Nick Paumgarten

September 29, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

The New-York Historical Society moved into its current home, on Central Park West, in 1908. The building, grand as it was, wound up being much

smaller than the Society had intended. The money ran out, as it will, and as it would again in the decades to come, when the N.Y.H.S. failed thrice more to realize its full scale. Now the New York Historical (a rebranding last year dropped both fussy hyphen and fusty noun) is achieving its deferred ambitions, with a hundred-and-seventy-five-million-dollar expansion. It broke ground nearly two years ago.

For a new edifice that will adjoin the old one on West Seventy-sixth Street, the Historical (if we must) and Robert A. M. Stern Architects (or *RAMSA*, if you insist) wanted to use the same kind of granite, to stay true to the building's origins and to drive home the idea that, as Roy Moskowitz, the Historical's project manager, put it, "We've always intended to do this, and it's only fair that we be allowed to do this."

The question arose: What granite is it, and where might one find it? The archives cited a stone called Sherwood pink. *RAMSA* hired a company called Swenson Stone Consultants to investigate. Malcolm Swenson, the president, had a hunch, and checked his much-thumbed copy of "The Commercial Granites of New England," an encyclopedic guide published in 1923. Further sleuthing traced this particular pink to an abandoned quarry near Stonington, Maine, on a two-hundred-acre pile of igneous rock called Crotch Island.

"No one knew how to get it," Edward Eglin, a Swenson executive, said the other day. He was speaking at the Deer Isle Granite Museum, in Stonington, to several dozen guests seated around a vast diorama depicting Crotch Island in its quarrying heyday, around a century ago. (Eglin had brought along his own volume of "The Commercial Granites of New England," from which, later that night, over oysters, he read a favorite passage aloud: "Areally, granite is perhaps the most abundant rock in Maine." He paused to savor "areally." "Even where the exposures are of other rock varieties, the notable absence of granite dikes and quartz veins indicates the presence of granite at no great distance.")

Crotch Island, named for the inlet that splits it, belongs to a Rhode Island company called New England Stone, now run by Ann Marie Ramos, whose husband, Tony, bought the island in the seventies. In 2021, Tony Ramos, who died last year, and Malcolm Swenson visited the site where Swenson

thought the Sherwood pink might be. They had the topsoil excavated to expose the stone, extracted some samples to compare with the existing cladding on Central Park West, and, once they had a match, opened the old Sherwood quarry, for the first time since the thirties.

The corduroy-like finish on the original stone at the N.Y.H.S. had been hand-chiselled by quarrymen on site, but this was no longer feasible. “You can’t really find people who do that kind of work, at scale,” Eglin said. So this time the fabricators, in Quebec, developed a computer-controlled milling process, “with some random waggling of the milling head, to make it look handmade.” The blocks, about seventy-five in total, each weighing between eight thousand and forty-five thousand pounds, were trucked to Quebec. The first new stone was placed at the building site on August 4th.

The Crotch quarries used to have some fifteen hundred workers. Now there were four, three of whom attended the talk at the museum: two Quebecers and a local named Richard Stinson, in a Chevrolet ball cap. “It’s hard to find labor,” Stinson said. Asked how many generations back his family went on Deer Isle, he said, “Forever.” He operates the burner—a rod that blasts fire into the stone to cleave it. He’d never been to New York to see the fruit of his labors: “I don’t get off the island much.”

Early the next morning, out on Crotch Island, Ramos led Eglin and a few visitors down an old track littered with rusted machinery and piles of grout (the vulgate for waste rock) to an arena-size section of the quarry where the four men were already busy cutting stone. Stinson was working the burner. Two others operated a diamond saw, to make giant blocks.

“This is manly-man stuff, and we have such a hard time finding manly men,” Ramos said. She explained that the burning technique, along with wedge-and-hammer, is mostly obsolete: “This is the last quarry that does it. It’s noisy, wasteful, and less efficient. But the men love doing it. It’s more fun.”

Ramos said the industry in the U.S. was dying. She cited labor shortages, transport costs, regulation, and a preference for steel, glass, and concrete. She reckoned that the biggest customer for cut stone is the Church of Latter-day Saints. At the head of the quarry, ospreys had built a nest high

atop an abandoned derrick bedangled like a maypole with rusty cables. It was one heck of a morning in Maine, a real sparkler. At no great distance from the base of the derrick, there were million-dollar views northeast toward Acadia and south toward the open ocean. Someday, there would almost certainly be summer houses here, probably of materials other than granite, and with the island underneath rebranded something other than Crotch. ♦

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

Sidekick Dept.

An Italian Geek in King Charles's Court

Federico Marchetti, a fashion entrepreneur, was a confidant of Giorgio Armani, but he's stumped by whether it's O.K. to wear a kilt around the King.

By John Seabrook

September 29, 2025

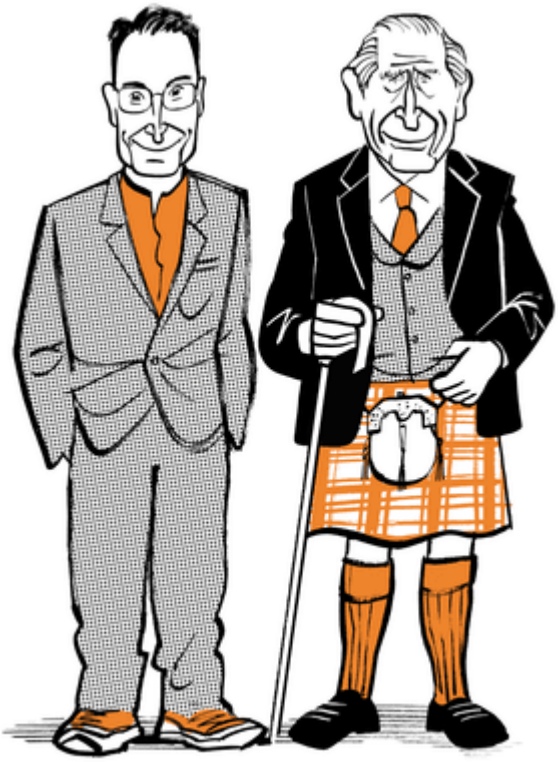


Illustration by João Fazenda

Federico Marchetti, the Italian fashion entrepreneur, is a master of sprezzatura—the courtier's art of cloaking ambition and cunning in an air of guileless nonchalance. In the early days of e-commerce, he convinced

Giorgio Armani, the king of Italian fashion, that selling clothes online would not damage his brand. He also built digital stores for other élite fashion houses, and created Yoox, a high-end online retailer. In 2018, Marchetti, then forty-nine, sold the company at a valuation of six billion dollars. But, instead of retiring, he sought out a new liege. He had served the king of fashion so ably (Armani does very good business online) that it was not entirely surprising when he joined forces with an actual king: Charles III of England.

Marchetti was in town during Fashion Week to promote his memoir, "The Geek of Chic." (The title is borrowed from a 2012 *New Yorker* profile of him.) On a Wednesday evening, Silas Chou, a Hong Kong-based textile and fashion tycoon, hosted a book party in his eighty-second-floor apartment on West Fifty-seventh Street. Guests observed a moment of silence for Armani, who had died a few days earlier, at the age of ninety-one, before tucking into what Chou described, not inaccurately, as "the best Chinese food you've ever eaten."

Two days later, Marchetti, who lives in Milan and on Lake Como, was having breakfast at a downtown café outside the Police Building, where he keeps an apartment, talking about his relationship with King Charles. When they met for the first time, in 2017, at an event in London, Charles was still a prince. They bonded over their shoes. "I said, 'Your shoes look amazing!' And he said, 'They're twenty years old!' " Marchetti recalled. "They were perfect, absolutely perfect. And my shoes were perfect, too, and *ten* years old." Charles has long been devoted to promoting sustainability in the fashion industry, part of his broader environmental advocacy. "He is someone who is wearing for twenty years the same coat—the camel," Marchetti noted. He recited a motto of the King's: "Buy less but buy better."

In 2021, Charles, admiring Marchetti's get-up-and-go, invited him to chair his fashion task force. "He calls me his Italian secret weapon, because he loves that I'm an action man," Marchetti said. Soon, Marchetti was invited to a small dinner at Dumfries House, an estate in Scotland owned by the King's Foundation, Charles's charitable nonprofit. (Marchetti is now a trustee.) "The dress code said 'smoking jacket,' " he recalled. "In Italy, we

don’t have ‘smoking jacket.’ I had to Google it.” (It refers to a velvet or silk dinner jacket worn with tuxedo trousers.) Charles himself, Marchetti remembered, had on “an amazing outfit with matching colors that only a very sophisticated man can put together. I thought, Oh, my God, you’re so stylish.”

Marchetti felt compelled to acquire a kilt for his new duties; he had one made by a Scotsman, who dreamed up a new tartan, in cream, orange, and gray. (The kilt-maker said that the pattern was “inspired by two national symbols of Italy, the wolf and the lily.”) The etiquette of kilt-wearing, however, flummoxed the Italian. “I was told that, if the King’s not wearing the kilt, no one else can,” he said. (That turned out to be wrong.) Marchetti had also heard idle gossip to the effect that “an international person cannot wear the kilt.” (Also untrue.) So far, he has played it safe, in trousers.

“I was hurrying to work and she was walking her dog, and it started to rain and she didn’t have an umbrella, and I jumped in a cab and there was already someone in it, and then we met on Tinder.” Cartoon by Liam Francis Walsh

On another occasion at Dumfries, Marchetti made a bold choice because, he said, “I’m a courageous man.” He wore green shoes, a cheeky take on the John Lobb wing tip, made in collaboration with Paul Smith. The gambit paid off with the King and his court. “Now every time they introduce me to somebody, they say, ‘This is the most stylish man of Italy,’ ” Marchetti

recalled. (He has persuaded his friend, the movie director Luca Guadagnino, to design the interiors of the Milan and Lake Como residences, which he shares with his wife, the British fashion journalist Kerry Olsen, and their fourteen-year-old daughter, Maggie.)

Marchetti was one of only a few Italians invited to Charles's coronation ceremony, in 2023; others included the President of the Republic and Andrea Bocelli. For the occasion, his friend Brunello Cucinelli made him a morning suit: white tie, striped pants, and tails. One of Marchetti's gifts to the King was even bolder than his green shoes: a chrome-plated toothpaste squeezer from Lorenzi, a venerable knife shop in Milan. It was a reference to a minor scandal from years ago, caused by a report, in the *Guardian*, that the prince's toothpaste was squeezed onto his brush by a servant.

"His valet told me, 'You're a brave man, to bring him a gift like this,' " Marchetti recalled. Charles, in a thank-you note, indicated that he was amused.

Does he use the toothpaste squeezer?

"I never asked," Marchetti said. Even an action man knows that, when dealing with kings, discretion is the better part of valor. ♦

John Seabrook has been a contributor to The New Yorker since 1989 and became a staff writer in 1993. His books include "The Spinach King: The Rise and Fall of an American Dynasty."

Rip Van Winkle Dept.

As Siberia Gets Another Round, Fallon’s a No-Show

The dive bar hidden in a subway entrance was the go-to spot for Anthony Bourdain and Quentin Tarantino. After a two-decade hiatus, it’s popped up in Columbus Circle.

By Ben McGrath

September 29, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

A family of four walked into a bar. The kids—boys, aged ten and thirteen—requested Shirley Temples. “Only two problems,” the bartender replied.

“We don’t have grenadine, and we don’t have Sprite.” They didn’t have wine, either, not that it bothered the parents (Tanq-and-tonic, bud). Another patron, anticipating his wife’s arrival, brought a couple of bottles of wine in a paper bag and handed them to the bar’s front man, Tracy Westmoreland, who looked unfazed. It’s an unusual bar where the customers supply the booze that they intend to consume, but Westmoreland’s joints have always been special. He opened Siberia in a former K.G.B. drop spot in the subway station at Fiftieth and Broadway in 1996. “It was, like, the size of a shipping container,” Greg Gutfeld recalled recently, on “The Tonight Show.” “Dude, the bar—there was no bar. There was a cooler, like the kind you take to a beach.”

“I think I remember bringing beer into the bar and then him charging me for my own beer,” Jimmy Fallon said, of Westmoreland.

“That’s Tracy,” Gutfeld said. “He is very cheap, but if you want somebody dead he’ll do it.”

Westmoreland—who also, to be fair, had a habit of not charging friends for many drinks at all—was evicted from the subway location in 2001. He soon reopened, in a warehouse near the Port Authority Bus Terminal, around the corner from another dive he owned, Bellevue, which was notable for the hearse he parked out front bearing the words “Reserved for bin Laden.” The second iteration of Siberia, like the first, had no signage. You had to know that the red light above the unmarked door denoted a portal to an endless night, and that behind the door you might find yourself talking to Quentin Tarantino or Conan O’Brien or Anthony Bourdain or, at the very least, a tabloid reporter telling stories that added pulp-novel color to the gentrifying city. The father of the two boys recalled once bringing a college friend, a corporate lawyer, to the second Siberia. “Are those people fucking?” the lawyer had asked, pointing past a mechanical bull and a couple of parked Harleys (parked indoors, that is) toward a filthy sofa. They were indeed, and the lawyer had just violated one of the rules (no cursing, no hitting on women) with which Westmoreland’s bouncers greeted newcomers to deter meatheads.

The Port Authority space burned in an electrical fire, in 2007. End of an era. Bin Laden outlasted Bellevue, too, before succumbing. Conan grew a

beard. Tarantino was threatened with cancellation. Bourdain killed himself. Donald Trump, who never set foot in either Siberia, was elected, twice impeached, defeated, and reëlected. And now, after a nearly two-decade hiatus, during which Westmoreland dabbled in acting, with roles as a crook and a homeless man, Siberia is back—once again in the subway—beneath the Hearst Building, on Fifty-seventh Street. “This place is too fucking nice,” Westmoreland said, flashing a gap-toothed smile. (So much for the rules.) It was opening night, a word-of-mouth affair, and he had invited many of his old regulars, a disconcerting number of whom wielded canes, presenting a hobbling metaphor for the ink-stained media, late-night television, middle-class Manhattan—take your pick.

Overheard amid the reminiscences, as punters examined analog pictures of the glory days which had been brought by a party promoter turned real-estate agent: “Any time I ever went out, that was the goal—to end up in Siberia.”

“You weren’t doing Siberia right if your memories aren’t vague.”

“I think my partner slept on that sofa one night. It was a very, very bad situation.”

“My metabolism is different because I stopped doing coke.”

The two young boys, more interested in Roblox than in the Ms. Pac-Man machine, went home with their mother, disappointed that Fallon hadn’t made an appearance. Their father, remaining behind, graduated from Budweiser to Jameson and allowed his perceptions to blur. Over there, dressed in his trademark blue blazer, was George Gurley, of the defunct New York *Observer*, whom Westmoreland once called “the whitest guy in New York.” By his side, as ever, was Chris Wilson, formerly of Page Six and now a digital director at *Maxim*. Wilson confessed that he had ducked Westmoreland’s calls initially. “I kind of didn’t want to come, because I feel like this isn’t me anymore,” he said. “But maybe it is me.” Another round. The dim light grew alluring in a familiar way. The stray conversations turned stranger.

“Are you, like, a pimp? What’s your deal?”

“I had a brain aneurysm in 2006.”

“Now I feel like an asshole.”

Wilson, trying to settle up as midnight approached, offered his phone to the bartender, who blanched as if he were trying to scan her forehead. Cash only, pal. ♦

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

Sketchpad

Disney World's New Rides Are Sick

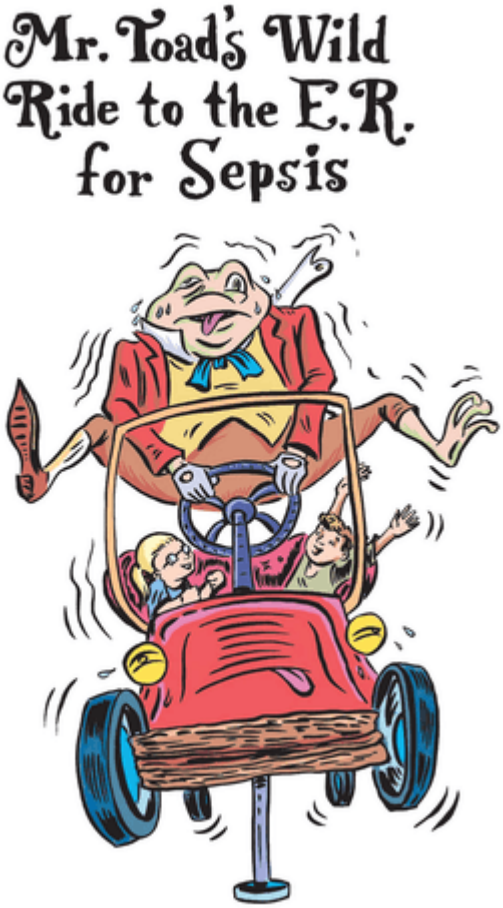
Make sure to wash your hands after Viruses of the Caribbean.

By Miriam Jayaratna, Wendi Aarons, and Ali Fitzgerald

September 29, 2025

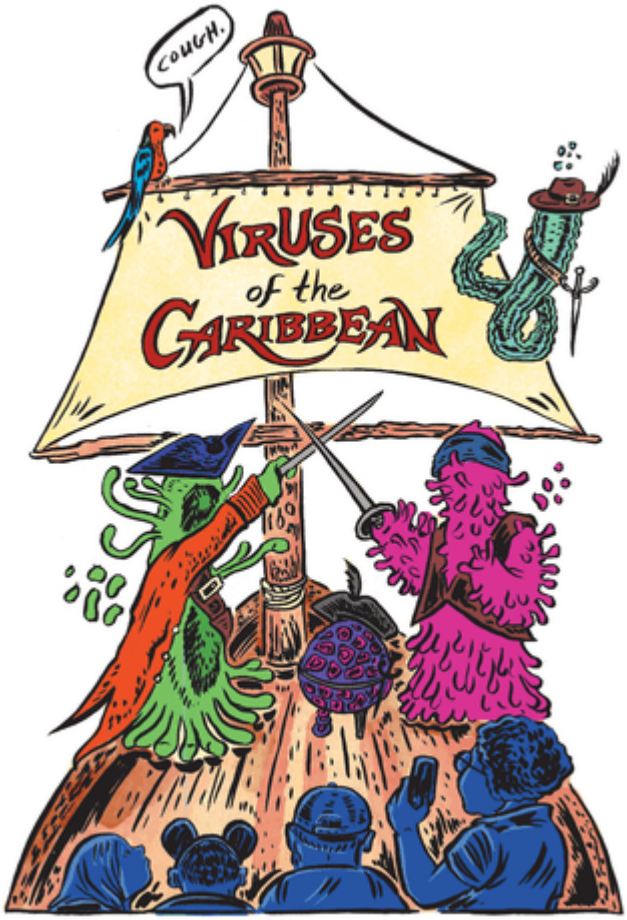
Florida plans to become the first state to end all vaccine mandates, including for schoolchildren.

—The Times.




RATATOUILLE: LA
PESTE DE REMY

Chicken-Pox Party with Mickey and Friends!


COUGH.
VIRUSES
of the
CARIBBEAN

Miriam Jayaratna is a New York-based clinical psychologist and writer.
Wendi Aarons is the author of the essay collection "I'm Wearing Tunics Now" and the middle-grade novel "Ginger Mancino, Kid Comedian."

Ali Fitzgerald, an artist and a writer, first contributed to The New Yorker in 2016. She writes the comic column “America!” and is the author of the graphic novel "Squeak Chatter Bark.”

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Reporting & Essays

- **Glowworms**
  In the punt on the river in the cave, beneath the dim light of glowing worms, it was thoughts of my own death that consumed me.
- **Tim Berners-Lee Invented the World Wide Web. Now He Wants to Save It**
  In 1989, Sir Tim revolutionized the online world. Today, in the era of misinformation, addictive algorithms, and extractive monopolies, he thinks he can do it again.
- **Have Cubans Fled One Authoritarian State for Another?**
  In the past few years, as many as two million people have escaped the island's repressive regime and collapsing economy. Those who've made it to the U.S. face a new reckoning.
- **Carol Burnett Plays On**
  The ninety-two-year-old comedy legend has influenced generations of performers. In a string of recent TV roles, she has been co-starring with some of her closest comedic heirs.

Personal History

Glowworms

In the punt on the river in the cave, beneath the dim light of glowing worms, it was thoughts of my own death that consumed me.

By Ann Patchett

September 29, 2025

Illustration by Hokyoung Kim

Why do I think that death would be manageable if I knew in advance when it was coming? Death is not manageable, and the answer to the question of when is never going to be anything more than a good guess.

In 2024, I was scheduled to go on book tour in Australia and New Zealand. Flights had been purchased for me and my husband, Karl, and tickets to various literary-festival events at which I was to appear had been sold. But, as our May 9th departure inched closer, three things became increasingly clear: first, Karl's hundred-and-two-year-old mother, Jo VanDevender, was not going to make it to a hundred and three; second, my friend Jim Fox, who, at eighty-four, had been diagnosed as having pancreatic cancer that had metastasized to his lungs, wasn't going to beat the odds much longer;

third, our little dog, Sparky, who looked at us with mounting panic through his bouts of hard panting, had developed an enlarged heart.

Karl and I had many long talks about whether to cancel the trip. Karl is a doctor, and he is able to be both kind and unsentimental where death is concerned, even the deaths of his mother and his dog. He said it was possible that all three would still be here when we returned, and it was also possible that they would die while we were gone and we wouldn't be able to get back in time, and, by the way, back in time for what? To be helpful?

Jo had spent the past seventy-five years of her life on Poplar Springs Drive in Meridian, Mississippi. She and her husband, Frank, long deceased, had had three children: Karl and his sister, Nancy, were both in their seventies, and Michael was in his sixties. Michael lived next door to Jo, and Nancy lived four houses down on the other side of the street. Karl had a plane, and we regularly flew from Nashville on weekends to see Jo. The last time we went, Karl's daughter, Josephine, flew with us. Nancy's daughter Langdon had come from Los Angeles. We were all thinking the same thing—that Jo was somewhere near the end—though when someone is a hundred and two it's hard to tell the difference between the end of life and the slowing down even further of life. Jo had a genius for rallying. Most of her friends from her generation, the legendary Whiskey Widows of Northwood Country Club, had already died, but Jo's friendships extended deep into other generations, so there were still plenty of visitors. I had known my mother-in-law longer than I had known my husband. We had been friends for thirty years, a fact that pleased us both. I had dedicated a novel to her: "To my friend Jo VanDevender." She loved that. "Not 'To my mother-in-law,' " she said. " 'To my friend.' "

On that last Sunday visit, Michael and I stayed at the house with Jo while Karl took everyone else to lunch. I got a good two hours with her, holding her hand as she dozed in a hospital bed. She hated that hospital bed, even though it made her more comfortable and her care easier on everyone. She wanted her own bed back. She wanted never to die. She woke and slept and woke, and every time she opened her eyes she seemed surprised to see me there.

"I like your shirt," she said.

I thanked her.

“I’ve been sick,” she said.

“You have,” I said.

“Am I going to feel better?”

“You will.”

“I like your shirt,” she said. “When am I going to be better?”

“Soon, I think. Do you want to try some applesauce?”

She did not, but she took a little water. I asked her if she had been a good swimmer, and for a minute the memory lifted her out of the fog. “I was,” she said. She told me that she had swum in Bay St. Louis when she was a girl. She looked at me. “I like your shirt.”

By the time everyone came back from lunch, the weather had started to deteriorate. Karl said that we needed to leave quickly in order to be able to fly out. It was March 24th, Palm Sunday. Later, I would think that, if that was our last goodbye, then it had been a good one. We all kissed her and told her that we loved her.

My friend Jim and I had said our last goodbye in the hallway of his New York apartment a month earlier. I’d come to stay while his husband, Martin, was away on business. To have an entire week with Jim Fox was as close to a lottery win as anything I could imagine, if lottery wins paid out in love and long conversations about books and films and dogs. The first morning I was there, Jim got into his wheelchair, and I pushed him the three blocks from his apartment to his chemo session. He held his cane, which he liked to use as a gondolier’s pole to help me along. He sang.

Jim’s friend Dale met us in the waiting room, wearing a beautiful brown corduroy dress. In other circumstances, I would have asked her where she got it. Jim had so many friends who wanted to take him to chemo that a schedule had been devised. But, after the initial tests, we were told that

there would be no chemo that day, because Jim's platelet count was low. Then he fell in the bathroom. The three of us were sent next door to the hospital and down to the basement for scans. I was especially grateful for Dale's company when they took Jim away. The scans aroused suspicions, and the decision was made to admit Jim through the emergency room. In the E.R., we were put into a tiny holding bay with a dancer named John, who was in renal failure. John knew all about how to come into the system through the E.R. He wore a fluffy red onesie and had giant bags of Doritos and SkinnyPop, which he freely shared.

Dale did not want to leave, but she had already committed to babysit for her grandchildren in Brooklyn, and this was probably for the best, since there wasn't room in the bay for two occupied beds, two visitors, and the wheelchair. After she left, I sat in the wheelchair, holding the cane. Because it was a teaching hospital, medical students arrived in an endless procession, along with medical residents and various techs and techs-in-training and nurses and nursing students, all of whom needed to ask Jim some questions: What was his name, his date of birth, how was he feeling, what was his pain on a scale of one to ten, did he know the year, did he know who the President was?

"The President now?" he asked cheerfully. "Joseph R. Biden. But let's do them all. Let's do them backward." And so he did—Biden, Trump, Obama, Bush, Clinton, Bush, Reagan, Carter, Ford, Nixon . . . all the way to the Founding Fathers. Once he had started, he would not be stopped.

The repetitious questions did not throw him off his course. All comers were human beings trying to do their jobs. He met each one with joy.

In the last week I would ever spend with one of the best friends I've ever had, I was given the gift of being supremely useful. I brought him vanilla ice cream and black coffee. I emptied the urinal, found the remote and the hearing aids, changed the sheets, tended to the sacral ulcer, greeted other helpful visiting friends. When, three days later, Jim was discharged into my care without a single thing relating to his health having been resolved or discovered, I got him dressed and wrapped in a blanket, then pushed him the three blocks home in his wheelchair, because I couldn't imagine how I would get him into and out of a taxi. We spent our final day together

making lists, organizing bottles of pills, and cleaning out the linen closet. I located, purchased, and installed a riser on the toilet seat. I soaked his feet and cut his toenails. He gave me the small china dog that his father had won for him at a fair in Ellwood City, Pennsylvania, when he was a child. “I’ve had that dog with me everywhere I’ve lived,” he said.

I held the little brown hound in the palm of my hand. Maybe I wanted it, but I didn’t want it now. “Could you give it to me later?” I asked. “How about my birthday?”

“This isn’t your birthday present. It’s your going-away present,” he said. “My going-away present to you.”

I wanted to believe that I would see him again before he died, but I knew that probably wasn’t going to happen, and this made the solitary ride down in the elevator a sad and singular journey. You get what you get, I told myself. I had got so much. I had not got enough.

The dog was harder.

Jim would have understood this. When his dog, Grace, died the year before, at the age of sixteen and a half, the sadness was overwhelming. I had dinner with Jim and Martin in their apartment at some point in those short months between Grace’s death and Jim’s diagnosis. Jim set the stage over dessert. “Now, we have a very important question to ask you,” he said with great formality. Both Jim and Martin looked at me nervously, and I knew the question before they asked it.

I told them yes. Yes, they should get another dog, and if they died or became incapacitated this unknown dog could come and live with me.

They were so happy you would have thought I’d pulled a puppy from underneath my napkin. That night, we all believed that there would be one more dog in this lifetime.

Oh, how I wish that Jim could have had one last dog to sleep beside him when he was sick.

Sparky would have been an excellent candidate for the job as he wasn't well himself, but what dog wants to see New York City for the first time so near the end of his life? What dog really wants to get on a plane?

Sparky would have done it for me, though. He was the kind of dog who woke up every morning wondering what he could do for his country and never what his country could do for him. Ask any of the readers who met him at Parnassus Books, the store I own in Nashville, where he worked. Ask any of the staff. His sweet and gentle nature made him a legend among the shop dogs. Karl had picked him out at our local humane shelter twelve years earlier, walked straight to the bin where he was and lifted him up, the Dalai Lama of dogs.

The medley of pills I pushed down Sparky's throat twice a day didn't do much to save him. When his belly distended like a hard balloon, Dr. Wall drew three hundred and ten ccs of fluid out of his abdomen and brought us back a dog so elated and hungry and seemingly well that it counted as a miracle. "Don't keep doing this," she said to Karl and me. "You can drain them and drain them, but the fluid comes right back. It isn't kind."

I'll always be grateful to her for telling us this up front. Otherwise, I would have had her put a needle in Sparky twice a day so that I could have what I wanted: I wanted him to live.

My friend Pam, who keeps a picture of Sparky on her wall, told us that we should go to Australia. She said that, if Sparky got worse, she and Dr. Wall would make the right decision. I knew that they would, but I didn't want to go.

The home health aide called Michael in the middle of the night, sometime between April 4th and 5th, and Michael got up and went next door. When Jo died, he was with her.

The funeral, at St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Meridian, was befitting a woman who had been an involved and beloved citizen with advanced social skills. People poured in for the visitation and stayed for the service. They lined up their cars and drove to the grave site, far too many to fit beneath the small awning that covered the chairs for immediate family. The skies

opened into sheeting rain as the minister gave his greeting; this was followed by thunder and an explosion of lightning. "*Go! Go!*" the minister shouted to the assembled, and we ran, soaked, back to our cars. Karl turned on the headlights and got the windshield wipers going at a mad slap. We drove straight to Northwood Country Club, where lunch was served. Karl said how much his mother would have liked that, nature forcing us off to the party without a minute to linger over her final resting place.

Back in the day, Jim Fox and I had been known to stay on the phone for more than an hour, but once the coughing started to wear him out he set a strict fifteen-minute limit on all calls. "This is genius," I said. "Now we can talk anytime."

And, for a while, we did. We talked almost every day. But then the fifteen minutes got hard. There were e-mails, and then the e-mails stopped. Martin called me on April 30th to tell me that Jim was sleeping, that Jim was dying now. "I put the birthday card you sent right by his bed, where he can see it," Martin said.

Two days later, on May 2nd, his eighty-fifth birthday, Jim died.

Jim was the person I most wanted to call later that same day, to tell him that I had taken Sparky to see Dr. Wall again, and that Dr. Wall had drawn half a litre of fluid out of his abdomen, despite what she had said before. "Jim," I wanted to tell him, "she gave him another chance, a couple more days."

But it was just a day. The next morning, May 3rd, Karl and I took Sparky back to her office. All the fluid that had been drawn off the day before had returned, all that and more. Dr. Wall took him to another room and put a port in his leg so that the medicine wouldn't sting him. Karl and I sat close enough to make a single surface of our laps, and we held him while she gave the injection into the port. For years, Sparky had been so afraid of going to the vet, and this was what he had been afraid of. His legs folded beneath him, and his sweet head fell into my open hand.

All three of them were gone now, and five days later we were gone as well.

I started keeping a journal in the year 2000. An old boyfriend of mine had had a weekly appointment calendar from the Museum of Modern Art, and he wrote down as much of his day as would fit in a space six and a half inches long and an inch high. Years after I last saw him, I decided to co-opt his habit—a resolution to mark the new century. It's the small space that makes it possible for me. Every day, I condense my life into what will fit in that strip of calendar.

The months preceding our departure to Australia and New Zealand were a train wreck, but I kept up the entries because I was twenty-four years into the pledge. Looking back over those pages now is nearly unbearable. They are a map of everything, of Jo and Jim and Sparky.

We flew to Los Angeles on May 8th, then to Melbourne on the ninth. I told myself that things would be better on the other side of the world, and I was right. At home, I would have lain on the floor of my office and cried. I know this about myself. Distraction has much to recommend it. In Australia and New Zealand, I had work and scenery, other writers and friendly readers. Karl and I were not separated by the workday. We were together all the time, and that was the greatest comfort. What a disaster it would have been to leave when everyone was still alive, only to have them die one by one when we were so ungodly far away. I'd thought I could manage it, but I could not have.

That first day in Australia, we walked in a beautiful park not far from our hotel and tallied the unfamiliar birds as a means of staying awake. My memories of the Melbourne Writers Festival are disconnected in the way of dreams: I remember the snacks in the basement of the theatre where I spoke but not what was said onstage. I remember that, from the table where I sat signing books, I could see that a production of "Wicked" was running at the theatre across the street. I signed for more than two hours. Karl came by and said hello. I was told that the length of the line was a good thing, because it meant that the signing after the evening event would be brief, but the second signing turned out to be every bit as long. Some people came twice.

The next morning, a car picked us up at 4 *a.m.* to deliver us to our flight to Queenstown. At the airport, the driver wrestled our bags to the curb and was

gone. The place was half asleep. We were half asleep.

It turned out that there was no flight to Queenstown, and there wouldn't be for another two days.

The only agent at the only open ticket counter in the airport studied our printed itinerary.

She told us that our flight had been cancelled a while ago. "You were rebooked on the flight that left yesterday morning," she said.

I shook my head. "I was working yesterday. Yesterday was why I came to Melbourne." The tickets had been purchased by a festival, but I didn't know if it had been the next festival or the previous festival that had failed to inform us.

It didn't matter, because there was no flight. Tracking down whoever had dropped the ball wouldn't change that. We had to figure out how to get to Queenstown on some other airline. Most of the desks would be open at six. It wasn't yet five.

From what we could determine on Karl's phone, the only way to fly to Queenstown now would be to fly to Sydney and wait for a connecting flight, which would take eleven hours in total and cost us a full day of our vacation. We kept trying different scenarios, different airlines, but continually failed to get the results we were hoping for. As a resident of a vast country, I should have been able to conceive of the vastness of this land I was visiting, but I could not.

The publicists and festival organizers were sleeping. I borrowed Karl's phone and texted Meg.

Meg Mason was the reason I'd agreed to come to the Southern Hemisphere in the first place. Meg, a novelist, is a New Zealand native who moved to Sydney at sixteen. She and her husband, Andrew, were already in New Zealand, waiting for us. She told me that figuring out our transport would take a few minutes.

When she called back, she had booked us a flight to Christchurch, which would put us on the wrong side of the correct island. “In Christchurch, I’ve hired a plane to bring you to Wanaka.”

“Does it come with a pilot?” I asked, wondering if this was the aviation equivalent of a rental car. I assumed that Karl *could* fly an unfamiliar plane across an unfamiliar island, but it wasn’t ideal.

“You gave me your credit-card number,” she said. “It comes with everything.”

The condition for success was that our flight to Christchurch had to land by three-thirty so that we could take off in the rental plane by four, because, as Meg explained, the pilot didn’t fly in the dark. There was just the one flight from Melbourne to Christchurch, and it was scheduled to land at three-fifteen.

When we arrived, we had no trouble picking the pilot out in the crowd. He wore a blue pullover with a patch that said “Canterbury Aviation,” and carried a charging pack for his plane, which looked remarkably like a car battery. I didn’t ask why. Insofar as it was possible to hustle, we hustled to get our luggage, clear customs, and find a taxi, in which the three of us were driven to the distant other side of the airport. It amazed me that the journey to the other side of the airport could be such a long and scenic drive. We arrived at the edge of a grassy field and got out with our luggage, the pilot, the charging pack.

The waiting plane was a Cessna 185 Skywagon, a taildragger, circa 1974. It was a four-seater, but one of the back seats had been removed to make room for luggage and a jumble of plane-related detritus: ropes, a mallet, a large toolbox. Karl was thrilled, and I was fine. I was proud of being fine, because I believed that many people in my position wouldn’t have been. Ivor (the pilot was named Ivor) untied the ropes and pulled up the stakes. We would make the four-o’clock deadline, just. We took off without the benefit of tarmac, taxiing across the short nap of grass.

“Accompanying your argument with that simple, childlike tune isn’t making it any easier to understand.”
Cartoon by Carolita Johnson

I am no stranger to small planes. My stepfather flew our family around when I was growing up, and Karl has had many planes in our thirty-one years together. I have had flights that were unpleasant and flights that were uneventful, but I had never before been struck with a sense of wonder on a plane. In that Cessna 185 Skywagon, I was lit up with wonder. Much of this can be attributed to flying down the middle of the South Island of New Zealand and seeing the green and treeless mountains in the light of late day, as if the whole island had just pushed itself up from the blue-green sea. But more staggering than what I was seeing was how I was seeing it. We were flying very, very low. We were flying the way I fly in dreams, brushing over the contours of land. On the mountains, the unattended sheep raised their faces to the sky and blinked.

I talked to Karl about this later. I would have sworn we were a hundred feet above the ground at most. He said that it was more like a thousand feet, but maybe a thousand feet feels like considerably less when you’re used to so much more. Going to Meridian on weekends to visit Jo, we kept an altitude of between six thousand and ten thousand feet, depending on the weather. Tennessee, Alabama, and Mississippi rolled out like an old quilt beneath us, all pattern and shape and no detail. I hadn’t asked Meg what it cost to be flown from Christchurch to Wanaka, but, whatever we paid, it wasn’t enough.

In Wanaka, we landed in the very grass where Meg and Andrew were waiting. Ivor staked the plane, and we gave him a lift to the hotel where he would spend the night—only commercial flights are allowed over the mountains in the dark—then we went to the house on a lake which the Masons had rented.

Meg and I had built a solid friendship over the years based on a fervent correspondence, but this was only the second time we had seen each other in person, and I had never met Andrew. There was, for all of us, an element of risk: four adults driving a rented Defender to a very secluded house with enough groceries to last several days. I can see the ways in which it could have gone Agatha Christie, but it didn't. Our only disagreement was over how to cook the porridge.

Meg had made every arrangement for our happiness. We read by the fire and then lay out on the deck to watch the stars. We drove to the head of the Routeburn Track and crossed a bright-blue river on a rope suspension bridge to study the ferns and moss on the other side, then drove to Glenorchy to do a book club for thirty people at a general store called Mrs. Woolly's. We talked about Jo and Jim and Sparky while hiking. We talked about the books we were reading and the books we wanted to write. I had a few bites of Meg's Vegemite toast—thin layer of butter, thin layer of Vegemite—then started making my own. My sadness was neither resolved nor ignored, but it softened. This is something the tourism board might consider advertising: *"Go to New Zealand and soften your sadness."*

There were a certain number of set activities that we had agreed on well in advance: visits to the glowworm cave on Lake Te Anau and to the kiwi sanctuary, trips to the Milford Sound and to Arrowtown. This was our vacation, and after the vacation was done Meg and I would appear at literary festivals in Auckland and Sydney. By the time we'd packed up and left the house in Wanaka, driven several hours, bought more food, and found the rental house in Te Anau, we were tired and it was dark. When Karl said that he would not be sorry to miss the glowworms, Andrew said that he could do without them as well. It might be nice to settle into the new house, make some popcorn, and leave the worms to themselves.

But I wanted to go. The chances of my making it back to Te Anau on some other night in life were nonexistent. Meg backed me up. “They’re worms that *glow*,” she said. “And we’ve already paid for them.”

“You don’t need to go,” I said to the husbands. “We’ll be fine.” By which I meant that Meg could drive. I wasn’t going to take the Defender into a landscape devoid of street lights when the steering wheel was on the right-hand side of the car.

Andrew said no. If we were in, then he was in. Somewhere in the world, there may be a more agreeable person than Andrew Mason, but I have not yet found him. Karl, who is very agreeable himself, said that he would come, too. The four of us got back in the car.

It was a Thursday, and our tickets were for 9 *p.m*. The town of Te Anau had already called it a night, but the large visitors’ center at the edge of the lake was brightly lit and full of T-shirts and branded rain gear and plush stuffed keas. We stood in line to go down a gangplank to the boat that would take us to the cave, and watched the previous tour group debarking, a sheen of elation on their faces. “Was it good?” I asked a random sampling of them.

“Fabulous!” they said. “Oh, you’ll love it.”

On the half-hour trip to the western shore of Lake Te Anau, Meg and I sat together on a bench and looked at the crown of stars arcing over the sky while our husbands sat nearby, mapping out the next day’s drive on their phones.

We were happy, in the way that people who go off on a boat to have an adventure at night are happy.

On arrival, the large group on the boat was divided into smaller packs of twelve. Our pack consisted of Karl and myself, two Masons, and eight Chinese visitors, who were told through the translation app on their phones that they would have to put their phones away. No one was allowed to use a phone in the cave, which seemed a real disadvantage for the people who were now cut off from any further instruction, but they cheerfully complied. Our guide was a slight man who reminded me of Johnny Depp playing

Captain Jack Sparrow in “Pirates of the Caribbean,” or maybe of Johnny Depp’s father had he played the same part. I wondered how often our guide took breaks and came up to the earth’s surface to stretch.

The path into the cave descended steeply, and the ceiling lowered so that everyone had to bend and then squat. It was in this cramped configuration that we went down and down and farther down. Like any American, I was thinking about liability, a concept that didn’t seem to trouble New Zealanders. The twisting limestone tunnel was slick and poorly lit, and soon we could hear the roaring of water. In a few more turns, we came upon a large waterfall pouring into a rushing river, aptly named Tunnel Burn, which was lit up to show just how clear the water was, how fast. We crossed a stone bridge and, on the other side, found a punt waiting for us. For the first time, it occurred to me that this was not a good idea, but there was nothing I could do about it.

Forward was the only direction available. The twelve of us got into the unsteady open boat with Captain Jack, and, when we were settled, he began to pull us down the ice-cold river hand over hand, using a chain.

Yes, in the pitch dark we could see tiny glowing worms dotting the ceilings and walls, but they were, in number, several hundred billion fewer than the stars that covered the night sky above Lake Te Anau. I took Karl’s hand and whispered that he should hold on to me, no matter what. We’d been told not to speak in the boat as it was being pulled along, and that was just as well, because everything I had to say was about death.

Not Jo’s death or Jim’s or Sparky’s, though I kept the three of them close. In the punt on the river in the cave, beneath the dim light of glowing worms, it was my own death that consumed me. If any of the strangers in this open boat lost their minds and threw a few of us overboard, threw me overboard, that would be that. The river was cold and fast and headed to the center of the earth. If there were a geological shift, an earthquake, a rock slide, that would be that. The one entrance into this cave was, coincidentally, the one exit, and that small opening could close at any moment. But more alarming than the ways in which this physical space could turn against us was the simple metaphor of a wizened little man pulling a boat down a river in the dark. I had always believed myself to be pretty sanguine at the thought of

my own death—I'd had a good long life, done good work, experienced true love, was generally A+ lucky—but now all I wanted was to get the hell out of there. I wanted to be above the ground and not beneath it.

I thought of my father, ten years dead. His presence in the boat was palpable. "You bought a ticket," he said to me. "You brought Karl and your friends. They were perfectly happy to stay home, but you insisted."

I felt as if I were on a conveyor belt being carried through suffering and time and loss, and at the end I would be dropped off into darkness. I hoped that Jo and Jim and Sparky had missed this part.

The glowworms continued to glow.

When we looped back to the same dock, Karl helped me out of the boat, or I helped him.

We stooped and climbed up through the tunnel of rock. I'd been crying, but the environment was so pervasively wet that no one noticed. Our guide stopped to point out an accessible glowworm on the stone wall, and everyone leaned in for a closer look. I would have nothing to do with it.

We were fed back through a museum and into a theatre where we were shown a film about glowworms. A young woman gave an animated presentation, explaining to the audience that these particular glowworms weren't really worms at all but the maggots of the fungus gnat. These maggots vomit and excrete illuminated threads of bile to entice tiny insects to their deaths. When tiny insects are in short supply, they eat one another. In the film, one glowing maggot scores an oversized moth, wraps it up, then bores through its eye before eating its living brain. There was a reason that they didn't show the film before you went into the cave.

Meg and Andrew skipped the presentation and stayed in the hallway to look at photographs of the cave's discovery by white settlers, in 1948, some two thousand years after it had been discovered by Maori people. Those settlers managed to make an underground river with murderous maggots on unstable terrain into a tourist attraction in record time.

“I cannot believe you had a breakdown,” Meg said. “You never have breakdowns. I consider you unflappable.” We were back on the big boat, going across the open lake. It was freezing now, and we were well past tired.

“It surprised me, too,” I said.

“Was it the worms?”

“Maggots,” I said. “But, no, it was more the dark underground river leading toward death.”

“Do you think the people who told us it was fabulous, coming off the boat, actually had breakdowns in the cave but didn’t want to ruin the surprise?”

“Possible.”

“Was it Jo and Jim and Sparky you saw?”

I shook my head. “It was me. It was my death.”

Meg put her arm around me. “Well, *that’s* awful. Maybe don’t put that in your review online.”

The next day, we took the Milford Road to the Milford Sound. As with every other destination in New Zealand, the drive was the reward. We went through deep, mossy forests on narrow roads that offered up spectacular alpine views whenever we turned a corner. When Andrew pulled the car over to take pictures, the sun broke through the clouds in silvered streams, as if to herald the Epiphany.

“This is one of the most beautiful places in my country, and I’m only here because you came from Nashville,” Meg said. We were in the back seat, the husbands in the front. “Are you still thinking about the maggots?” she whispered, pronouncing the word like a New Zealander. *Meegits*.

I was, but not with the intensity of the day before. That’s the thing about your own death—you can hold the truth of it for only a few minutes, and then it reverts back into abstraction.

To drive to the Milford Sound, one must go through the Homer Tunnel, which runs through the Darran Mountains. When we arrived at the tunnel, Andrew pulled over and turned off the car, and Karl patted his shoulder and said, “Well done,” because Karl gave Andrew a bit of praise every time he stopped as a way of appreciating his willingness to do all the driving. Vehicles could pass through the tunnel only in one direction at a time, and so we got out and stood near the red light, waiting twenty minutes before it turned green. A kea walked around on the side of the road, pecking at gravel. Andrew took a picture of it.

Green light. We piled back into the car, and the magnificent scenery switched off.

Everything switched off. There were no lights in the tunnel, and quickly it was as black as a glowworm cave, but instead of the maggots we had headlights, which were equally ineffective against the overwhelming darkness. The Homer Tunnel starts at three thousand one hundred feet above sea level and drops by more than a football field in just three-quarters of a mile. The car didn’t seem to be moving forward as much as falling straight down, but this didn’t bother me. It reminded me of the Duquesne Incline, in Pittsburgh.

“What’s happening?” Meg whispered.

“Just a really steep tunnel, I guess,” I said.

“No, there’s no such thing as a steep tunnel. Tunnels are meant to go through the mountain. Not under it.” She tipped over so that her head was in my lap. “I don’t think I can do it.”

I put my hand on her head. I understood what she meant, even though I didn’t feel it myself. “We’ll be out soon enough.”

“No, I’m not going to make it.” Her voice was thin. “It’s against nature. Can you talk, please? Can you please tell me a story, or anything? I don’t care. I’m closing my eyes.”

I leaned over her. In the dark, I held her in my arms. “That kea?”

“The one we just saw?”

“I didn’t want to say anything, but she’s famous. She’s the official kea, the one who’s on the postcards and handkerchiefs. She has tremendous licensing deals.”

“That’s a lot of pressure.”

“She can never go anywhere now and just be a bird. That’s why I didn’t say anything.”

“I wonder if we’re going to die,” Meg said.

“We’re going to die, but not in this tunnel.”

“The kea,” Meg said. “What’s her name?”

“Sally,” I said.

When we were finally returned to daylight, Meg sat up and smiled hugely. “That was hideous.”

“I know.”

“I can’t believe we both had existential crises on the same vacation. Friends, encountering their own deaths, Thursday and Friday.”

“What are the chances?” I said.

Just as the glowworms aren’t really worms, the Milford Sound isn’t actually a sound; it’s a fjord. Precipitation is the great constant there, and when we got on the boat it was raining. Meg held fast to Andrew, and together they made their way to the open deck on top of the boat to watch for dolphins. Karl went up front to talk to the captain, and I drank tea from a paper cup in the boat’s glassed interior. From time to time, I’d go up top to see the Masons, but the rain kept driving me back in. I went to see Karl, who introduced me to his new friend. The captain said that he wasn’t allowed to cruise behind the waterfalls anymore because of recent rock slides. The

highest waterfall in the Milford Sound was five hundred feet, or half the height at which Ivor had flown us from Christchurch.

Over the loudspeaker, the captain told the passengers that the Alpine Fault ran down the South Island, right beneath the Milford Sound. The “rupture events”—which struck me as a very polite way of saying “earthquakes”—came with great regularity, every three hundred years. A rupture event of magnitude 8 was currently seven years overdue. He suggested we think about that while driving home through the tunnel.

I threw my tea away and went quickly up the grated metal stairs. I saw my friends at a distance, holding on to the railing. Both of them wore their stocking caps pulled down beneath the hoods of their anoraks. The wind and the rain and the churn of the engine, the hats and the hoods, all worked together to keep them from hearing anything. They turned and saw me, their smiling faces wet with rain. They had seen dolphins, they shouted, and I went and stood beside them, looking over the edge until I saw dolphins, too. ♦

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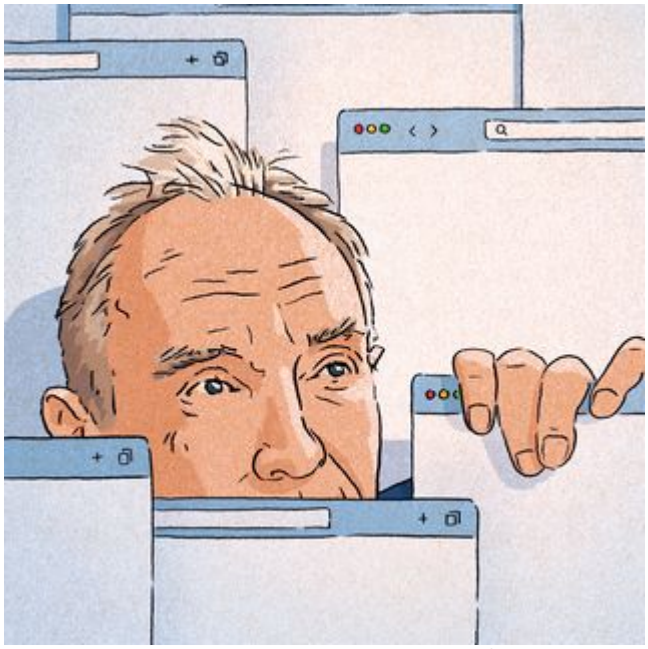
Annals of Technology

Tim Berners-Lee Invented the World Wide Web. Now He Wants to Save It

In 1989, Sir Tim revolutionized the online world. Today, in the era of misinformation, addictive algorithms, and extractive monopolies, he thinks he can do it again.

By Julian Lucas

September 29, 2025



Berners-Lee is building tools that aim to resist the Big Tech platforms, give users control over their own data, and prevent A.I. from hollowing out the open web.Illustration by Tim Bouckley

Tim Berners-Lee may have the smallest fame-to-impact ratio of anyone living. Strangers hardly ever recognize his face; on “Jeopardy!,” his name usually goes for at least sixteen hundred dollars. Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web, in 1989, but people informed of this often respond with a joke: Wasn’t that Al Gore? Still, his creation keeps growing, absorbing our

reality in the process. If you're reading this online, Berners-Lee wrote the hypertext markup language (HTML) that your browser is interpreting. He's the necessary condition behind everything from Amazon to Wikipedia, and if A.I. brings about what Sam Altman recently called "the gentle singularity"—or else buries us in slop—that, too, will be an outgrowth of his global collective consciousness.

Somehow, the man responsible for all of this is a mild-mannered British Unitarian who loves model trains and folk music, and recently celebrated his seventieth birthday with a picnic on a Welsh mountain. An emeritus professor at Oxford and M.I.T., he divides his time between the U.K., Canada, and Concord, Massachusetts, where he and his wife, Rosemary Leith, live in a stout greige house older than the Republic. On the summer morning when I visited, geese honked and cicadas whined. Leith, an investor and a nonprofit director who co-founded a dot-com-era women's portal called Flametree, greeted me at the door. "We're basically guardians of the house," she said, showing me its antique features. I almost missed Berners-Lee in the converted-barn kitchen, standing, expectantly, in a blue plaid shirt. He shook my hand, then glanced at Leith. "Are you a canoer?" she asked. Minutes later, he and I were gliding across a pond behind the house.

Berners-Lee is bronzed and wiry, with sharp cheekbones and faraway blue eyes, the right one underscored by an X-shaped wrinkle. There's a recalcitrant blond tuft at the back of his balding head; in quiet moments, I could picture Ralph Fiennes playing him in a movie—the internet's careworn steward, ruminating on some techno-political conundrum. A twitchier figure emerged when he spoke. He muttered and trailed off, eyes darting, or froze midsentence, as though to buffer, before delivering a verbal torrent. It was the arrhythmia of a disciplined demeanor struggling with a restless mind. "Tim has always been difficult to understand," a former colleague of his told me. "He speaks in hypertext."

He visibly relaxed as we paddled onto the water. Berners-Lee swims daily when it's warm, and sometimes invites members of the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) to "pondithons," or pond-based hackathons. "We have a joke that if you get any number of them on the island, then they form a

quorum, and can make decisions," he said, indicating a gazebo-size clump of foliage. He spoke of the web as though it were a small New England town and he one of the selectmen. Berners-Lee raised his two children in nearby Lexington, the cradle of the American Revolution, and rose early for the annual Patriots' Day festivities. "We took them to the reënactment on the Battle Green," he recalled, "and the midnight ride of Paul Revere."

The Founding Fathers idolized Cincinnatus, who was appointed dictator to save the Roman Republic, then peacefully returned to his fields. Berners-Lee is admired in a similar spirit—not only for inventing the web but for refusing to patent it. Others wrung riches from the network; Berners-Lee assumed the mantle of moral authority, fighting to safeguard the web's openness and promote equitable access. He's been honored accordingly: a knighthood, in 2004; the million-dollar Turing Award, in 2016.

Now Sir Tim has written a memoir, "This Is for Everyone," with the journalist Stephen Witt. It might have been a victory lap, but for the web's dire situation—viral misinformation, addictive algorithms, the escalating disruptions of A.I. In such times, Berners-Lee can no longer be Cincinnatus. He has taken up the role of Paul Revere.

"They thought they were safe," he said, as the boat startled a flock of geese. Platforms had lulled users into complacent dependency, then sealed off the exits, revealing themselves as extractive monopolies. Berners-Lee's escape hatch is a project called the Solid Protocol, whose mission is to revolutionize the web by giving users control over their data. To accelerate its adoption, he launched a company, Inrupt, in 2017. "We can build a new world in which we get the functionality of things like Facebook and Instagram," he told me. "And we don't need to ask for permission."

Berners-Lee knows that the obstacles are formidable. But he's pulled off a miracle before. "Young people don't understand what it took to make the web," he said. "It took companies giving up their patent rights, it took individuals giving up their time and energy, it took bright people giving up their ideas for the sake of a common idea." The dock slid into view just as he reached a crescendo. Smiling, he set down his paddle. "Shall I drop you here?"

In the beginning, the internet was without form, and void, and data trickled through the ports of the routers. The “series of tubes,” in the immortal words of the Alaska senator Ted Stevens, went online in the late nineteen-sixties, though “tubes” exaggerates its concreteness. Technically, the internet is a protocol: a set of rules that let computers send and receive data over various networks by breaking it into “packets.” Vint Cerf and Robert Kahn devised this “inter-network” at the U.S. Department of Defense. By the late eighties, it had spread to civilians, who could send e-mail, transfer files, and post on forums through subscription-based services such as CompuServe and AOL. Still, many yearned for a unified ecosystem. “There was a fork in the road,” Brewster Kahle, the founder of the Internet Archive, told me. “Are we going to have an information superhighway which is open to all? Or is it going to be five hundred channels of nothing on the net?”

Berners-Lee modestly maintains that anyone might have solved this conundrum. But his upbringing helped. He was born in 1955 to Conway Berners-Lee and Mary Lee Woods, two computer scientists who met while working on an early commercial computer, and raised him in suburban London. Conway, who studied the mathematics of queuing, used water jets to teach Tim about electronic circuits. Mary, a believer in “watchful negligence,” would let him and his three younger siblings wrap themselves in extra perforated tape. Tim loved math, the outdoors, and building electronics with transistors. At Oxford, where he studied physics, he knew that his future was in computing; between terms, he cobbled together a working machine from junk parts.

His career began, ordinarily enough, at a telecom company in southern England, where he and a college girlfriend, then first wife, went to work. But in 1980 he took time off for a fellowship at *CERN*, the particle-physics lab near Geneva, and returned, four years later, for a full-time job. His unglamorous assignment was to maintain the computer system that processed images of experiments—I.T. work for the heirs of Planck and Einstein. And the only thing more complex than the quarks and bosons they were chasing was the babel of languages, operating systems, storage formats, and filing systems that they employed. “One scientist might have critical information about how to run the accelerators stored in French in a

private directory in the central Unix mainframe; another might have information on how to calibrate the sensors stored in English on an eight-inch I.B.M. floppy disk in a locked metal cabinet," Berners-Lee writes. "It was a mess." Out of this mess came the last great invention of the twentieth century.

The web was a fusion of two earlier technologies: the internet and hypertext, a way of organizing documents non-hierarchically through links. Hypertext dated to the nineteen-forties, when the science administrator Vannevar Bush wrote an article about a device that could represent knowledge "As Freely as We May Think." By the eighties, the technologist Ted Nelson was trying, unsuccessfully, to build a universal hypertext library, which he called Project Xanadu. Berners-Lee's more pragmatic idea was to use hypertext to enhance online collaboration. "Imagine making a large three-dimensional model, with people represented by little spheres, and strings between people who have something in common at work," he wrote in a 1989 proposal.

Colleagues at *cern* didn't know what to make of the idea. "For many computer scientists . . . every document belonged in a specified container," Berners-Lee writes. "I was proposing instead to free those documents—essentially to dump the files from their folders onto the floor." A supervisor jotted "vague but exciting" on the proposal, and let him pursue it on the side. In October, 1990, Berners-Lee began laying the web's foundations: HTML, the language of web pages; HTTP, the protocol that governed their transmission; and URLs, the addresses that linked them together. On August 6, 1991, the web's first page, http://info.cern.ch, went online, introducing itself as "a wide-area hypermedia information retrieval initiative aiming to give universal access to a large universe of documents." Soon enough, there would be porn.

In January, 1993, when I was born, there were about fifty web servers on the internet; new hosts customarily e-mailed Berners-Lee to let him know they were online. By my first birthday, there were six hundred, and this magazine had printed the now famous cartoon captioned "On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog." The first site I remember is Yahooligans, a Yahoo portal for children, where I played chess and downloaded

screensavers. Next was Neopets, a virtual-pet game where my uncle, a former photo-lab technician, reinvented himself as a programmer. On the web, I read Jules Verne on Project Gutenberg, gave myself nightmares learning about Japanese war crimes in Manchuria, and laughed with a cousin at the crowdsourced recordings on farts.com. It was just as Berners-Lee wrote: “If you could put anything on it, then, after a while it would have everything on it.”

My father, a songwriter and producer who built computers for his home studio, was quick to embrace the dot-com gospel. He bought domain names for everyone in the family and encouraged my early experiments in programming. At recess in middle school, while others played soccer or traded Yu-Gi-Oh! cards, I pored over tomes on HTML, JavaScript, and PHP—which paid off, socially, when I built a proxy server to let classmates access banned Flash games. Eventually, I started coding sites for local businesses, beginning with my mother’s. But it was exhausting to keep up with browsers’ rival implementations of the languages I’d learned.

Fragmentation menaced the web from the outset. From *CERN*, it spread quickly through listservs, where enthusiasts shared proto-browsers to replace the bare-bones command-line program Berners-Lee had written. This was the kind of improvisation he’d hoped for. But it quickly got out of hand.

One day, Berners-Lee had a listserv exchange with a college student named Marc Andreessen, who’d proposed an “<img>” tag to embed pictures in pages. Berners-Lee demurred, saying that he preferred more content-neutral syntax. But Andreessen wasn’t asking for his blessing. In 1993, he led the team that launched Mosaic, the first modern browser. The next year, he released a commercial successor, Netscape, whose I.P.O. made him an instant multimillionaire. *Time* put him on its cover—barefoot, leering, perched on a throne—and hailed him as a “Golden Geek.” (*Time* profiled Berners-Lee the next year, noting that unlike Andreessen, who drove a Mercedes, Berners-Lee drove an old Volkswagen; he jokingly blamed its carbon-monoxide emissions for the “diffuseness of his answers.”) Berners-Lee believed that Andreessen was trying to “hijack” his creation.

His pique wasn't just about money or ego. The web was meant to be universal, and had already outpaced similar networks. Kahle, the Internet Archive founder, had created *WAIS*, or the Wide Area Information Server, a publishing system with natural-language search. Another competitor was Gopher, developed at the University of Minnesota. Yet both relied on existing file formats and hierarchical menus. When Gopher tried to charge licensing fees, users fled. The web, by contrast, was free, easy to use, and, thanks to hypertext, infinitely flexible. "The markup language was simple," Dan Connolly, who worked with Berners-Lee to codify HTML, told me. "And you didn't have to ask your boss for money."

To keep it that way, Berners-Lee moved to the U.S. and founded W3C, in 1994. In time, the organization would open offices across the world, but its first home was at M.I.T., where it eventually settled into Frank Gehry's flamboyant Stata Center, a jumble of towers and angles that appear to grow in several directions at once. The web, too, seemed in need of a stabilizing center—one that Berners-Lee doubted either he or the market could supply. A consortium, he writes, provided an alternative to "Balkanization and competing technical fiefdoms." Companies were invited to shape the web collaboratively, through technical standards reached by consensus, and, later on, agreed not to sue one another over web technology.

"Now he will wake up to a scar and edible flowers."
Cartoon by Anjali Chandrashekar

"Tim used to call it 'blue-helmet work,' like U.N. peacekeepers," Connolly said of the consortium's early efforts. Its authority was constantly challenged. "These young engineers were saying, 'Why do we need a

consortium?’ ” Jean-François Abramatic, a former W3C chairman, recalled of an early meeting in San Francisco. “ ‘Why don’t we develop the best products and compete?’ ” But more enlightened self-interest won out. “They realized that the whole market was going to be much bigger if they coöperated,” Berners-Lee told me. He offered a nautical analogy: “When you sail a boat, there’s force on the sail and force on the keel. The boat goes forward, because those forces are very strong, but it’s the constructive tension that drives the boat forward.”

W3C kept the web whole during the “browser wars” of the late nineties, as Microsoft and Netscape pushed their own flavors of HTML. It kept the web’s design supple amid exponential growth, even when that clashed with demands for more features. The lodestar was Berners-Lee’s “principle of least power,” which dictated a minimal architecture. “He’s got this physicist’s picture of things scaling up and scaling down, of very simple rules that work well at any level,” Connolly said. Abramatic recalled the stress of defending this vision from the shortsightedness of various industries. “But if we had to do all of it just for Wikipedia,” he said, “that was worth it.”

“You have to stay with it,” Berners-Lee told me. “You invent something, and you have to make sure it’s all right.” He didn’t win every battle. He had imagined the web as a space where everyone would read *and* write; instead, “browsers,” a term suggestive of bovine passivity, won out. He still regrets tying web addresses to the Domain Name System, or D.N.S., which allowed domain names like newyorker.com to become speculative assets.

Even so, the early web was a dream realized. As Y2K neared, Berners-Lee was planning the next phase: a “Giant Global Graph,” as he later dubbed it, of structured data. In his first book, “Weaving the Web” (1999), he argued that, if websites could be augmented with a layer of machine-readable information, the potential was boundless. “The intelligent ‘agents’ people have touted for ages will finally materialize,” he wrote. “The Web will be a place where the whim of a human being and the reasoning of a machine coexist in an ideal, powerful mixture.”

Berners-Lee sipped lemonade and stared at a projected image of Joe Rogan. From Concord, he, Leith, and I had come to M.I.T.’s Center for

Constructive Communication, whose director, Deb Roy, knelt on a rolling chair and presented his research on America's "Civic Breakdown." Roy, a media scientist, discussed a project that used large language models as a "listening tool" for group discussion, which he'd piloted at a public high school in Newark.

Berners-Lee and Leith considered. "I'm just thinking of Charlie, Tim," Leith said. "Is there a role for Charlie in this?"

"Well, Charlie is the *individual's* A.I.," Berners-Lee replied, pursing his lips.

"You could make a *group* Charlie, a small-group Charlie," she suggested.

"You could ask Charlie how polarized you are, if he had access to all of your media data," Berners-Lee's young chief of staff chimed in.

"Isn't the balanced person someone who listens to everything?" Leith asked.

Berners-Lee, squinting, wasn't so sure. "Can you do that just by listening to Ezra Klein and Joe Rogan and you've covered the entire spectrum?"

Roy looked flummoxed: "So, 'Charlie'? "

" 'Charlie' is an A.I. that works for you," Berners-Lee said. "It's very, very powerful." A prototype was already being tested at his company, Inrupt.

Berners-Lee has been predicting our age of automation since the late nineties, when he set out to build what he called the Semantic Web. Its mission was to get humanity's data online, and he pursued it zealously for more than a decade. In a 2009 *TED* talk called "The Next Web," he urged governments, corporations, and citizens to upload all they could: "You hug your database, you don't want to let it go until you've made a beautiful website for it," he said. "But, first, give us the unadulterated data." His demand escalated to a chant. "We have to ask for raw data now," Berners-Lee cried with sermonic fervor. He windmilled his arms like an inflatable

tube man. “Can you say ‘raw’? Can you say ‘data’? Can you say ‘now’? Raw data now!”

The idea was to make facts, statistics, and just about any “structured” information as free and flexible online as documents already were. A database of magazines, for instance, could link to further databases maintained by each publisher—and so on down to the facts in particular articles, which, in turn, might link to the sources they cited. It was metadata unchained, and Berners-Lee believed it would change the world. In a 2001 *Scientific American* article, he envisioned a future web of genie-like agents able to book medical appointments or instruct microwaves in the latest manufacturer-approved tips for heating frozen food.

For this utopia to be realized, the web would need an overhaul. HTML had run its course, Berners-Lee decided. Its successor, XHTML, or extensible hypertext markup language, would separate information and the way it was presented more cleanly, making pages easier for machines to read. Many developers, though, had no interest in such a drastic change. Berners-Lee wanted “raw data now”; they wanted to build interactive web applications.

The clash led to a schism at W3C. In 2004, after losing a vote, a group of browser developers who wanted to keep improving HTML formed a rival standards body. Berners-Lee considered the move a power grab, describing it as “the first real blow to the integrity of the World Wide Web.” But when his “extensible” language faltered he backed a reconciliation with the rebels, whose new standard, HTML5, had prevailed. Web applications became the basis of “Web 2.0,” powering Twitter’s endless scroll and Google’s smoothly panning Maps.

The Semantic Web survives in certain contexts. Scientists use it to make the research behind their papers—protein structures, brain scans—programmatically searchable. DBPedia, a crowdsourced database of several billion facts, helped I.B.M.’s Watson win “Jeopardy!” But Berners-Lee’s vision of reasoning machines, drawing conclusions from trustworthy data freely shared by individuals, never came to pass. There is plenty of raw data online, but much of it is harvested privately by platforms. The A.I. trained on it doesn’t parse carefully encoded labels according to logical rules; it “infers” from wholesale scraping.

After the presentation at M.I.T., the conversation turned to A.I.'s trustworthiness.

"I use some language model daily," Roy said. "Yet there's this slipperiness at the base. They're not accountable."

"They're not accountable in what sense?" Berners-Lee asked.

"If they steer you wrong, whose fault is it?" Roy clarified. "There's a difference between pretending to care and caring."

Berners-Lee paused. "Philosophically, I disagree with you."

"You do?"

"Yeah. If something can pretend to care, it's fundamentally the same operation."

Near the climax of the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics—a living diorama of British history, directed by the filmmaker Danny Boyle—a model house was lifted away to reveal Berners-Lee. Seated at a NeXT Computer, the kind he'd used at *CERN*, he typed a message that flashed across the stadium: "*THIS IS FOR EVERYONE*." A light show dramatized the birth of the World Wide Web, its hyperlinks racing from continent to continent. Finally, Berners-Lee stood, maestro-like, from the keyboard, turning to applaud each quadrant of the roaring crowd.

The web was riding high. China had half a billion internet users, who could still criticize the government on the microblogging platform Sina Weibo. Twitter was credited with fuelling the Arab Spring. In the United States, Barack Obama was on his way to reëlection, his campaign driven by the largest social-media and data-analysis operations in political history. The web was broadly seen as a force for justice, destined to uplift the world.

Berners-Lee was spreading his wings, too. In 2010, he divorced his second wife, the mother of his two children, and began a relationship with Leith, whom he knew from philanthropic projects. (They married four years later at the Chapel Royal, in St. James's Palace.) "Once I met Rosemary, my life

became an almost non-stop flurry of activity," he writes. Together, in 2009, they had founded the World Wide Web Foundation, to promote global internet access, especially in Africa, where Berners-Lee marvelled at the web-enabled spread of farming techniques, and at the profusion of routers in the palace of Rwanda's President, Paul Kagame.

In 2012, Berners-Lee founded the Open Data Institute, in London, to advocate for digital transparency. One of his protégés, the young activist Aaron Swartz, took more radical measures. In his "Guerilla Open Access Manifesto," Swartz had warned that the world's scholarship and scientific research—much of it publicly funded—was being "digitized and locked up by a handful of private corporations." Then, in 2013, he took his life, after federal prosecutors charged him with a felony for sneaking into a router closet at M.I.T. to download millions of articles from *JSTOR*. "Hackers for right, we are one down," Berners-Lee tweeted. "Let us all weep."

Swartz's death foreshadowed a darker turn. In a forthcoming book, "The Age of Extraction," Tim Wu, a Columbia law professor who coined the term "net neutrality," identifies 2012 and 2013 as the years when "platform power" took hold. Since the nineties, it had been assumed that the web would democratize society, empowering bloggers to compete with media conglomerates, and small manufacturers to bypass big retailers. Some of that happened. But the web's Davids had only traded one Goliath for another—corporate platforms that stood between them and their markets. As Wu writes, "Paeans to small-is-beautiful and the transformation of the human existence" soon gave way to "a strategy that extracted from dependent businesses and harvested the time and data of the masses."

Platforms aren't inherently extractive. Wu defines them as any space that "brings together two or more groups to transact or interact while reducing the costs of doing so." The internet itself is a platform. But the new web-based platforms were far less neutral. They grew at breakneck speed, and then, once network effects had made them indispensable, they squeezed sellers, served ads, and otherwise extracted value from users while making exit ever costlier. They bought out rivals and turned into monopolies: between 2007 and 2018, Wu notes, Facebook, Microsoft, Google, and Amazon collectively acquired more than a thousand firms.

Berners-Lee sounded the alarm, warning, as always, about fragmentation: buy a song on iTunes or read a magazine in its proprietary app, and you were no longer on the web. “The more this kind of architecture gains widespread use,” he wrote, in *Scientific American*, “the less we enjoy a single, universal information space.”

The fight over how to resist platform power led to W3C’s deepest rupture. In 2012, Netflix and several other members of the consortium proposed a standard to protect streaming video from piracy by letting browsers play video while blocking access to the underlying files. This was a form of digital-rights management, or D.R.M.—long anathema to open-web advocates, who not only disliked copyright but were morally opposed to technical limits on the free operation of their computers. (Drivers must obey traffic laws, but their cars don’t shut off when they run a red light.) Berners-Lee felt the same but feared that, without D.R.M., streaming companies would retreat to closed, app-based ecosystems. He agreed to hear the proposal.

The backlash was swift, spilling from the consortium’s mailing lists into the pages of the *Guardian*. “Stop the Hollyweb,” the Free Software Foundation, one of the oldest digital-rights groups, urged in a petition. Video was only the beginning, activists warned: if D.R.M. prevailed, browsers might one day block source-code views, downloads, even cut-and-paste. When the Motion Picture Association of America joined the consortium, in 2014, the fight grew uglier. “Hitler might have caused less of a stir,” a W3C staffer recalled on a podcast episode titled “Bring Me the Head of Tim Berners-Lee.”

The loudest dissenter was the science-fiction writer Cory Doctorow, who represented the Electronic Frontier Foundation at the consortium. D.R.M., he argued, would hinder accessibility, create security flaws, and make browsers dependent on encryption modules sold by Microsoft and Google. Users could even be charged with a felony for bypassing D.R.M. software. Doctorow warned, “We are Huxleying ourselves into the full Orwell.”

Doctorow admired Berners-Lee—both had wept at Aaron Swartz’s funeral. “He passed up ten fortunes to devote himself to public service,” Doctorow told me. “The web was so important that these companies came and bent

the knee to Tim.” But now, he believed, the web’s knight was the one genuflecting.

By 2016, as a deeply divided W3C debated a new D.R.M. standard, protesters in Guy Fawkes masks gathered outside the Stata Center, chanting “rm D.R.M.”—“rm” being the Unix command to delete a file. In the end, Berners-Lee exercised his authority as director to break the deadlock: D.R.M. was in. “Some people have protested ‘no,’ but in fact I decided the actual logical answer is ‘yes,’ ” he wrote afterward. Evoking the legendary King Canute, who couldn’t hold back the tide, he urged the consortium to accept its limits: “People like to watch Netflix.”

“It was a rotten time,” Berners-Lee said of the battle, which is conspicuously absent from his memoir. “People we’d counted on as friends began to see the W3C as the enemy.”

Doctorow, for his part, is still fighting “to bring back the Web that Tim made.” His new book, “Enshittification,” vividly dissects our “age of zombie platforms”: Google adulterating search results for advertisers; Facebook extorting news organizations; Adobe removing unlicensed colors from users’ images after shifting its software to the cloud. He characterizes tech C.E.O.s as graduates of “Darth Vader University, where the first lesson is ‘I’m altering the deal. Pray that I don’t alter it any further.’ ”

Yet Doctorow insists there are ways to resist: antitrust actions, data-privacy regulations, and the legalization of “adversarial interoperability,” or the right to engineer compatibility between proprietary platforms and more open alternatives. In 2017, Berners-Lee took a hiatus from W3C to launch his own interoperability initiative, Inrupt. “We will build beneficial systems that work for everyone,” he wrote in a post announcing the project. “The future is still so much bigger than the past.”

Inrupt’s offices occupy a glass tower beside TD Garden, where the Bruins and the Celtics play. The space is lined with whiteboards, and, on the day I visited, a half-dozen employees worked quietly at standing desks. The company’s name, a portmanteau of “innovate” and “disrupt,” does little to clarify its mission—nothing less than breaking the hold of platforms and reclaiming the open web.

In a conference room, I met the C.E.O., John Bruce, an affable Englishman with a sweep of white hair, who plays the plainspoken foil to Berners-Lee's digital statesman. When the two met, almost a decade ago, Bruce had just sold a cybersecurity firm to I.B.M., and was interested to hear about the company Berners-Lee planned to start. "A man who invents something like the web is a smart guy," Bruce said. "But it was more than that. He'd nurtured it. He'd fought for it. If this guy had an idea to make it better, I was all ears." They bonded over British television from the sixties, but when it came to Berners-Lee's project, "I couldn't grok it," Bruce admitted. "We had a couple of dinners, and it took me all of those and then some to understand what Tim was talking about."

What needed fixing was obvious enough: web users had surrendered their data to monopolistic platforms that respected neither privacy nor choice. Because their systems were deliberately incompatible, they could wall off the valuable information trails we generated—search histories, purchases, social-media posts—and treat us with impunity, knowing it was nearly impossible for us to leave.

But what if everyone stored their data on personal servers? Platforms would have to request access, or even offer micropayments, letting users comparison-shop. Decoupling data from the services that used it would also spur competition and encourage innovative new applications, since information from various sources could be recombined. All this would be accomplished by what Berners-Lee called Solid Pods: Solid, for "social linked data," Pods, for "personal online data stores." They were online strongboxes devised by the very Pandora who'd unleashed the web itself.

"Uh-oh. Instead of choosing an Uber XL, I accidentally called for a bachelorette-party bus."
Cartoon by Drew Dernavich

Solid grew out of M.I.T.'s Decentralized Information Group, which Berners-Lee had co-founded to help realize his dreams for the Semantic Web. In 2015, he and his colleagues launched the Solid Protocol, hoping that it, like the web, would show how an open, decentralized system could triumph over a patchwork of subscription services. "You can make the walled garden very, very sweet," Berners-Lee said at an event in 2016. "But the jungle outside is always more appealing."

The promise of "data sovereignty," though, was relatively intangible, and twenty-first-century platforms were far more entrenched than nineties AOL. To accelerate Solid's adoption, Berners-Lee decided to go into business. Recommending standards wasn't enough. It was time to move fast and fix things.

"It's been fascinating for me to get things done, to execute," Berners-Lee told me. By the end of 2018, Inrupt had twenty employees, a reported twenty million dollars in V.C. funding, and a tailwind from the Cambridge Analytica scandal, which revealed that leaked Facebook data had been used to target ads in the 2016 U.S. Presidential race. Conveniently, the web was also about to turn thirty. In a BBC segment, Berners-Lee warned of the web's "downward plunge to a dysfunctional future." He used the anniversary to promote Inrupt, which planned to sell enterprise servers to implement Solid. (Because the protocol is open, other companies can do the same.)

In the years after its launch, Inrupt announced a string of partnerships. Solid was piloted by the U.K.'s National Health Service in the hopes of giving patients more control over their medical records. The BBC built a prototype "BBC Box" that could algorithmically recommend shows without retaining user data. The government of Flanders, in Belgium, went further, promising every citizen a Solid Pod as part of its compliance with Europe's General Data Protection Regulation. The momentum coincided with a broader wave of decentralization in tech, from the blockchain boom to federated networks like Mastodon and Bluesky. Once again, Berners-Lee seemed to be on history's leading edge.

Today, Solid looks stalled. Eleni Sharp, who led the BBC pilot, told me the Box never made it out of testing. "People say they want to be more in

control of their data," she said. "But do they then want to be more hands-on? Not really!" In Flanders, with nearly seven million residents, only about a thousand actively use Solid; one feature lets graduates send digital diplomas to employers. A Flemish official insisted that more projects were under way, but I couldn't find any residents aware of them. On the r/Vlaanderen subreddit, one replied to my query, "I had no idea we were using some exotic tech by Tim Berders. Did you make that up?"

"I never really used Solid for anything serious," Kjetil Kjernsmo, a Norwegian informatics expert who co-authored the standard, told me. He was Inrupt's first employee, and had expected to work on tools for the hundreds of developers interested in the protocol; instead, the company focussed on selling servers to corporate clients. Berners-Lee mentioned a developer who has built several Solid apps, including a recipe manager and a viewership tracker that aggregates data from multiple streaming services. But that developer's own blog wearily concedes that the protocol "doesn't seem to be going mainstream anytime soon."

Of course, it takes only one "killer app" to vindicate a technology. While I spoke with Bruce, Berners-Lee was meeting with a representative from Visa, which recently announced "the next evolution of digital commerce." Visa believes that consumer purchasing will soon be delegated to A.I. agents, which will make informed decisions based on user data. But whom will they work for? If they answer to platforms, the result could be a more insidious version of algorithmic recommendations—sentient credit cards that read our minds and collude with merchants.

Inrupt's solution is Charlie, a Solid-based chatbot that works for you. Charlie uses personal data to inform its answers, but also protects that data from platforms, allowing security-conscious users reliant on targeted "insights" to have their cake and eat it, too. Greater trust would inspire more data-sharing, facilitating deeper customization, Berners-Lee explained. "If you give it access to your exercise data, then ask what running shoes you should have, you'll find that it knows you very, very well."

He dreamed up Charlie in 2017. Last year, Inrupt built a prototype, which Bruce showed me over Zoom. It was an app on his iPhone, which opened

with the prompt “How can I help you today?”

“This is the world without Charlie,” Bruce said of the default mode, which simply queries Anthropic’s L.L.M., Claude. We asked for potential fall getaways, and it suggested Kyoto or Tuscany—each pricey and overrun with tourists. But giving Charlie access to a fictional user’s “data wallet” yielded more bespoke results. “Zoe,” as the user was called, lived in Seattle, loved nature photography, and worked in tech, where salaries are falling. Why not send her to Olympic National Park, in Washington? Charlie thought it was a good fit for her “love of photography” and “practical travel constraints,” adding that her Marriott points would cover the hotel.

“Charlie knew what data was pertinent to this request,” Bruce said. The app had sifted Zoe’s personal information, bundled it with her query, and sent it to Claude. (The final product will be compatible with multiple L.L.M.s, which will run locally in a sealed-off “Trusted Execution Environment.”)

Soon, Bruce added, Charlie will be able to alter files in a data wallet, the first step toward “agentic” powers. But he couldn’t say when it would be released. “It could be rolled out by an Acme, Inc.,” Bruce said. “It could be rolled out by an independent business that wants to operate Charlie for the benefit of everybody. We could roll it out for the benefit of everybody.”

The commendable aim was to mainstream the principle of user control over data. Still, it was hard not to feel that Berners-Lee’s ambitions had narrowed. “We build it now so that those who come to it later will be able to create things that we cannot ourselves imagine,” he once wrote of the web. But, at this critical juncture, the unimaginable thing he’d chosen to build was a chatbot that helps you pick sneakers.

Charlie may be too late. Google just announced its own agentic commerce platform, and, when I followed up with Visa, the company was evasive about its commitment to Berners-Lee’s idea. In any case, stronger measures will be needed to resist what Wu calls the “emergent form of economic power in our time—the artificially intelligent tech platform.”

In July, Cloudflare—a firm that shields roughly a fifth of all websites from automated attacks—rolled out tools to block A.I. companies from scraping

sites without permission. It's meant to stave off what some call Google Zero, the day when "answer engines" such as Google's Gemini and OpenAI's ChatGPT—which don't drive traffic to the sites that they scrape—replace search engines and destroy publishers reliant on online advertising. "The dystopian horrible outcome is that you starve to death and die as a journalist or a researcher or an academic," Matthew Prince, Cloudflare's C.E.O., told me. His hope is that A.I. firms can be forced to pay for what they consume, with revenue distributed to creators à la Spotify.

"These companies are basically free-riding off of the content and production of others," Lina Khan, who led the Federal Trade Commission under President Biden, told me. A millennial like the web itself, she grew up posting on Xanga and LiveJournal, and is concerned not only with the platform economy's unfairness but also its threat to online creativity. "If creators who are actually producing aren't going to reap the rewards, what's going to be the initial economic incentive?" Last year, a federal judge ruled against Google in an antitrust case that Khan filed against it for monopolizing the search advertising market. Lawyers for the company, which plans to appeal, recently made the startling admission that "the open web is already in rapid decline."

A floatplane skimmed the clear skies over Lake Muskoka, in Ontario's cottage country. "That's the guy who worked for Microsoft," Berners-Lee remarked, though later he wasn't sure. We had just sat down for lunch on the deck of the summer house he shares with Leith, who emerged from the kitchen bearing asparagus, smoked-trout pâté, peaches, and butter tarts. Friends had cycled through all summer, Leith explained, many with forbidding dietary restrictions. Her solution: "I did what most people do now. I went to Claude and said, 'Claude?' "—she affected the French pronunciation—" 'I need six days of menu planning using the New York *Times*.' "

"Streets of London," by the singer Ralph McTell, started playing; he crooned about a "forgotten hero / and a world that doesn't care." Lately, Berners-Lee has been spending a bit more time on music himself. "As it happens, I've just had a few singing lessons for the first time in decades,"

he told me. “Have you heard of panto?” He meant British pantomime, a genre of family-friendly slapstick that he first performed with an amateur group in Geneva. “We did ‘Peter Pan’ and flew everybody to Never Never Land.”

I was, he’d told me, the first journalist to visit his summer place: a snug retreat with brown clapboard siding, on a sparsely inhabited island. Earlier, we’d been swimming, and had meant to sail across the lake in Berners-Lee’s catamaran until we realized that there wasn’t any wind.

Our conversation was similarly becalmed. I’d come not just as a journalist but as a concerned digital native, watching Berners-Lee’s web unravel from within. Billionaires were using platform power to distort reality and control politics; Elon Musk’s Grok had recently declared itself “MechaHitler.” Generative A.I. was flooding the internet with deepfakes and conspiracy theories; a retired relative, who spends a lot of time watching YouTube and querying Gemini, had recently informed me of a likely shift in the magnetic poles, which would fling us into the void as though “God were shaking an Etch A Sketch.” The Trump Administration had abolished net neutrality, the principle that internet-service providers should treat all traffic equally. Yahooligans felt further away than ever as news broke that Meta’s A.I. was engaging in sexual role-play with children.

Like Dorothy confronting the Wizard of Oz, I wanted Berners-Lee to explain how, exactly, we were all going to get home. Did he really think monopolistic tech companies could be constrained without government intervention? How could Charlie—a mere intermediary between users and L.L.M.s—prevent A.I. from hollowing out the open web? And was anyone, anywhere, actually using Solid Pods? Politely, Berners-Lee bristled. He countered that “public outcry” would protect net neutrality, that A.I. hallucinations could be checked against structured data, and that users were clamoring to take back their privacy. Of algorithms, he said, “It’s just the addictive bits we have to worry about,” then whipped out a diagram of all the good and bad online. Eventually, we broke off the interview to go kayaking. The conversation turned to Isaac Asimov, who, Berners-Lee observed, had failed to anticipate an A.I. that couldn’t be made to follow deterministic rules.

In “This Is for Everyone,” Berners-Lee argues that the web’s lack of compassion is “a *design issue*” that can be fixed. “There’s still time,” he writes, “to build machines that serve the human,” that “promote the dignity of our fragile species on this isolated globe.” It’s a moving vision. But it’s hard to reconcile with the entropy of today’s online world, where all that’s solid melts into air, and every protocol is profaned.

Leith returned me to shore in a motorboat. Soon, I was in my hotel room, retracing Berners-Lee’s past across the network he had built. Some links were broken, but the Internet Archive filled the gaps. Next month, in San Francisco, the organization will honor Berners-Lee with its Hero Award, to mark the trillionth page its crawlers have downloaded from his World Wide Web. ♦

Julian Lucas, a staff writer, began contributing to The New Yorker in 2018.

A Reporter at Large

Have Cubans Fled One Authoritarian State for Another?

In the past few years, as many as two million people have escaped the island's repressive regime and collapsing economy. Those who've made it to the U.S. face a new reckoning.

By Jon Lee Anderson

September 29, 2025

"Everyone was leaving," one man who fled in 2021, with his pregnant wife and their four-year-old son, recalled. "There was a feeling that you had to. It was like a fever."Photographs by Rose Marie Cromwell for The New Yorker

For seven years, while the Torre K23 hotel was under construction in Havana, the locals complained furiously. They said that the building—the "tower of arrogance," as some called it—would spoil the neighborhood, a leafy district near the city's seaside promenade. Besides, they pointed out, there was a perfectly good hotel down the hill: the Habana Libre, a former Hilton that Fidel Castro had made his home base after the Revolution. But Cuba, in the midst of a long-running economic crisis, was desperate to attract foreign currency. And the new hotel was erected by an unassailable entity: the commercial arm of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, known as *GAESA*, which controls the nation's construction, tourism, finance, and import-export industries.

The Torre K23, which opened in February, is now the tallest building on the island: a forty-two-story, blank-faced rectangle of glass and steel, with some five hundred rooms that almost no Cuban can afford. Near the penthouse level, a balcony stretches across the building, offering a swimming pool and a vertiginous view of the city. But there are few guests poolside. The Torre K23 is largely abandoned, as is the rest of Cuba.

Tourism, once the country's main source of income, has fallen by more than half in the past decade. This is partly because of *COVID*-19, which shut down public life for nearly two years. But, even before then, tourists were deterred by sanctions imposed by President Donald Trump and by an increasing ambience of decline. During a recent visit, I found the once jammed neighborhood of Old Havana nearly empty, except for a handful of hustlers glumly hawking cut-price cigars, rum, and sex. Homeless men lay slumped on the sidewalks. Outside La Bodeguita del Medio, which was once patronized by Pablo Neruda and Ernest Hemingway, a pair of elderly women in colorful dresses and head wraps stood with cigars in their mouths, watching for Americans they could bully into paying to pose with them for photographs. One of them, manhandling a middle-aged tourist, made a lewd offer—"I'll suck it if you want, *papi*"—as his friend snapped a pic.

But the main cause of the island's vacancy is not that visitors have stopped coming; it's that the citizens have fled. The exodus began in 2021, when anti-government rallies filled the streets, protesting oppressive policies and the lack of medicine and food. Castro had died five years before, but the Communist Party retained its grip on power, and it put down the protests harshly, jailing and beating hundreds of demonstrators. Since then, an estimated eighteen per cent of Cubans—as many as two million residents—have left. This represents the largest outflux in the sixty-six-year span of the tumultuous Revolution. (By comparison, an estimated two hundred and fifty thousand Cubans immigrated to the United States in the years after Castro seized power. The Mariel boatlift, in 1980, was seen in the U.S. as an epochal crisis; it involved about a hundred and twenty-five thousand migrants.)

Cartoon by Tom Chitty

Some of those fleeing Cuba have been desperate enough to cross the Straits of Florida on improvised rafts or boats; at least a hundred and forty are thought to have died at sea last year. But the majority went by plane, subsidizing their trip by selling their homes, sometimes at punitively low prices. Tens of thousands of Cubans have taken expensive charter flights to Nicaragua, where the despotic President Daniel Ortega allows them to pass through in exchange for hefty fees. From there, they find their way north, often through smuggling networks. Since 2022, at least eight hundred and fifty thousand Cubans are believed to have entered the U.S., with many settling in and around Miami.

I met one of those immigrants a few weeks after my trip to Havana—a middle-aged man whom I'll call Aldo. He fled in 2021, with his pregnant wife and their four-year-old son. "Everyone was leaving," he recalled. "There was a feeling that you had to. It was like a fever." The family travelled north from Central America for weeks, crossing rivers by night and riding concealed in smugglers' trucks. After reaching the U.S. on foot, they were taken into custody by Border Patrol. An officer reassured them that they were safe and that their rights would be respected in the U.S. Aldo and his wife burst into tears.

But that was before Trump returned to office with a fiercely anti-immigrant agenda. “Now there is real fear,” Aldo said. For decades, Cubans saw the United States as a kind of promised land—a place where they could be free of authoritarian rule, of the threat of punishment for criticizing the government, and of a judiciary that bowed to the interests of the ruling party. These days, those who come to the U.S. can find that it feels distressingly like what they left behind.

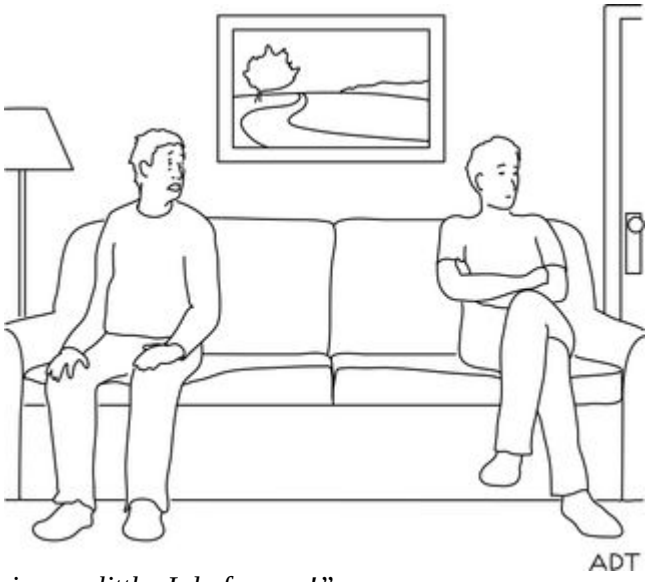
After the dissident Cuban writer Reinaldo Arenas was forced into exile in Florida, he sketched the relationship between his old home and his new one: “If Cuba is Hell, Miami is purgatory.” Generations of migrants have helped remake the city in their homeland’s image. There is a Little Havana, with stores and restaurants that evoke those on the island, and a park where men gather to play dominoes beside a monument commemorating the botched Bay of Pigs invasion. There are streets and parks named for Cuban heroes —from Máximo Gómez, an anti-colonial fighter of the nineteenth century, to Osvaldo Payá, a Christian dissident who died in a suspicious car crash in 2012. At times, the officials handing out honors have been willing to overlook some bad behavior undertaken in the campaign against Castro. In 1988, the right-wing Cuban terrorist Orlando Bosch arrived in Miami, after serving time in prison for masterminding a series of gruesome bombings. The mayor welcomed him by declaring an Orlando Bosch Day.

Another street was renamed late last year: not long after the Presidential election, the Miami-Dade County Commission declared that a four-mile stretch of Palm Avenue would henceforth be known as President Donald J. Trump Avenue. Florida has more than 1.6 million Cuban American residents, and sixty-eight per cent of them voted for Trump. Hoping that he will aid their long quest to retake the island, they have embraced him with unusual enthusiasm.

Abraham Jiménez Enoa, an exiled Cuban writer, recently visited Miami after several years in Spain and was struck by the fervid atmosphere among Cuban Americans. “My head exploded,” he told me. “They’ve exchanged Castro for Trump!” To Jiménez, who grew up during the last years of Castro’s rule, the politics of Florida felt disquietingly familiar. “If you are on the left in Miami, they lynch you on social media, or wherever they see

you—the same thing the regime does with dissidents back on the island," he said. "And if you're not a Trumpist, well, then you're a Communist, and Communism is the plague. A lot of Miami Cubans refer to Trump in the same way the island's revolutionaries refer to Fidel Castro: as their savior, the man who will take us out of our misery."

Trump has seemed conscious that his supporters expect him to take a hard line against the regime. During his first term as President, he placed Cuba on the list of state sponsors of terrorism, alongside such nations as Iran and North Korea; the rationale, widely seen as flimsy, was that it had provided a haven for ten members of a Colombian rebel group. Joe Biden removed Cuba from the list, but Trump restored it on his first day back in office, effectively preventing U.S. companies from doing business with Cuba. He also rescinded several other directives that Biden had signed to ease relations, and in June he imposed sanctions on foreign companies linked to Cuba's military and to *GAESA*.



"Everything I do, which is very little, I do for you!"
Cartoon by Adam Douglas Thompson

Yet Trump's Cuban American supporters have had to make an uneasy accommodation. As part of the new Administration's widely hyped crackdown on immigration, it removed protections for undocumented Cuban migrants—a community that has received special treatment since the Cold War, when the U.S. had an ideological interest in sheltering fugitives from Communism. In 1966, the Cuban Adjustment Act gave immigrants

from the island the right to apply for permanent residency after just a year. More recently, Biden initiated a program of "humanitarian parole" for residents of Cuba and several other troubled states, which allowed a hundred and ten thousand Cubans to enter the country. Now they are susceptible to deportation—as are about five hundred thousand others whose path to citizenship has been complicated by changing laws. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis has taken up the anti-immigrant campaign aggressively, deputizing law-enforcement officers to assist *ICE* in its roundups. Even attending legal hearings has become risky. The immigration court in downtown Miami has a backlog of nearly a hundred and fifty thousand Cuban asylum seekers, and agents sometimes wait outside to apprehend them.

People who believe that the best hope of better governance in Cuba is increased engagement with the U.S. are dismayed. Joe Garcia, a former Democratic congressman from Florida, worked as an intermediary between Havana and Washington under the Obama and Biden Administrations. A burly man of sixty-one, fond of tropical shirts and good cigars, he met me under his customary canopy on Miami Beach. He argued that the state's politicians were betraying immigrants. South Florida has three Cuban American representatives in Congress: Carlos Giménez, Mario Díaz-Balart, and María Elvira Salazar, all Republicans. None of them had intervened forcefully against the deportations. "María Elvira Salazar has said she is 'deeply disappointed' in the Trump Administration," Garcia allowed. Yet she had also co-sponsored legislation known as the Dignity Act, which would offer sanctuary to Cubans who arrived before 2021 while allowing newer arrivals to be deported. "Her 'Sophie's choice' is '*Let me abandon this group of Cubans in order to save those I can*,' " he said. "What's the distinction between them? 'Oh, *they* came in under Biden.' "

He saw a distressing lack of solidarity among the successive generations of immigrants. The first wave, who arrived in the early sixties, were mostly white and relatively well off; they tended to disapprove of those who came twenty years later, who were largely poor and Black. Now, he said, those who had arrived in recent decades were doing the same: "The gilded Cubans, the ones who have made it, take the attitude that 'These newcomers, they're not us.' "

Garcia went on, “This community, which was built on the idea of freedom, is O.K. now with the potential deportation of as many as half a million Cubans.” In his view, the state’s Republicans had decided that they would accept deportations if Trump helped force out the Cuban government. Around Miami, an argument over their tactics was being carried out on billboards. Some bore images of the Republican representatives and the caption “*Traidores*”—traitors. Others, paid for by a Democratic-aligned *PAC* called Mad Dog, depicted Castro and Trump alongside the message “No to dictators, no to Trump.” Before long, though, partisans on the other side had the inflammatory billboards replaced. The new ones showed the same Republican politicians above the words “*Los Verdaderos Patriotas*”—the true patriots.

Carlos Giménez is seventy-one, an immigrant from Havana who, before being elected to the House, served as the fire chief of Miami and as the mayor of Miami-Dade County. When I met him in his office and mentioned the billboards calling him a traitor, he smirked. “That’s the Democratic Party, which is almost irrelevant now,” he said.

Giménez was exaggerating, but not by much. As Florida has become increasingly dominated by Republicans, the state Democratic Party has been weakened by infighting and largely ineffectual in elections. Loyalists have defected, and centrists have veered right. In 2016, Giménez backed Hillary Clinton for President. Now he’s a Trump supporter.

When I raised the prospect of mass deportations, he spoke carefully. “The situation in the U.S. is the fault of President Biden, who, even if he let decent people into the United States, also let in criminals.” He added that he personally hoped that immigration strictures would be loosened “for people who are decent.” He and his Republican colleagues were “working from the inside.”

It is not clear that their work has had any effect, though. In the first half of this year, more than four thousand Cuban immigrants were sent back to the island, and many others were handed off to Mexico; some forty-two thousand more have final deportation orders and are waiting to be removed. When Cuba has tried to impose limits—among other things, it resists accepting deportees who have criminal records in the U.S.—the

Administration has simply shipped migrants elsewhere. One detachment was announced in a press release titled “8 Barbaric Criminal Illegal Aliens Finally Deported to South Sudan After Weeks of Delays by Activist Judges.”

For Giménez, the overriding priority is bringing down the Cuban government. “I applaud President Trump for putting pressure,” he said. “Frankly, I’d go further. The solution to Cuba is regime change.” Giménez’s idea is that, if the island becomes poor enough, its people will rise up and overthrow the government. He wants to “stop all flights, food, and medicines, and the movement of people taking goods and money back and forth.” He also suggests halting the flow of remittances from the U.S. and disabling a program that allows the regime to raise money by essentially renting out Cuban doctors to impoverished countries. He argued that it was crucial to impose these strictures in the next two years, before the midterm elections could install a Democratic majority in Congress. “The regime is weaker than ever,” he said. “It needs outside help to provide even the most basic things to the people. All we want is to see democracy in Cuba.”

The kind of intervention that Giménez and his allies advocate is profoundly risky. Failed totalitarian regimes tend to give way not to democracies but to mafia states. Yet Giménez argued that leaving Cuba in its current condition was worse: “It’s like saying, ‘We’ve rolled three. Can you roll snake eyes and make it worse?’ Yes. But you can also make it better. My hope is that the diaspora will come through when the time comes. In any post-transition period, yes, there must be a plan to keep order on the island. But we have the resources here to help.” He acknowledged that starving the regime would cause hardship for the Cuban people. But, he said, “sometimes if you have a cancer and you want to cure yourself, it can be painful.”

Trump and Secretary of State Marco Rubio, whose parents were Cuban immigrants, have hinted that they will take further measures to “foster freedom in Cuba.” But Ric Herrero, the head of the Cuba Study Group, a pro-engagement advocacy organization, expressed skepticism that the Administration will do anything more than signal toughness. Cuba has no rare-earth minerals that might entice Trump to get involved. Aside from placing sanctions on *Gaesa*, the Administration has done little to change the

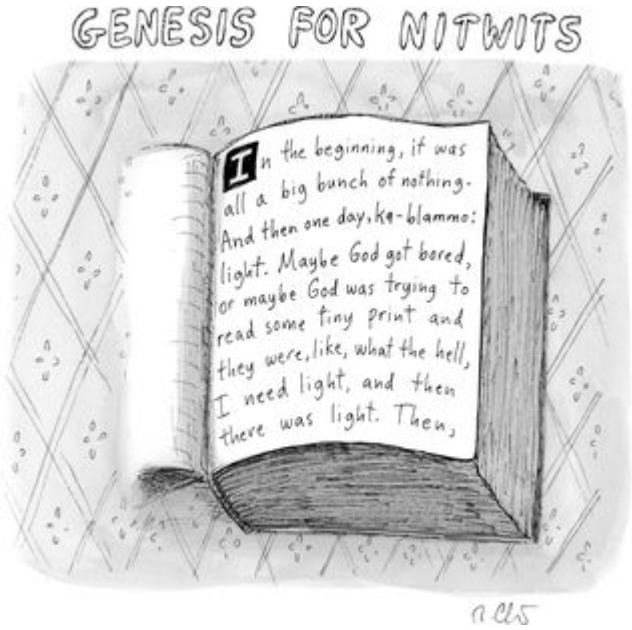
status quo. It has sanctioned officials in countries that hire Cuban doctors, for example, but it hasn't stopped flights to the island—presumably because they are popular with Cuban Americans. "As far as Rubio is concerned, Cuba's not a priority," Herrero said. "His No. 1 goal, every day, is to show that there's no sunlight between him and the President."

Giménez remained hopeful that he could push the Administration to act when the time was right. He told me that he'd met with Kristi Noem, the head of the Department of Homeland Security, and asked for stricter measures on Cuba. "She was receptive but is quite busy," he said. "Right now, people aren't really focussed on this hemisphere. There's a lot going on."

Critics have been predicting that the regime in Havana is about to collapse since the demise of the Soviet Union, thirty-five years ago. During my recent visit, though, the situation felt unusually tenuous. It is as if the convergence of penury, incapacity, and decline has finally become impossible to ignore.

Cuba has many chronic problems, but the essential one is that its economy doesn't provide for its people. After Fidel Castro stepped down as President, in 2008, he made a rare admission of his government's inability to run the economy: "The Cuban model doesn't even work for us anymore." Castro had been in office for forty-nine years. His brother Raúl succeeded him for nine years more, and an acolyte of theirs named Miguel Díaz-Canel has led for the past six. None of them has been able to reverse the slide.

Once one of the world's largest sugar producers, Cuba has allowed its agricultural base to erode so severely that it recently began importing raw sugar. The electrical grid is disintegrating, with hours-long blackouts common across the island. Almost all its gasoline is imported, making gas expensive and scarce; in many parts of the countryside, bicycles and horse carts have supplanted cars. Life is especially difficult for retirees, who receive a pension equal to six dollars a month—about five per cent of what they need to survive. In Havana, beggars are ubiquitous. Near my hotel, a few blocks from the Torre K23, there were several dumpsters overflowing with garbage. For a week, it remained uncollected, and on most mornings elderly people were foraging through it.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

The Cuban novelist Leonardo Padura told me, “The dream of the Revolution has turned into a living nightmare.” At seventy, Padura is a voice of a generation that endured a long war in Angola and the privations that followed the Soviet collapse. His latest novel, “Dying in the Sand,” captures their sense of dispossession. “There’s no light at the end of the tunnel,” he said. “You can’t even see the tunnel walls.”

The recent exodus represents an acute brain drain. A large percentage of those who have left are young and educated, eager to escape a place where the average salary for skilled professionals tops out at about thirty dollars a month. A Cuban friend of mine named Dolores, a former child psychologist in her eighties, survives on remittances sent by her two sons, who live in Florida. “We oldies are the only ones who are left,” she told me with a wan laugh. Once a fervent believer in the Revolution, Dolores now devotes most of her energy to *resolviendo*, the ritual of resolving quotidian needs that has come to typify life for many Cubans: obtaining gasoline for her ancient Lada, if the nearby gas station has any, or paying someone to hold a place in the line, which can last for days; going to one of the state-sponsored *agromercados* to buy produce, if a friend has sent word that there is anything worthwhile. If, like most Cubans, you don’t have a generator, your perishable food spoils quickly, and your evenings are spent in darkness; without a fan to fight the summer heat, sleep is next to impossible.

A few years ago, Cuba was one of the safest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Now, amid the privation, there have been increases in assaults, robberies, and murders. Thieves on foot or on motorbikes snatch cellphones from incautious tourists. Others have devised an ingenious scheme that operates out of Havana's airport. One longtime visitor to Cuba told me that he hailed a cab after a recent flight there and got unusually solicitous service: a tout ushered him to the front seat and carried his bags to the trunk, and when he reached his destination the driver fetched the bags for him. He discovered later that an accomplice hidden in the trunk had rifled through them and stolen a couple thousand dollars in cash.

Cuban officials often complain that the U.S. trade embargo, imposed in 1962 after Castro began expropriating American-owned businesses, has stifled their economy. Yet many of the island's problems are self-inflicted. In 2021, President Díaz-Canel led an effort to loosen the government's control of industry by permitting a new class of businesses. But hard-liners in the Communist Party, worried about losing control to the private sector, repeatedly tightened regulations. The military overseers of *Gaesa* also apparently resented the competition, so hundreds of businesses were punished for alleged offenses. A recent Miami *Herald* investigation revealed that *Gaesa* holds as much as eighteen billion dollars in cash, making it far more solvent than the civilian administration. (A well-connected importer told me that the bank where he kept his money in Cuba had loaned it to the government, and had then been unable to recoup the cash to pay him back.) Some observers worry that, if the government is weakened further, the military will move to solidify control.

In June, a young Cuban reporter named Delia Proenza published an article and a video denouncing the country's penuries. "This is hard, and the worst of it is, there is no end in sight," she wrote. "What we have been enduring for some time now isn't *life*; with these horrendous heat waves, without electricity most of the time, one cannot be sure of having enough to eat nor sufficient sleep, and what is needed is not more explanations but concrete solutions."

Proenza works for a newspaper, *Escambray*, that is run by the Communist Party, so she was careful to couch her remarks in the ambiguous lexicon of

Cuban officialdom. But any public criticism of the government is rare, and her statements quickly went viral online. Some speculated that Proenza had official permission to present some limited critiques, either as a damage-control exercise or as a way to displace blame onto regional officials. Despite outward shows of unity, Cuba's Communist Party is riven with factions that are frequently reported to be at odds.

Another indication of fragility came in mid-July. During a parliamentary session, the minister of labor and social security, Marta Elena Feitó Cabrera, declared, "There are no beggars in Cuba. There are people pretending to be beggars to make easy money." There was a public uproar, and the minister resigned, as President Díaz-Canel chided his underlings not to "act with condescension toward the people" or "be disconnected from their realities."

During my visit, the Party newspaper printed a palliative message from Díaz-Canel: "Notwithstanding the machinations of our adversaries, we will overcome the difficulties." An accompanying editorial celebrated Karl Marx's birthday and extolled his genius for "having synthesized, as no one else had, the extremely complex clockwork that is capitalism, and, upon understanding it, managing to break the spell for those who had been forever exploited and kept entranced by it." After sixty-six years of authoritarian rule, the only thing that the Cuban government offers its dwindling population is more of the same. Around the island, billboards proclaim "Continuity."

The argument between Miami and Havana, with its endless recitation of old slights, can have the feel of a protracted family fight. One of Fidel and Raúl Castro's sisters, Juanita, spent decades vociferously denouncing her brothers from exile in Miami. The most assertive of Florida's Cuban American representatives, Mario Díaz-Balart, is a nephew of Fidel Castro's estranged first wife. He recently tweeted in favor of "strong measures aimed at cutting off the oxygen to the regime."

But Herrero, of the Cuba Study Group, argued that this kind of rhetoric is better understood as electoral gamesmanship. The anti-Cuba Republicans were "driven by messaging and posturing," he said. "When all else fails, they tell people in Florida that they're still putting pressure on this regime

and promise that they're going to 'bring it to its knees.' They never have to deliver results. They just have to keep their base animated enough to hit the polls come November."

María Elvira Salazar, the Florida representative, recently took up the cause of a Cuban rapper named Eliéxer Márquez Duany. Known to fans as El Funky, Márquez appears on "Patria y Vida," a song that became an anthem of the protests in 2021. After the crackdown, he was increasingly at odds with the government, and so, when he was invited to the Latin Grammy Awards, he flew to the U.S. and never left. Márquez became an avowed Trump supporter—"If I could vote, I would have voted for Trump," he told *Politico*—and a fan favorite around Miami. Still, his application for residency was denied earlier this year, and he was given thirty days to leave the country. Salazar intervened with federal authorities on his behalf, declaring that "El Funky is a political refugee who deserves the full protection of U.S. immigration law." He was allowed to stay.

Giménez launched an initiative that was less media-savvy than Salazar's but more ambitious. In March, he published a list of a hundred and eight "repressors"—including former Communist Party officials, judges, prosecutors, secret police, and intelligence agents—who were living in the U.S. He also wrote to Kristi Noem, demanding that they be deported. The following month, D.H.S. announced that one of the repressors, Daniel Morejón García, had been arrested in Miami. Giménez issued a celebratory letter. "I have long warned that agents of the Cuban Communist regime have entered our country under false pretenses, living among us, all while concealing their dark past," he wrote.

The people on Giménez's list were identified by the Represores Cubanos project, a crew of amateur investigators affiliated with a Miami-based nonprofit called the Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba. Some were discovered essentially by accident—recognized by other Cubans on the street, or at the supermarket, or in social-media photos posed in front of a Trump Tower. Others were tracked down through prolonged investigations.

I got in touch with one team member, Maikel Bencomo, and he agreed to meet me in Hialeah, a working-class city in greater Miami, where we sat in a park adjacent to the new Donald J. Trump Avenue. Bencomo is forty-four

and thickset, with a bluff, bullish manner; he wore diamond earrings, gold rings, and dark glasses that he didn't take off. He had brought along his wife—a quiet, watchful Cuban woman—and their two-year-old daughter. We spoke at a picnic table next to a lake, while people whizzed overhead on a zip line.

In Miami, billboards urge Cuban American politicians to resist the Trump Administration's deportation campaign.

Bencomo told me that he had grown up in Las Cañas, a farm town outside Havana. He said that Las Cañas was "always a rebellious place," adding proudly that one of his uncles had been attacked by a pro-regime militia for being a counter-revolutionary. Bencomo himself had been imprisoned twice, first for refusing to perform his compulsory military service and then for having "Down with Fidel" tattooed in Spanish on his back. After his release, he recalled, his house was vandalized by a mob in an "*acto de repudio*"—an act of repudiation, organized by local Party members.

In 2014, he said, he came to the U.S. and was granted political asylum, but he remained focussed on Cuba. Whenever he wasn't working, as a machine operator for an excavation company, he was gathering intelligence on the regime. Opening his phone, he scrolled through a cascade of social-media posts, explaining, "I'm dedicated to posting about the repressors from my town." Bencomo said that he maintained a network of friends and relatives back home. In exchange for tips, he helped pay for their smartphone plans, which are expensive in Cuba.

Morejón, the manager of a state-owned animal-feed plant, was known in Las Cañas as a regime thug—a tough-guy type who hung out with local police. "He had a pistol, and he was an alcoholic, abusive in his manner," Bencomo recalled. A video taken during the protests of 2021 shows Morejón accosting a man in his sixties who was riding a motorbike alongside the marchers. On a crowded street, Morejón strides up to the man and pummels him to the ground. After bystanders intervened to stop the attack, police arrested the victim, along with two men and two women who'd taken his side. Morejón testified against them at the trial. The men were sent to prison and the women sentenced to house arrest with hard labor.

Last year, Morejón joined the exodus to the U.S., and people who knew him reported his motions to the Represores project; the researchers sent the tip to Giménez, who passed it on to Noem. Morejón was arrested, and though the charge was relatively minor—lying on immigration forms about his involvement with the Cuban government—the Represores team considered it a victory. Bencomo said that, after years of work, "we started to have more strength with this Administration." When I asked about Trump's immigration policy, he replied, airily, that he "supported the Republicans," although he conceded that family members who had come more recently—including his wife and his mother—were at risk of deportation. "In a war, there are always going to be victims," he said. "I trust this Administration." His wife rolled her eyes.

Bencomo was currently pursuing a man named Luis Vitali Balmaseda, who had been a police chief in the municipality surrounding Las Cañas. Bencomo had spotted him several times in Hialeah, he said: "I know where

he lives with his wife and daughter." He told me that Vitali had been responsible for his second arrest and had beaten him at the police station—but he was awaiting more evidence from his collaborators in Cuba. "The United States is a country of laws," he said, as if repeating something he had been told. "We need to provide proof." When I asked what motivated him to do this work, he paused. "I don't care so much about my home town, frankly," he said. "What I want is revenge with the regime. Not justice. Revenge."

Giménez said that he believed the hundred and eight repressors on the list were just the beginning—that there were many more former regime agents in the U.S. Cuban dissidents had told him that "even police are trying to leave," he said. He gave a hopeful smile. "This could be a sign that the rats are trying to leave the sinking ship."

But the repressors list has thus far resulted in only a few deportation orders. Immigration advocates worry that the spectre of a Communist incursion could provide the Administration with another way to raise fears about migrants—and another way to refuse people entry. I pointed out to Giménez that if every Cuban who had been affiliated with the Party were denied a chance at asylum, it would exclude many people who had been forced to work within constraints that they did not choose. "If you were part of the system, you were part of the system," he said. "You made your choice."

Yet even some of his allies wouldn't meet that standard. In a sleek office tower in Coral Gables, I met with Rolando Cartaya, who leads the Represores project at the Foundation for Human Rights in Cuba. A soft-spoken man of seventy-two, Cartaya told me that, before making his way to the U.S., he had worked for the Communist Party's youth newspaper, *Juventud Rebelde*.

Over coffee and pastries from the venerable Versailles restaurant, he said that he had avoided controversial topics in his journalism but, as a devout Catholic, was appalled by the regime's offenses. Finally, he wrote a letter to an international wire service, accusing the government of "traces of fascism" for organizing actos de repudio against Cubans who planned to participate in the Mariel boatlift. Cartaya was fired and eventually jailed. After being released, he supported himself for a time as a pest fumigator.

Cartaya's allies had their own grievances. He arranged a Zoom call with two other researchers behind the list, Luis Domínguez and Samuel Rodríguez Ferrer. Domínguez, who is sixty-two, immigrated to the U.S. with his family in the seventies. "My ancestors fought for Cuba's independence against Spain," he told me. "They would roll over in their graves if they saw what we've allowed to happen in Cuba." Domínguez, sitting at home in Connecticut, in front of a row of computer monitors, explained that he had taught himself internet surveillance to track repressors and to antagonize the regime. In 2009, he'd embarrassed the Castro family by posing as a Colombian woman to carry out an amorous six-month exchange with one of Fidel's sons. Later, he used Google Earth to confirm that Díaz-Canel had a back-yard swimming pool, an unthinkable luxury on the island. He launched an online forum, Secretos de Cuba, which publicizes allegations of malfeasance among the Party élite. "Cubans have now seen them going around in Mercedes and BMWs, and they're thinking, What about us?" he said.

His colleague Ferrer was at his home office in Apollo Beach, a suburb of Tampa. He is a member of the Jehovah's Witnesses, who have long been persecuted in Cuba; he said that he was harassed and arrested before he finally emigrated by sea, in the mid-nineties. After the 2021 protests, he denounced the government on social media and set up an organization called Funds for the Victims of Communism, Inc., to solicit donations.

One of Ferrer's targets was Melody González Pedraza, a Cuban judge who was detained as she tried to enter the U.S. in the spring of 2024. González had sentenced four young men to prison for throwing Molotov cocktails at a police chief's vehicle and at an intelligence officer's house in the town of Encrucijada, where Ferrer's family lives. He maintained that they were innocent, and that one of them hadn't even been in Cuba at the time.

From the U.S., González insisted that she had issued the verdict under pressure from Cuban state security. In an interview at the time, she recalled saying in an asylum hearing that the Party was "nothing more than a burden for most members and a requirement for survival," but that rejecting its dictates "means losing all kinds of rights, including the right to choose one's job or profession." Ferrer testified against her, quoting harsh language

from her verdict. Her asylum request was denied, and she was sent to an *ICE* prison in Louisiana; in late September, she was deported.

Ferrer said that González deserved whatever she got, because she had "voluntarily served in an unfair system that had jailed thousands of Cubans as political prisoners." I asked how he felt about facilitating the deportation of repressors when many of his compatriots were being threatened with the same fate. "There are hundreds of repressors who should be deported," he said. "And there are many Cubans who are being deported who should not be." He paused, and added, "These are decisions that are over our heads."

One evening, I met Aldo, his wife, and their two young sons at a dingy apartment complex in Hialeah where they have been living. Their apartment was about the size of a mobile home, with a small bedroom and a long, narrow space that served as a living room, a kitchen, a play area for the kids, and a computer station for Aldo. Back in Havana, he had been a scientific researcher; he now works a modest desk job in an unrelated field.

Aldo had spent his time in the States terrified that he would be deported back to Cuba and jailed. He had been involved in dissident circles since his student days, in the nineties. In the crackdown of 2021, Cuba's state security apparatus told him to leave the country or face arrest.

Aldo has found the immigration system capricious and confusing. When he and his family first crossed into the U.S., he was taken to an *ICE* office for interrogation. He sought to explain his reasons for fleeing Cuba, but officials told him to keep quiet, that they would ask the questions. At the time, some immigrants were being granted humanitarian parole, which provided legal residence; others got I-220A status, meaning that they would be deported unless they secured asylum. Aldo, whose family was classified I-220A, could discern no pattern to the decisions. "It seems to be the luck of the draw," he said. As they settled into Miami, he found an immigration lawyer and filed an asylum request. But courts were overwhelmed by a flood of asylum seekers—a long-standing systemic shortage exacerbated by Biden's inclusive policies. Aldo was given a date for a hearing three and a half years in the future.

By the time the hearing finally came, this May, Trump was in office, and the mood was more hostile. Aldo brought along a binder of evidence to corroborate his claims of persecution. He found the hearing deeply unsettling, he said: “I was asked questions like ‘If Cuba is a totalitarian regime, as you say, how were you able to graduate from university?’ ” Aldo tried to explain that he had necessarily kept a low profile, and that his actions, such as printing anti-government leaflets and helping stage protest concerts, were designed to be difficult to prove. He was still waiting to hear whether the officials were convinced.

Miami has a tradition of naming streets and parks for anti-Castro figures. After last year’s Presidential elections, the county commission renamed a four-mile stretch of road for Trump.

“My problem, and the problem of many other Cubans, is that we’re caught between extremes,” Aldo said. “The Biden Administration was one extreme. We begged them to resolve my situation, but nothing happened. And then Trump comes along from the other extreme and tells *ICE* to fill a

quota. But if you ask a group like *ICE* for quotas, which we hear is three thousand people a day, well, it's obvious, you're not going to be implementing justice."

This summer, Trump led an entourage to visit "Alligator Alcatraz," a detention center for migrants that was under construction in the Everglades. The facility, set on an airstrip in Big Cypress National Preserve, cost nearly half a billion dollars, but it had been hastily built, and it showed. The prisoners' quarters consisted of large tents filled with wire-mesh cages, like oversized dog kennels. Alligator Alcatraz was designed to hold five thousand inmates with minimal infrastructure, in the middle of a mosquito-ridden swamp.

For Cubans, the historical resonance is unmistakable. At the end of the nineteenth century, as Cuba fought for independence from Spain, the colonial government interned thousands of suspected rebels in facilities known as *reconcentrados*—concentration camps. The settings were brutal, thick with insects that spread disease. For Trump, the dangers of his new prison's location were thrilling. "The snakes are fast, but the alligators are faster," he told reporters. "We're going to teach them"—the detainees—"how to run away from an alligator. Don't run in a straight line, nope—like *this*." He made zigzag motions with his hands. "And you know what? Your chances are about one per cent."

The following week, I drove west from Miami toward the Gulf of Mexico—Trump's "Gulf of America." After the last row of strip malls and subdivisions, the Everglades took over, in a vast, hot expanse of subtropical wetland. In the Miccosukee Indian Reservation, I passed shacks where tourists take airboat rides into the swamp to see alligators.

I was accompanied by Thomas Kennedy, a policy analyst at the Florida Immigrant Coalition. Kennedy is thirty-four, the son of Argentineans who came to the U.S. on tourist visas and stayed. After spending much of his childhood as an undocumented immigrant, he became a citizen, and has made migration issues his life's work. A few days earlier, he had joined a group of Democratic state legislators who drove out to inspect Alligator Alcatraz and were refused entry by officials there. "What they told them was that they didn't have the right to enter, and also that it was for their own

protection," Kennedy recalled. One of the legislators pointed out that it had been safe enough for the President of the United States. The officials still declined to let them in.

As the road extended into the deeper wilderness of Big Cypress National Preserve, signs marked the entrance to the prison. Turning off, we stopped at a roadblock guarded by two armed officers in flak jackets. One of the guards told us that unauthorized visitors were forbidden, but she was willing to talk for a few minutes. Her face was red in the heat, and she acknowledged that the swamp was not the most comfortable place to stand guard. But she couldn't complain, she said—she had plenty of drinking water, sunscreen, and bug repellent.

The inmates were less well cared for. Kennedy was in touch with a Cuban woman whose son, a severe asthmatic, had been held in Alligator Alcatraz for a week, and was transferred only after his health significantly declined. Another Cuban man had been brought in with acute hemorrhoids; he was eventually taken away for surgery, then immediately returned to detention, despite being in constant pain. Kennedy said that it was difficult to keep track of detainees, because many were being transferred to prisons in Louisiana and Texas, but the cases of abuse were piling up. A fifteen-year-old boy had been held for a week before anyone realized that he was underage; another detainee who went on hunger strike had been chained up on the airstrip for several hours in the sun. (D.H.S. denies allegations of inhumane conditions.)

By the entry, vans with tinted windows pulled in to deliver more detainees. Kennedy gestured toward a spot in the swamp where he'd seen alligators lounging when he visited with the legislators. The prison was intended to hold migrants who had committed crimes, but, according to the Miami *Herald*, only a third of the inmates had criminal records in the U.S. Kennedy pointed out that Alligator Alcatraz existed in a legal limbo: the Department of Homeland Security, *ICE*, and the State of Florida had all eschewed responsibility for the facility. "Lawyers still have no idea where to turn to file their cases," he said. "It's a concentration camp. It operates outside any judicial framework, where people are put into a legal loophole from which there is no recourse."

Later, Kennedy introduced me to Betty Osceola, a Miccosukee activist who was a prominent voice of opposition to Alligator Alcatraz. She told me that the abuses at the prison were obvious, but that no one in power seemed to care. “I’ve been trying to get people to listen, including local legislators,” she said. “Unfortunately, in Florida and across the U.S., the toxicity is such that, if you just talk about the human issues, they tune you out.” Instead, she and her allies had been raising concerns about the ecosystem. The prison, she pointed out, had been installed in the middle of a national preserve without an environmental-impact study. “What they’re doing to people there is not right, but it’s also affecting the panthers, the wood storks, and the fireflies, because of the light pollution,” she said. Given the number of violations, Osceola seemed astonished that the government had been allowed even to start construction: “If they had been any other group or individual, they’d have been arrested.”

In August, a federal judge ordered the prison to be vacated on environmental grounds. As DeSantis complained of “an activist judge that is trying to do policy from the bench,” the state filed an appeal and secured a stay in the ruling. Still, inmates were hastily transferred to other facilities. Some went to Fort Bliss, in Texas, or to a prison in northern Florida called Deportation Depot. Others were sent to Miami’s Krome Detention Center—another facility that has been the site of disquieting incidents. In late June, a seventy-five-year-old Cuban American man died there, apparently of heart failure. He had been in the U.S. since the age of sixteen.

From Miami, I spoke by phone with one of the women who were arrested in Las Cañas after the incident with Morejón. Alina, as she asked to be called, is fifty-five, the mother of a grown daughter and son. She had served three years of hard labor, working on a banana plantation and cleaning an office.

Alina described Morejón as a “disgraceful human being,” but said that he did not seem to have suffered for his offenses or for trying to flee to the U.S. Since being deported back to Cuba, he had returned to Las Cañas. “We hear he’s going to be put in charge of a shop next to the slaughterhouse,” she said. In the years since the protests, Las Cañas had acquired a new police station, whose officers circulate frequently through the community in squad cars. “They want to send a message that if anyone ever thinks of

doing anything like that again, they will go to prison for a long time," she said. This summer, the state-owned telecommunications agency abruptly raised the price of data plans across the country, in what was seen as an attempt to stem the flow of information.

During Alina's sentence, her daughter had looked after their home while also studying biomedicine. Her son had studied agriculture. Both subsequently fled the country. All the young people were leaving, Alina said: "There's no future here, so they're going. They're going to Brazil, to the Dominican Republic, to Uruguay—everywhere but the United States."

During Alina's trial, Morejón revealed that he was an enforcer with the regime's "rapid response brigades," a plainclothes force that is often deployed against protesters. In August, Trump signed an executive order calling for the creation of an apparently similar entity: a National Guard "quick response force," to be used in "quelling civic disturbances." A clause of the order allows "Americans with law enforcement or other relevant backgrounds" to join up through an online portal—effectively creating a militia of Trump-supporting veterans and ex-cops.

Joe Garcia spoke bitterly about the decline of governance on both sides of the Straits of Florida. "Let's face it—both communities, Havana and Miami, are dying," he said. "For decades, the exile community in Miami existed by being against Cuba. But how do you do that now? What is Cuba today? Nothing. At least before there was Fidel, this mythical figure, but Cuba now is a failed nation. And so, frankly, is this city, built on the idea of freedom and the offer of sanctuary to those fleeing persecution elsewhere. That's all gone now."

While I was in Havana, I visited the Centro Fidel Castro Ruz, a museum dedicated to the late Cuban leader. It is housed in an ornate villa, near the Torre K23, that once belonged to one of Cuba's wealthiest families—a legacy of the sugar boom. A guide was leading a group of middle-aged women through the exhibitions. The women, visitors from the countryside, seemed awed by everything. In one room, they stopped to admire a display of Castro's guns and uniforms. Farther on, an electronic map showed the countries he had visited as Jefe Máximo; another showed those he'd "helped" militarily—places like Vietnam, Angola, and Nicaragua. There

was a display of books about him in various languages, selected to make Castro seem like a figure of global stature.

Midway through the tour, a man in a guayabera joined the group. He was Cuba's labor minister, and he spoke to the women for a few minutes. They were, it turned out, state employees who had performed well and had been rewarded with a trip to Havana. It was hard not to think that their government jobs might get them barred from the U.S., if they ever tried to escape. In Cuba, though, whatever privations they had endured, their fealty had earned them the gift of a talk from a minister of the Revolution. ♦

Jon Lee Anderson, a staff writer, began contributing to The New Yorker in 1998. His books include "To Lose a War: The Fall and Rise of the Taliban."

Profiles

Carol Burnett Plays On

The ninety-two-year-old comedy legend has influenced generations of performers. In a string of recent TV roles, she has been co-starring with some of her closest comedic heirs.

By Rachel Syme

September 29, 2025

Burnett said that she approaches her exuberant physical comedy “from the outside in,” letting costumes dictate character.Photograph by Danielle Levitt for The New Yorker

Carol Burnett, the ninety-two-year-old legend of American comedy, keeps a document on her home computer listing hundreds of performers she’s

worked with, from Harpo Marx to Zooey Deschanel. She has stories about them all, and she recounts anecdotes about long-dead colleagues as if they happened yesterday. There's the one about Marlon Brando, who called her, out of the blue, to ask where she'd got her chin done. There's the one about Laurence Olivier, who reënacted some of his smoldering performance as Heathcliff, in "Wuthering Heights," for her before shrugging and saying, "Bugs Bunny could've done it." There's the one about the actress Betty Grable, who once made a guest appearance on "The Carol Burnett Show," the long-running blockbuster CBS variety hour. When Grable couldn't stop burping during rehearsals, her fellow guest star, the comedian Martha Raye, finally shouted, "Betty, why don't you just *fart* and save your teeth?"

One morning last fall, Burnett was at Television City, the studio lot in Los Angeles where her variety show was filmed, a half century ago, to shoot a cameo as herself on "Hacks," an HBO Max series about the second act of an aging comedian played by Jean Smart. The two women first met in the early two-thousands, when Smart read for a part in a stage play based on Burnett's life. Their paths crossed again in the twenty-tens, when Burnett guest-starred as Smart's mother on the sitcom "Hot in Cleveland." As "Hacks" crew members bustled about, adjusting Smart's wig and pinning a microphone to Burnett's lapel, the women kibbitzed about long-lost show-biz acquaintances.

"Do you remember Ann Miller?" Burnett asked, referring to a star of mid-century musicals. "She was once at a benefit for Oscar Hammerstein, and he wasn't there because he was dead, but Ann kept asking, 'Where's Oscar?' Someone had to tell her he'd been dead for ten years. And she just said, 'Well, *I've* been on the road with 'Mame.' So now I say that all the time."

Smart, who is nearly two decades younger than Burnett but still something of an old-timer herself, volleyed back, "And there was that time when Ann was doing that show with Mickey Rooney and it wasn't going well and she was, like, 'I have cheese all over my face!' and someone told her, 'Annie, it's *egg*,' and she said, 'Oh, who cares, it's all poultry!' "

Those too young to remember such things may have grown up, as I did, knowing Carol Burnett primarily from her role in the 1982 movie

adaptation of the musical “Annie,” as Miss Hannigan, the orphanage headmistress, or from the nineties sitcom “Mad About You,” in which she played Helen Hunt’s overbearing mother. Others might know her as Marion, the wizened heroine from the last season of “Better Call Saul,” one of a number of recent acting roles that have given Burnett something of a late-career resurgence. But in the heyday of her variety show, which ran from 1967 to 1978, drawing a reported average of thirty million viewers per episode, she was as much a fixture of American living rooms as Walter Cronkite or Johnny Carson; around the Television City lot, people used to joke that the CBS logo adorning the side of the main studio building stood not for Columbia Broadcasting System but for “Carol Burnett Show.” Even at a time when women were routinely dismissed as unfunny, Jerry Lewis (who once remarked that instead of going into standup a woman should be “a producing machine that brings babies into the world”) allowed that Burnett was an exception. Many of today’s leading practitioners of the form consider her a vital forebear, her exuberant slapstick routines—an ear-splitting Tarzan yodel, an overexaggerated faint onto the floor, a tussle with a malfunctioning washing machine—forever imprinted on the American sense of humor. When Burnett presented Quinta Brunson, the creator and star of the sitcom “Abbott Elementary,” with an Emmy for Lead Actress in a Comedy Series in 2024, Brunson grew teary in her acceptance speech, commenting on “the Carol Burnett of it all.” Julia Louis-Dreyfus told me recently, “Carol has always been in my consciousness. I was breathing her air without realizing it.”

“ . . . and he still finds time to bite the mailman.”
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Through the decades, Burnett has collected seven prime-time Emmys, six Golden Globes, a Grammy, an honorary Tony, two Peabodys, the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, a Kennedy Center Honor, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, and, in 2019, the first-ever Carol Burnett Award, a special Golden Globe given for lifetime achievement in television and named in her honor. She is roundly considered, as Amy Poehler puts it, an “unproblematic fave,” whose status as a national treasure is without controversy. Burnett prefers things that way. She tells—and retells—the story of her life and her Hollywood adventures without shades of darkness or complaint. A special that she filmed with her “Carol Burnett Show” co-stars just months after 9/11 became one of the most watched programs that year, not by making any mention of the tragedy but by offering what Burnett called “mindless silliness.” In 2025, when TV networks are bowing under pressure from the Trump Administration’s threats against free expression, this apolitical bent can make Burnett seem like as much of a relic as the Turner Classic movies she watches most days in order to “spend time with old friends.” (She did say, of ABC’s decision to temporarily suspend the late-night show of her friend Jimmy Kimmel, after comments he made came under fire from the F.C.C., “I was horrified. I texted Jimmy the minute it happened and said, ‘The whole world has gone mad.’ ”)

In other ways, the current TV landscape finds Burnett’s legacy more alive than ever. The flamboyant rich ladies played by Parker Posey and Jennifer Coolidge on “The White Lotus,” or the scenery-chewing work of Christine Baranski and Audra McDonald on “The Gilded Age,” owe a debt to the many grandes dames that Burnett played on her show. Echoes of her loopy conviviality can be found in Poehler’s work both on “Parks and Recreation” and on the chummy new hit podcast “Good Hang.” Even “RuPaul’s Drag Race” has something in common with Burnett’s many portrayals—in Bob Mackie gowns and garish wigs—of feminine kitsch. Burnett told me that she feels a special comedic kinship with Kristen Wiig, her co-star on the Apple TV+ series “Palm Royale,” who, like Burnett, can seem almost vanilla until she disappears into characters of outsized eccentricity.

“Palm Royale” is worth watching just for Burnett’s performance, as a scheming doyenne named Norma Dellacorte. Burnett has always been able to draw laughs out of seemingly nothing. In the first few episodes of the show, her character is in a coma. And yet, with a flicker of her eyes and a few well-placed grunts, she steals every scene she’s in.

At the “Hacks” shoot, Paul W. Downs, one of the show’s creators, went over to introduce himself. “Can I call you Miss Burnett?” he asked.

“Sure, honey,” Burnett said, then, raising her eyebrows high and dropping her voice low, added, “Though I prefer Angelina Jolie.”

In Burnett’s younger years, her body was as gangly and bendable as a marionette. She was a Stooges-like master of the pratfall: there was not a staircase too grand for her to tumble down, her legs jutting out at all angles. Now, with mobility a more delicate business, she navigated the set on the arm of her third husband, Brian Miller, a silver-haired musician twenty-three years her junior. She wore black Rothy’s flats, a black turtleneck, and a turquoise blazer. Her face, framed by her signature auburn bob, retained the elasticity that once earned her comparisons to her friend and mentor Lucille Ball. She and Smart assumed their positions in adjoining chairs in a room that had been staged to look like a Beverly Hills cardiologist’s office. Smart’s character on “Hacks,” Deborah Vance, does acerbic standup reminiscent of that of Joan Rivers, but the character is an amalgam of various trailblazing women of comedy, Burnett included. In the scene, Deborah, like a younger Burnett, has landed her own late-night television show, and she’s at the doctor seeking help in the wake of an on-set panic attack. Burnett, functioning as a sort of fairy godmother from comedy history, runs into her there and offers a pep talk.

When the cameras rolled, Burnett delivered a bit of opening dialogue, about getting food poisoning at Planet Hollywood, which she embellished with another real-life show-biz anecdote, about the late actress Carol Channing. Channing was a woman of peculiar eating habits, Burnett explained, and had to miss a day of rehearsals when she guest-starred on “The Carol Burnett Show,” in 1971, after getting sick from consuming contaminated elk meat. Burnett slipped into her best Channing impersonation—wide eyes, a gravelly baby voice—and repeated a warning that Channing had

given her: “Now, Carol, you must promise me that you won’t eat just any old elk.” Dropping the Channing bit, and pressing one hand solemnly to her chest, Burnett landed her punch line: “I’ve *kept* that promise.”

Downs was watching on a monitor. “She’s so on, it’s insane,” he said. (The Channing story, alas, would end up on the cutting-room floor.)

The “Hacks” writers had given Burnett, who has impeccable manners, uncharacteristically biting last lines. “You’re going to be wonderful—you always are,” she tells Deborah. “Except for that Lifetime movie you made in the eighties. I didn’t care for that.” After an initial take, Downs asked for a punchier delivery. Burnett tried several versions in a row: first deadpan, then with a sneer of sarcasm, pursing her lips in judgment. In her third take, which made it into the episode, she leaned forward and uttered the line with a soft resolve, as if offering sobering advice. Then she brightened up, pointed at Smart, and added, in a singsongy tone, “Knock ’em dead, kiddo!” (Tina Fey, who played the Burnett part in a recent Netflix miniseries adaptation of the Alan Alda film “The Four Seasons,” described Burnett’s ability to enliven even the flattest turns of phrase as “Oh, you think there’s one laugh in this line? There are *five*. Watch.”)

Burnett’s variety show, a well-choreographed mixture of sketch comedy and musical numbers, was legendary for its efficient production schedule—“I used to joke with the crew that I could swap out an outfit faster than they could swap out a couch,” she has said—and she still has an aversion to wasting time. She wrapped the “Hacks” scene in less than an hour. As she left the building, a few crew members yanked on their left earlobes, emulating a signature gesture that Burnett began making on TV in the mid-fifties, as a way to say hello to her grandmother through the screen, and later used to sign off every episode of her show. (A journalist once measured Burnett’s lobes as a stunt, and found that her left is a millimetre longer than her right.) Near the exit, an older man from the studio’s drapery department approached Burnett and handed her a small pillow he’d sewn as a gift. It was made of green velvet with gold rope fringe, the same materials that Bob Mackie had used to make one of Burnett’s most indelible costumes, for a parody of “Gone with the Wind”: a dress made of curtains, complete with a large rod that sat across her shoulders like a milkmaid’s

yoke. The man introduced himself as Greg. (Burnett likes to repeat people's names when she meets them, so that "they know I've seen them.") Greg told her that he'd been working at Television City "forever."

"Good old days," Burnett replied wistfully, then, clutching the pillow with one hand, and Miller's arm with the other, proceeded on her way.

Burnett is a zealous steward of her own legacy. For more than two decades, until the year she turned eighty-nine, she did a travelling one-woman show in which she would play clips from "The Carol Burnett Show" and wax nostalgic about its making. She could easily have filled the likes of Radio City Music Hall, but she preferred to play mid-size rooms, to allow for a certain camaraderie between herself and the audience. She started these performances the same way she began each episode of the variety show, by conducting an impromptu Q. & A. with the crowd. She fielded requests for hugs, for autographs, for duets, and for teeth-whitening secrets. She redirected any attempts to pry into her personal life toward gauzy Tinseltown memories. Burnett's longtime assistant and stage manager, Angie Horejsi, told me, "Her ability to pivot is amazing."

Bob Mackie's costume for a "Gone with the Wind" parody, in 1976, was a gown made of velvet drapes, complete with curtain rod.Photograph from CBS Photo Archive / Getty

Elsewhere, too, Burnett has an unerring talent for sunny deflection. She has written four memoirs that recount her impoverished, often unstable upbringing in Texas and L.A., as well as her tumultuous relationship with her eldest daughter, the late Carrie Hamilton. But the books, which she quotes in conversation almost verbatim, are not deeply confessional. Burnett is keen to accentuate the positive, and any disclosures of hardship are offset by a plucky emphasis on how lucky she has been. (She told me that an editor at Random House, the publisher of her first memoir, declined the second, a collection of chipper anecdotes about her celebrity friendships, considering it too milquetoast; she took the book to another house, where it became an instant best-seller.) Though Burnett is indelibly associated with the embittered Miss Hannigan, it is Little Orphan Annie, a fellow optimistic redhead, to whom Burnett has publicly compared herself. Vicki Lawrence, who was an original cast member on "The Carol Burnett Show" and has been friends with Burnett for almost sixty years, told me,

“Carol never wants to hear any of the bad stuff. I’ve learned that when you get together with her it’s, like, Let’s laugh. It is probably a combination of her childhood and everything that she’s been through, but she just wants to be happy.”

Burnett comes from a long line of women whom she likes to compare to hairpins—“You know, a little screwy,” she told me. Her maternal grandmother, Mae Eudora Jones, was a devout Christian Scientist from Belleville, Arkansas, who’d been married five times by the age of fifty. Mae raised Burnett’s mother, Louise Creighton, in San Antonio, Texas, but Louise—who had a passion for the cinema, and a severe beauty reminiscent of Joan Crawford’s—harbored dreams of moving to Hollywood to become a columnist on celebrity culture. She named Burnett, her first child, born in 1933, for the actress Carole Lombard. In the months following the birth, Louise and her mother fought over whether the name was more elegant with or without the “e,” a dispute that Burnett has described as symptomatic of an intense rivalry between the two women which rarely abated.

When Burnett was two years old, her mother and her father, Jody Thomas Burnett—a soft-spoken man who for a time managed a local movie house—left her in the care of Mae and hopped a train for L.A. The move was a disaster. Louise struggled to break into journalism. Jody sold coupons door-to-door for a local photography studio but spent most of his paycheck on alcohol. The marriage imploded, and Louise rented a small room inside a dingy apartment complex one block from Hollywood Boulevard. When Burnett turned seven, Mae decided that they should join Louise in California; Louise, loath to relinquish her independence, arranged for them to move into a separate room down the hall.

Room 102, where Burnett bunked with “Nanny” for the next fourteen years, was a twelve-foot-by-sixteen-foot studio with a Murphy bed. Burnett slept on the couch. The shower rod doubled as her closet. Burnett recalled, “I always went to school slightly damp.” Mae was a hoarder and a severe hypochondriac, who, despite Christian Science’s stricture against traditional medicine, took barbiturates daily for anxiety. She often expressed a fear that she’d die if left alone, so Burnett was afraid to go to school. Both Mae and Louise received W.P.A. relief checks, and Louise scrounged up the

occasional freelance job, but the women resorted to schemes and minor scams to make ends meet. For a time, Louise ran an outfit of bookies from her room; Mae taught Burnett to filch toilet paper from a local luncheonette.

Jody turned up occasionally to take Burnett for a soda, but he failed to stay sober. Louise had an affair with a married man, resulting in the birth of Burnett's half sister, Antonia Christine, and afterward fell into a deep depression and began drinking heavily, too. Burnett remembers volcanic fights between Mae and Louise, who would accuse Mae of trying to turn Burnett against her. Burnett learned how to disassociate, pretending at bath time to be a mermaid or drawing comics about a fictional happy family. During her teen-age years, Mae and Louise would refer to this behavior as "Carol putting her shade down."

Burnett inherited her mother's fascination with the movies. The Hollywood sign was visible from the roof of their building, and Burnett liked to climb up there and gaze at it. She and Mae would see second-run features at local theatres almost daily, and at night they would "hit the boulevard" to scope out the premières taking place at the grand film houses. Burnett's favorite stories were always "the happy ones," in which lovers found each other in the end, justice was served, and everyone tap-danced off into the sunset. ("The movies then, they just weren't cynical," Burnett said.) She and other local kids would act out scenes from films. A cousin would play Jane; Burnett, as Tarzan, perfected her yodel. She developed a pretend radio show, which she'd perform out the window, and a recurring bit in which she'd play her own twin. Still, she rarely thought about becoming a professional performer. Her mother was a vain woman, styling her hair painstakingly each day to cover a birthmark on her temple, and she was tough on Burnett about her appearance. By the time she reached middle school, Burnett was five feet seven, with a weak chin that made her feel like a "gopher girl." Louise advised Burnett to pursue a career as a reporter, telling her, "You can always write, no matter what you look like."

In Burnett's telling, her path to show business involved a series of miraculous breaks, beginning at the end of high school, when she was admitted to U.C.L.A. but couldn't afford a forty-three-dollar administrative fee. One afternoon, she checked the mailbox and found an envelope

addressed to her, with no return address, containing a single fifty-dollar bill. “To this day, I have no idea where it came from,” she said. “But it paid for college.” At U.C.L.A., she discovered that there was no undergraduate journalism major, so she enrolled instead in the theatre-arts program, planning to study playwriting. But in a mandatory acting class she discovered a knack for comedy. She played a country bumpkin in a one-act play, delivering her straightforward opening line—“I’m back!”—in a Texarkana drawl inspired by one of her great-grandmothers. It brought down the house. She soon started doing college musicals, where she learned that she could belt. “I tried out for the chorus of ‘South Pacific,’ and the director told me I was too loud and couldn’t blend,” she said. She did get the part of Nathan Detroit’s fiancée, Adelaide, in “Guys and Dolls,” and found a more fitting register in a number that the character sings with a honking cold.

“Once they find out you can talk, they never stop asking you questions.”
Cartoon by Robert Leighton

Louise came to see her in a college production and Burnett fondly recalls her saying, “You were the best one.” But neither of Burnett’s parents would survive to see her career success. Her father died in 1954, at the age of forty-seven, owing to complications from alcoholism; her mother died a few years later, at forty-six, of the same cause, leaving Burnett as the guardian of her teen-age half sister. (Mae lived until 1967, just before “The Carol Burnet Show” débuted.) Still, Burnett told me, of her childhood, “I always knew I was loved.” Her autobiographical stage play, “Hollywood Arms,” features a scene in which she’s let down by a drunken Jody, then

serenaded by her mother and grandmother with a Doris Day ode to positivity: “Live, love, laugh and be happy.”

Like Barbra Streisand, who had a natural talent for singing and claims to feel almost bored by her instrument, Burnett doesn’t like to analyze where her artistry comes from. In a 1972 *Esquire* interview, the writer Harold Brodkey pressed her to examine her comedic sources. Had she read Freud? “It’s just comedy,” she replied. “There’s no medicine box—no, there’s no soapbox to my humor.” Still, you don’t need to be trained in psychoanalysis to recognize that some of Burnett’s most iconic comedy routines double as portraits of the malcontented women who raised her, among them her role in “The Family,” a series of sketches from “The Carol Burnett Show” about a riotously dysfunctional working-class clan. The writers behind the sketches assumed that Burnett would play the part of Mama, the mean-hearted matriarch; instead, Burnett chose to be Mama’s daughter Eunice, a whiner in a dead-end marriage who believes that she is destined for Hollywood stardom. Burnett gave the character a Texas twang, as a reference to her own thwarted mother. The sketches ran long, often up to twenty minutes, forcing viewers to endure the family acrimony past the point of comfort. Burnett likes to recount how the cast rehearsed one “Family” sketch without accents or costumes, as an experiment. The effect was very different. “It was *devastating*,” she said.

This past year, the comedic writer and actor Cole Escola delivered a distinctly Burnettian performance as Mary Todd Lincoln in the hit Broadway farce “Oh, Mary!” Escola told me, “What Carol did is so important to me, because it really feels like watching someone open a childhood wound, but knowing how to do it for laughs.” Like Burnett, Escola comes from a family marked by poverty and alcoholism, and Escola said, of Burnett’s comedy of repressed or delusional women, “I don’t see it as apolitical at all.” “Oh, Mary!” tells the story of Lincoln’s assassination in an ahistorical spew of dirty jokes and cabaret numbers. The play, which Escola wrote, isn’t explicitly drawn from their personal history, but they described it as “more autobiographical than any memoir I could write,” adding, “I get the same feeling watching Carol perform the broadest, dumbest things, or these kitchen-sink melodramas that are actually

surprisingly telling and deep. And, if they don’t hit people, then the next joke is never too far away.”

Burnett’s singular vice is real estate. “I used to love to move,” she told me, adding that this might be because she’d spent so much of her youth stuck in one tiny room. Throughout the years, she has lived in some combination of a Beverly Hills mansion, a sprawling manor in Honolulu, a compound in Santa Fe, an apartment in Trump Tower, and a condo in the Wilshire, a tony building in L.A. Around 2000, as a sentimental gesture, she rented Room 102, the apartment she’d grown up in, and used it briefly as a writing studio.

Today, Burnett has whittled her real-estate portfolio down to one property, a relatively modest Mediterranean-style house in a gated golf-course community in the Santa Barbara area. When I first visited her there, in the fall of 2024, she steered me into the main hallway. It was lined, like the walls of a midtown-Manhattan deli, with hundreds of photographs of Burnett with other famous people, including almost every American President since Eisenhower. There were framed notes from Bette Davis and Jimmy Stewart. A telegram from Rita Hayworth, sent after Burnett did a sketch parody of Hayworth’s role in the noir film “Gilda,” read, “I loved it. You should have done the original.” One photograph, of Burnett and Dolly Parton standing back to back, was angled slightly, to suggest that it was being weighed down by Parton’s breasts. “Isn’t that great?” Burnett said.

Other private jokes were sprinkled throughout the house. She pointed to the door of her office, which was made of an antique-looking dark wood, and explained that it came from the Warner Grand Theatre, where she’d worked as an usher during her teen years. Movies back then played on a loop, and viewers could enter a showing at any point, but she’d warned customers not to spoil Hitchcock’s “Strangers on a Train” for themselves by going in midway through. Her boss was so furious that he fired her on the spot. When the theatre went out of business, in the nineties, Burnett bought the door she’d been stationed at, complete with its stained-glass “Exit” sign.

The first move of Burnett’s adult life was the result of another stroke of luck. One night, during her junior year at U.C.L.A., a theatre professor offered Burnett and her boyfriend, a fellow-actor named Don Saroyan, who

would become her first husband, a gig as the entertainment at a fancy cocktail party in San Diego. Burnett sang a few show tunes, and afterward a well-dressed man who worked in shipping approached her to inquire about her career plans. She told him that she had Broadway ambitions, and he offered her and Saroyan a thousand-dollar loan each to relocate to New York. (At the man's request, Burnett has never revealed his identity.) She dropped out of school and packed a "cardboard suitcase," nursing dreams of "becoming Ethel Merman or Mary Martin," she recalled. In the end, she became a theatre star and a TV star almost at the same time.

One overcast morning, I met Burnett in a suite at the Baccarat Hotel in midtown Manhattan. Sitting on a cream-colored love seat, she was exquisitely put together in another black turtleneck, paired with a shell-pink blazer. The night before, she'd spoken on a panel with Wiig at the Paley Center for Media, and she joked that she might have been the only person in the building who'd actually worked for William S. Paley, the chairman of CBS during the "Carol Burnett Show" years. She looked out the hotel window and pointed to a building next to the Museum of Modern Art. A different building used to stand in that spot, a crumbling brownstone called the Rehearsal Club, which became her first home in the city, in the fall of 1954.

"Here's how stupid I was: I had no idea at all of where I was going to stay," Burnett recalled. She flew alone from L.A. (Saroyan followed a few months later), and during the flight she read a copy of *The New Yorker* that mentioned the Algonquin Hotel, so she figured that she'd go there. When she checked in, she was aghast to learn that a room cost nine dollars a night. "Our rent back in L.A. was a dollar a day," she said. She booked a night anyway and hung her clothes on the shower rod, as she'd done in Room 102. She made a collect call to Nanny, who begged her to come home. Burnett believes in signs from the universe. "Rain has always been a good symbol for me," she said. That first night in New York, it began to pour. She turned on the radio. "I swear to God, an announcer said, 'Hurricane Carol is hitting New York,' " she told me. "That's how I knew I had to stay."

The next morning, Burnett called her only acquaintance in the city, an aspiring actress who had been a few years ahead of her in college. The girl

told Burnett that she was living at the Rehearsal Club, a boarding house for young women pursuing careers in the theatre, subsidized by a consortium of rich uptown ladies. There was one empty bed available, and Burnett rushed over—in the rain—to nab it. The house rules were simple: no drinking, no men after 10 *P.M.*, and no full-time jobs outside the performing arts. Burnett moved into a "transient room" on the ground floor, the humblest accommodations. She had four roommates, including an acid-tongued actress whom Burnett nicknamed Miss Congeniality and a cheerful Englishwoman who was pursuing a career in flamenco dance. Burnett told me, "She would leave the room clicking her castanets, saying, 'Toodle-oo!' "

To help pay the rent, Burnett took a part-time job as a hat-check girl at an oyster bar near Rockefeller Center. She sometimes earned extra tips with a small scam right out of her grandmother's playbook: tearing the tags off men's coats and sewing them back on, then telling the owner that she'd done a bit of helpful mending while he dined. Her peers at the Rehearsal Club taught her to look for job postings in the performing-arts magazine *Show Business*, and she went to several cattle-call auditions, but she struggled to book jobs. One night, she talked her way into a Broadway theatre—"like Anne Baxter from 'All About Eve,' " she said—to ask the comic actor Eddie Foy, Jr., for career advice. Soon afterward, she hatched an idea to create a part for herself: the Rehearsal Club would put on its own revue and invite every major theatrical producer in town.

With help from the club's wealthy patrons, Burnett and twenty of her housemates rented the Carl Fischer Concert Hall and sent out an invitation that began, "These young women have been told you'd be happy to 'see their work' when they are 'in something.' " The performance, in the spring of 1955, was directed by Saroyan, who had moved to an apartment near the Rehearsal Club. Burnett, the show's only comedian, sang the song "Monotonous," which had been made famous by Eartha Kitt in the film "New Faces." But, whereas Kitt had sung a sultry version as she slunk across some velvet chaise longues, Burnett bellowed the lyrics in a housedress and hair curlers while flinging her body across broken kitchen chairs. The next morning, *Show Business* reported that Burnett was "easily the winner" of the night and that "her sense of timing is top notch." Agents

called the Rehearsal Club all day asking for her. Not long after that, Burnett and Saroyan were married, and she moved in with him.

Burnett's first appearance on TV was a lowly bit part as the girlfriend of a ventriloquist's dummy on a 1955 episode of "The Paul Winchell and Jerry Mahoney Show." She got more traction, in 1957, when she began a club act at the Blue Angel, a midtown cabaret known for launching such young comedians as Elaine May, Mike Nichols, and Phyllis Diller. Diller, a predecessor of Joan Rivers, would become famous for zesty standup routines laced with barbs and one-liners that she wrote herself. Burnett, by contrast, was an interpreter of material; her genius lay in what Diller, an avowed worshipper of Burnett, once described admiringly as taking "idiocy" all the way "to the very end." One of the songs Burnett performed at the Blue Angel was an original number by the composer Ken Welch, who would become a longtime collaborator. Called "I Made a Fool of Myself Over John Foster Dulles," it was a parody of Elvis mania in which Burnett's idol was not the king of rock and roll but the gray-haired, taciturn Secretary of State. The song was written up in *Life* and in the *Times*, and Burnett was invited to perform it on Ed Sullivan's and Jack Paar's late-night shows. (When Dulles was asked about the song on "Meet the Press," he said, "I make it a policy never to discuss matters of the heart.") The exposure earned Burnett a spot as a guest player on "The Garry Moore Show," a prime-time comedy variety hour on CBS. She quickly became a show favorite for her brassy singing voice and physical stunts, such as sputtering through the torch song "Come Rain or Come Shine" while gallons of water were dumped on her head.

Burnett told me that, when she first started out, her "television God" was Sid Caesar, the creator and star of the hit sketch program "Your Show of Shows." But, whereas Caesar's comedy was wry and cerebral, Burnett's was forceful and corporeal; onscreen, she would be tightly wound one moment, then explode into antics the next. She brought a similar quality to her breakout theatrical role, in "Once Upon a Mattress," a musical comedy based on the fable of the princess and the pea, which opened in 1959. Mary Rodgers, who wrote the music for the show, recalled Burnett's audition in a memoir: "She could break suddenly from melody into her hilarious hog-calling hoots, which didn't have any particular note in them but suggested

immense fun and eagerness and strength and health." "Once Upon a Mattress" moved to Broadway, where Burnett performed for nearly a year. In her showstopping first number, "Shy," Burnett, as the unkempt Princess Winnifred the Woebegone, bellowed the line "I've always been shy!" with dissonant bravado. Later, in the scene in which Winnifred is kept awake by a single pea, Burnett performed a prolonged pantomime of violent physical discomfort, thrashing and dangling like a fish on a line atop a towering stack of mattresses. During the musical's run, she went from guest player to regular cast member on "Garry Moore"—for which she won her first Emmy Award—and she worked seven days a week juggling both roles. (She never missed a single "Mattress" date, she told me, though she did once briefly doze off during the pea scene.) The convergence of the two projects helped develop Burnett's reputation as a triple-threat rising star: actor, singer, crash-test comedienne.

In 1962, Burnett signed a ten-year, million-dollar contract with CBS, stipulating that she make her own television specials and appear as a guest on other network programs. She released two albums of show tunes and embarked on a national tour culminating in a Las Vegas residency. She also teamed up with her friend and fellow Broadway It Girl Julie Andrews on "Julie and Carol at Carnegie Hall," the first of several specials that they would do together. It featured Andrews, a graceful soprano, as a posh English priss and Burnett as her hickish American foil. ("You're so kippers, so caviar, and I'm so liverwurst!," Burnett sang.) Andrews, who had been accustomed to playing an earnest ingénue in shows such as "Camelot" and "My Fair Lady," told me that she was initially terrified of doing comedy, but that Burnett's ebullient commitment to their bit helped her shed her inhibitions. "Carol is brave, and she made me brave," Andrews said. "It was just simple for us after that."

That same year, Burnett divorced Saroyan and married Joe Hamilton, a producer on "Garry Moore." The relationship (begun while Hamilton was still married to another woman) helped make Burnett a subject of feverish press coverage. A profile in *Life* from 1963 declared that "she already rivals Lucille Ball as the most popular comedienne in TV history." Journalists were fascinated by Burnett's humble backstory ("blueberry pie," one gossip columnist called her), and almost baffled by her go-for-broke physical

contortions. In one *TV Guide* profile, titled “The Girl in the Rubber Mask,” the reporter, Edith Efron, wrote that, whereas glamorous stars such as Carole Lombard and Mary Tyler Moore belonged to what Efron called the “romantic school” of comedy, Burnett was part of the “gargoyle school,” in which women “turn themselves into objects of ridicule and seem desperately intent on annihilating in themselves the last trace of feminine allure.” The *Life* writer compared Burnett to an anteater, a monkey wrench, and a hitchhiker’s thumb, while allowing that she was “oddly beautiful.”

As if to preëmpt her detractors, Burnett often resorted to brutal self-deprecation, describing herself in interviews as scrawny or bucktoothed. She admitted to one reporter, “I’m very thin-skinned. The least little criticism makes me lie awake and feel like slashing my wrists.” Over time, though, she converted the perplexed public interest into an unusually potent parasocial bond with viewers. Burnett has never liked performing as herself (“I’m always more comfortable in character,” she told me), and she pushed back when a CBS producer first suggested that she do Q. & A.s on “The Carol Burnett Show.” But she was ultimately persuaded by his reasoning: “Before you put on the fat suit and blacken your teeth, they want to *know* you.” Burnett’s out-of-costume persona—approachable, winning, game—earned her a kind of good will with audiences that her zany sketch material alone might not have. Amy Poehler told me, “You watched her answer questions like a quote-unquote regular person, while she clearly remains the funniest person in the room.” In an early episode, a young audience member asked Burnett if she could fit a doorknob in her mouth. Burnett cackled and let out a showy sigh. “What a cute little girl she is!” she told the audience. Then, flashing the child a sportive grin, she replied,“I don’t know. First I want to see if I can get a gag in yours.”

At Television City, after the “Hacks” shoot, Burnett rode a golf cart across the lot to the building containing Stage 33, the onetime home of her show. When the lot first opened, in 1952, L.A. was still overwhelmingly a film town; Television City was one of the first Hollywood facilities fully devoted to making network shows, an emblem of the industry’s rise. Today, it reflects traditional TV studios’ decline. In 2018, CBS sold the property to a development firm and became a tenant in the space. In the years since, the studio’s longest-running game show, “The Price Is Right,” has moved its

operations to Glendale, and “The Late Late Show with James Corden,” the last late-night show to tape there, was cancelled. The new developers are in the process of installing high-tech soundstages optimized for the types of quick-turnaround productions that have rapidly overtaken traditional television: glossy streaming series, YouTube videos, influencer content. But the original studio building is landmarked and remains undisturbed. In 2015, a large glass side door into the complex was emblazoned with the words “Carol Burnett Artist Entrance.”

Inside, a rickety elevator took us up to Stage 33. As Burnett walked slowly into the cavernous space, she pointed out the bathrooms in the wings. “Sonny and Cher shot in the next studio,” she said. “And during rehearsal breaks we would always run through the men’s room to see what they were doing.” Burnett’s stage was designed so that the audience was seated below the eye level of the performers, in a sunken pit, rather than above them, on risers. “It was like a little theatre,” Burnett said. “They were looking up at you, and they could see *everything*.”

Burnett got her own variety show thanks in large part to a contractual anomaly. Her ten-year agreement with CBS included an unusual clause: if, at any time within the first five years of the deal, she wanted to star in her own variety show, CBS was obligated to produce thirty hour-long “pay or play” episodes, either airing the show or compensating Burnett for the decision not to. When Alec Baldwin had Burnett on his podcast, in 2015, he joked that the arrangement was known in Hollywood as the Burnett Clause, “meaning that it’s never going to happen again.” Burnett believes that she was given the option only because the network didn’t believe she would exercise it.

For a while, she didn’t think so either. Her greatest hope at the time was to pursue more work on Broadway. But, in the years after leaving “Garry Moore,” Burnett and Hamilton had Carrie, the first of their three daughters, and Burnett found herself juggling new motherhood with a series of professional setbacks. In 1964, after a taxi accident left her in a neck brace, she dropped out of the Hollywood musical “Fade Out—Fade In,” then was forced to return after the producers threatened to sue her for breach of contract. A variety show that she developed with Bob Newhart was

cancelled after six months. In 1966, she developed a song-and-dance special with Lucille Ball, who'd come to meet her backstage during "Mattress," but the show got mixed reviews. Soon afterward, Burnett and Hamilton, now expecting their second child, Jody, relocated to L.A. They put a down payment on a house in Beverly Hills that had once been owned by Betty Grable and wondered how they'd afford the mortgage. Burnett remembers feeling as "in demand as a carton of sour milk."

Just before the end of 1967, with the Burnett Clause set to expire, Hamilton called Michael Dann, an executive at CBS, and told him that they wanted to invoke it. "We knew it was now or never to push the button," Burnett said. Dann warned Burnett that the comedy-variety format, whose blend of sketch comedy and musical theatre had grown out of vaudeville and nineteen-thirties radio, was "a man's game." He pointed out the many male comedians launched by the genre—Milton Berle, Jack Benny, Sid Caesar—and the fact that Dinah Shore, perhaps the biggest female variety star of the time, was primarily a musical act. Dann instead offered Burnett a lead role in a sitcom, a genre that she disliked. (She'd once told an interviewer, "They would probably call me Gertrude or Agnes, and that's all I'd be forever.") When the couple finally secured the commitment, with Burnett as star and Hamilton as producer, they were given a crowded Monday-night time slot, suggesting little confidence from the network. "We doubted that we would even make it until the end of the year," Burnett said. "So we just decided to do exactly what we wanted to do." (The show ended up being a success on Mondays and eventually moved to a powerhouse Saturday-night lineup that included "The Mary Tyler Moore Show" and "All in the Family.")

Taping the show was, Burnett told me, a bit like staging a new Broadway musical every week. The crew included a full dance troupe and a twenty-eight-piece orchestra. Liza Minnelli and Ella Fitzgerald were among the early guest stars. Each episode was performed without stopping, as if it were a theatre production, though the show did not air live. For the finale, Burnett always sang the show's schmaltzy theme song, "I'm So Glad We Had This Time Together," which Hamilton composed himself. As the credits rolled, post ear tug, Burnett, ever the fangirl, had the evening's special guest sign an autograph book on the air.

Cartoon by Mick Stevens

Lucille Ball told Burnett that on “I Love Lucy” she’d always relied on “the Cuban”—her ex-husband, Desi Arnaz—to call the shots on set. “All she had to do was come in on Mondays, read the polished script, and simply be ‘Lucy,’ ” Burnett recalled in one of her memoirs. Similarly, when it came to running the day-to-day operations of “The Carol Burnett Show,” Burnett has said, “there was no doubt about who was in charge”: at the height of the show’s success, in 1971, she was featured, beaming, on the cover of *Life* under the headline “Mrs. Joe Hamilton.” Burnett told me that, in the realm of professional decision-making, she has always suffered from a fear of being “seen as a bitch.” She’d read a recent biography of Elaine May, her old pal from the Blue Angel. “She was not a people pleaser, by any stretch of the imagination,” Burnett said appreciatively. “*I’m* a people pleaser.” If Burnett had a problem with a particular sketch on her show, she would tell the writers that she didn’t understand it rather than deliver criticism. She recalled one rehearsal during which she and the singer Eydie Gormé were practicing a duet of “Everything’s Coming Up Roses” and the director kept haranguing them for moving out of the spotlight, until Gormé harangued him right back. Burnett told me, “I wanted to kiss her feet! But she didn’t have to come back the next week.”

Burnett was less hesitant to assert herself when it came to choosing and cultivating her fellow-performers. She wanted the cast and crew to feel like a theatre company, not an assortment of scene-stealers and their support staff, and she selected co-stars who she felt would work well in a communal environment, including the debonair actor Lyle Waggoner, who also served

as the show's announcer, and Harvey Korman, who had previously been a dependable second banana on "The Danny Kaye Show." Burnett was looking for a young actress who could, among other things, play a version of her little sister in a series of sketches called "Carol & Sis," when she received a fan letter from a seventeen-year-old named Vicki Lawrence. Burnett, then nine months pregnant with Jody, insisted that she and Hamilton go see Lawrence play the kazoo in a local pageant. Over objections from the network, Burnett hired Lawrence before she'd finished high school.

Of the cast members, Burnett easily commanded the most airtime, but she also regularly ceded attention to others. She does not appear at all in one of the show's most famous sketches, featuring Korman as a dental patient and Tim Conway (who joined the cast in Season 9) as his clumsy, anesthesia-addled dentist. "Carol wanted us all to be as funny as we could be," Lawrence recalled. "And if she wasn't in a sketch she would still be standing in the wings, watching you do it."

Burnett expected her team to match her mood of upbeat magnanimity. Once, when Korman acted rudely toward the singer Petula Clark, who was a guest star on the show, Burnett threatened to fire him if he didn't change his attitude, then hung a sign as a reminder on his dressing-room door: "Mr. Happy Go Lucky." Comedy, Burnett liked to say, should feel like "playing in the sandbox," though the playing, in her case, occurred on a tight schedule. She spent most of each morning at home and arrived on the lot at 11 *A.M.* for rehearsals, which were as carefully planned, hour by hour, as a day at school. The show taped from 7:30 to 9 *P.M.*, and Burnett boasts that it always wrapped early enough for her and Hamilton to take the guests to dinner at the Hollywood watering hole Chasen's.

Any unruliness was saved for the sketches. Burnett told me, "When I would do the Tarzan yell, I would feel so calm afterward. Because your body doesn't know that you're doing some crazy, outlandish character. You're just *screaming*." Burnett described her approach to comedy as "from the outside in," adding, "Once I have the wig on, I know exactly how this person moves and how they talk." As a result, she considered one of her most essential creative partners on "The Carol Burnett Show" to be Mackie,

whom she hired when he was only twenty-six years old, after discovering his glitzy designs through his work with the singer Mitzi Gaynor. Mackie, who grew up enamored of screen starlets, infused his costumes with a sense of classic-Hollywood camp. Together, the two developed some of Burnett's most memorable characters: Shirley Dimple, a cuckoo child actor in baby-doll dresses and bloomers; Stella Toddler, an ancient acting teacher who wore turbans and spoke in a cotton-mouthed slur; and Nora Desmond, a deranged take on Gloria Swanson's iconic has-been from "Sunset Boulevard," whom Mackie outfitted with a gravitationally challenged bosom made of panty hose stuffed with birdseed.

Mackie and Burnett still get together about once a year, and often talk by phone to reminisce. Last spring, they met up at the Peninsula hotel in Beverly Hills. Burnett had gone to L.A. to attend a screening of a documentary about Mackie's life, along with some of his other longtime clients, including Cher and the pop star Pink. The designer, who is eighty-six, looked a bit like a ship captain, in a navy blazer embellished with gold buttons. He and Burnett sat next to each other at a table, and Burnett reached over to squeeze his hand.

"Early on, I was going to do a lot of stunts, like jumping out of a window," Burnett recalled. "And I said, You know, Bob, when I do these stunts, I should be wearing slacks."

"But I said, 'No!' " Mackie said. "You should wear a very tight skirt and heels. It gives you a chance to use the most amazing legs and knees and feet and do crazy stuff, which in pants doesn't mean anything."

"And that made all the difference," Burnett said.

Mackie replied, "I was just protecting your shtick."

By the late sixties, the counterculture was beginning to break into prime-time television. On "Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In," on NBC, a cast that included a young Goldie Hawn and Lily Tomlin cracked one-liners about race relations, hippies and marijuana. In 1969, the hit CBS variety show "The Smothers Brothers" was kicked off the air for its biting satire of Nixon and the Vietnam War. Burnett told me, "I was sorry that CBS cancelled

them, because they were very funny, and they had a point to what they were doing." But "The Carol Burnett Show" largely kept its distance from the upheavals of the time. Burnett was content to mine references from her own Depression-era youth; her famous maid character, the Charwoman, who became something of a show mascot, harked back to Chaplin's Little Tramp, wearing a rumpled outfit and performing silent reveries. "We seldom did anything topical," Burnett told me. "I just wanted to go for belly laughs." Offscreen, her preferred social activity was having celebrity friends such as Steve Martin and Bernadette Peters over for a game of charades. She never drank to excess or did drugs, and, when the *National Enquirer* published an article implying that she'd been drunk at a restaurant, she sued the paper for libel and won. She insisted to me that she was "not a prude," and that she enjoyed a "blue joke" as much as anyone. (In a new memoir, the actor Tim Curry, who played Burnett's conniving brother in "Annie," writes that after the film wrapped Burnett told him she was going back to Hawaii, where she lived at the time, to "watch the whales fucking.") Still, by the standards of the day, she was easy to label a square.

In this magazine in 1975, the critic Michael Arlen criticized "The Carol Burnett Show" as an example of a television comedy stuck in "ancient and synthetic molds." He was writing about the début of a new sketch series, "Saturday Night Live," which he argued was the first American variety show that seemed "to speak out of the real, non-show-business world that most people inhabit." Lorne Michaels, the creator of "S.N.L.," aimed to bring an insurgent edginess to the variety formula. In the show's early years, according to a recent Profile of Michaels in *The New Yorker*, he was known to reject sketches that dealt with middle age or suburban domesticity, saying they were "too 'Carol Burnett.' " In fifty years of "S.N.L.," she has never been invited to host. But alumni of the show have championed her legacy. Last year, while presenting Burnett with an award at *Variety's* Power of Women event, Amy Poehler said to her, "I wanted to thank my mother, *the* mother," then added, " 'S.N.L.' owes *everything* to you." (Burnett, who is used to being uncomplicatedly beloved, said of Michaels, "I don't know what I did to upset that man, but I'm so sorry." She added, "Do you think it's misogynistic?" Michaels declined to comment.)

By the time “The Carol Burnett Show” ended, in 1978, the variety-show genre was on the wane. CBS requested a twelfth season, but Burnett decided, as she told the audience in the show’s last episode, that “it’s classier to leave before you’re asked to.” At first, she felt eager to move beyond TV. She spent the seventies and early eighties working on various movie projects, including two films directed by Robert Altman, who, she said,“always trusted my instincts.” She starred as a type-A magazine editor in Alda’s “Four Seasons.” But her supporting part in “Annie” was the high point of her film career. As the villainous Miss Hannigan, Burnett exuded a bawdy sensuality, sauntering down the boarding-house hallways with the same furiously stifled energy that she’d brought to her best sketch characters. Burnett leaned into the character’s drinking habit, hiccupping through Miss Hannigan’s swigs from a bottle of bathtub gin. The character had a sneaky pathos. Burnett told me, “No villain ever thinks they’re the villain.”

The same year that “Annie” was released, Burnett and Hamilton separated. Burnett had no producer credit on “The Carol Burnett Show”—she told me that she’d never even thought to ask for one—so her business manager had to scramble to secure her a cut of the series’s lucrative residuals. The messy split fuelled Burnett’s already strong impulse to keep working on her own. During the following decade, she made a mushy TV movie called “Between Friends,” co-starring Elizabeth Taylor, about two divorcées going through menopause, and a short-lived soap-opera-parody series called “Fresno.” She also made a string of successful one-off TV specials with famous co-stars—Andrews, Robin Williams, Whoopi Goldberg, Rob Reiner—and, in 1990, a more experimental anthology series called “Carol & Company,” which aired on NBC. When the show faltered, after two seasons, Burnett agreed to try reviving a “Carol Burnett Show”-like sketch format for CBS, but it lasted only five episodes. The actor Richard Kind, a cast member on both “Carol & Company” and the CBS revival, called the latter a “step back,” both for himself and for Burnett. “Carol is not always a risktaker with her comedic choices,” he said. “America loves her because she found her comfort zone and she excels in it.” But, he added, “the world was changing, and Carol *wanted* to change.”

Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Burnett is the opposite of snobbish. She is a self-proclaimed soap-opera addict, and she considers a short turn on “All My Children” to be a highlight of her résumé. When I asked her if she felt disappointed that she had never “*EGOT*-ed,” she said that what she always wanted far more than an Oscar was to have her handprints embedded in the concrete outside Grauman’s Chinese Theatre, an honor that she finally received in the summer of 2024. She told me that one of her few career regrets was starring in the 1995 Broadway play “Moon Over Buffalo,” a comedy of errors about a troupe of travelling actors which marked Burnett’s return to the Broadway stage after thirty years away. A behind-the-scenes documentary from 1998, by D. A. Pennebaker and Chris Hegedus, shows the play’s director, Tom Moore, and playwright, Ken Ludwig, disparaging Burnett behind her back as “too television,” and treating her presence in the show as a cheesy but necessary bit of stunt casting. But by the end she is thoroughly vindicated: during the play’s first staging before an audience, a set malfunction causes a long pause in the performance, so Burnett crawls out from under the closed curtain and entertains the crowd with a rousing thirty-minute Q. & A. session that earns a standing ovation. Reviewers of the play savaged both the director and the writer but sang Burnett’s praises. “Time hasn’t tarnished Ms. Burnett’s cockeyed splendor,” Vincent Canby wrote in the *Times*. On little more than the strength of Burnett’s appeal, “Moon Over Buffalo” ran for nine months.

Burnett still possesses, as she proudly put it, “all my original parts”—no refurbished hips, no designer kneecaps. Every day, she walks for twenty-five minutes on a treadmill. She reads both the Los Angeles *Times* and the New York *Times* in print and then does an hour or so of puzzles (“The mind is a muscle,” she said). She has developed a habit of texting her daily Wordle score to a selection of friends, including Allison Janney, Julia Louis-Dreyfus, and Charlize Theron. Burnett doesn’t use a regular starting word, as many players do, but plucks a new guess each day “from the universe,” and often wins in only two tries out of six, a pattern that has led friends to suspect that she cheats. (“I would never!” she said.) Janney told me, of seeing the daily text pop up on her phone, “Sometimes I get so frustrated, and I think, Ugh, I hate this game. But I have to keep doing it, because I don’t want to lose touch with Carol. Carol *freaking* Burnett!”

Janney, who co-stars in “Palm Royale,” is part of a group that Burnett calls her “new girlfriends,” all of whom she has met through recent television work. For a while, she told me, she felt that she had few collaborators left. During her live shows, she would blow a kiss to a cartoon of Korman and Conway, who died in 2008 and 2019, respectively. “Pretty much everyone is dead,” Burnett told me, her face softly downturned. “Well, except me and Julie Andrews and Dick Van Dyke.” So she considered it a “miracle” when Vince Gilligan, the creator of the acclaimed AMC drama “Breaking Bad,” and a longtime admirer, called to ask her to appear on the final season of “Better Call Saul,” which aired in 2022. The show, which followed a crooked New Mexican lawyer, played by Bob Odenkirk, was an archly funny drama, shot partly in gritty black-and-white. Gilligan told me, “It did not surprise me that she’d want to try a different kind of role, because she likes to test herself.” Her character, a fragile but quietly steely woman, might be the straightest Burnett has ever played. One critic described the performance as “a subtle symphony of world-weary nuance.”

Around that time, when the creators of “Palm Royale” conceived of the role of Norma Dellacorte, they had in mind what one producer described to me as a “Carol Burnett type” who could play a scheming woman convinced of her own grandeur. Then they thought, Why not Burnett herself? Being a part of the two shows, Burnett told me, is the “closest I’ve felt in some time to being back in the sandbox.” When Miller, her third husband, threw her a

surprise ninety-second-birthday party this spring in Montecito, Janney, Wiig, and their fellow “Palm Royale” cast member Kaia Gerber carpooled from L.A. to attend.

For almost a decade, Burnett has been trying to make a film version of her memoir “Carrie and Me,” about her relationship with her eldest daughter. Carrie struggled with drug addiction as a teen-ager but went to rehab and got clean in 1979, then embarked with Burnett on a mother-daughter anti-drug speaking tour. A punkish sprite who for a time sported a platinum Mohawk, Carrie started a promising Hollywood career of her own, appearing in a TV series based on the movie “Fame” and starring in the 1988 indie film “Tokyo Pop.” The former, in which Burnett and Hamilton did a song-and-dance routine as Dust Bowl-era hobos, marked the first of several times that the two performed together. Like Burnett, Carrie was interested in her “hairpin” matrilineage, and the two collaborated on the script for “Hollywood Arms,” Burnett’s autobiographical stage play. Carrie, though, did not live to see the play realized. She died of lung cancer, in 2002, at the age of thirty-eight.

Burnett recently found a screenwriter, the actress Zoe Lister-Jones, who shares her vision of a “Carrie and Me” adaptation as a tragicomedy in the vein of “Terms of Endearment.” Burnett told me, excitedly, that she had cast Janney to play her in the film, and was looking at Miley Cyrus or Riley Keough for the Carrie role. She did not want to discuss her other two daughters. (One of them, Erin Hamilton, whom Burnett is estranged from, has also struggled with addiction. In 2020, Burnett and Miller filed for guardianship of Erin’s adolescent son.) The last time I visited Burnett at home, in March, she emerged from her bedroom with Carrie’s old diary and a stack of printed-out e-mails. She grew teary as she read me a missive: “Mama, I’ll always be your rock and roll girl. I’ll always have holes in my coats. But inside, I feel myself becoming more of a woman and no longer a girl.”

Around the time that Carrie got sick, Burnett grew close to Miller, whom she’d met years before when they were both working on a production of Stephen Sondheim’s “Company.” They married in 2001. In her second memoir, Burnett writes that, despite their two-decade age difference, “I

thought of Brian as a contemporary.” Miller, who for many years managed the orchestra at the Hollywood Bowl, is fluent in the language of vintage show biz. Their partnership has been largely free of professional collaborations, though recently that has been changing. In 2023, Miller produced a tribute show in honor of Burnett’s ninetieth birthday—for NBC, not CBS, which balked at the idea that Burnett could draw an audience. The show became NBC’s most watched special in several years. In 2024, he and Burnett pitched a series based on her Rehearsal Club days to Apple TV+, and Apple executives asked for a pilot. This July, the platform decided not to move forward with the project, so the couple is shopping the show elsewhere.

Once or twice a week, Burnett and Miller go out for an early dinner at Lucky’s, an old-school steak house in downtown Montecito. They sit in the back, underneath a black-and-white photograph of Burnett and Ed Sullivan. She always orders a single Cosmopolitan, made to her specifications, which include a side of extra cranberry juice. She calls this Carol’s Cosmo, and has the recipe printed out on thick white business cards, with a little caricature of herself at the top, to hand to new bartenders. (She asked, more than once, that I not divulge the formula, explaining that her family history of alcoholism and addiction has made her wary of promoting drinking.)

Last spring, I met Burnett at Lucky’s for lunch. In a typically industrious move, she’d packed in a second appointment the same afternoon, using one of the restaurant’s private dining rooms to tape promo spots for the platform Shout! Factory TV, which has the licensing rights to stream “The Carol Burnett Show.” The small space was packed with cameramen, production assistants, and Burnett’s glam team.

Burnett perched in a director’s chair beneath a portable ring light.

“We’re just going to do a few tosses, and then we’ll be done,” a man said from behind a camera.

Burnett clapped her hands together and sat up straight in preparation. “Bing, bang, boom!” she said. She told me later that she’d recently been to a birthday party at which the guests had gone around the table and said what

age they felt like inside. Burnett picked eleven. “I play, like a little girl,” she said. “Why would I ever stop playing?” ♦

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

Takes

- **Jonathan Blitzer on Roger Angell's "Down the Drain"**
  In the summer of 1975, one of the great writers about baseball profiled the pitcher Steve Blass, whose career had recently imploded.

Takes

Jonathan Blitzer on Roger Angell’s “Down the Drain”

By Jonathan Blitzer

September 28, 2025

June 23, 1975

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

As a New York Yankees fan, I spent the summer of 2000 feeling my chest tighten anytime my team was on the field and the ball travelled in the vicinity of second base. Routine grounders caused the greatest stress. The more inconsequential the play should have been, the more likely it was to go wrong. Seemingly overnight, Chuck Knoblauch, the All-Star second baseman, had lost his ability to toss the ball to first, the shortest throw on the diamond.

There was a particular lineage to his condition. In the nineteen-eighties, a Mets catcher named Mackey Sasser couldn't throw the ball back to the pitcher. Years later, Rick Ankiel, a Cardinals pitcher, could no longer throw strikes—yet, when he was moved to the outfield, his accuracy rarely faltered from a greater distance. The list goes on. Only a small fraction of players are on it, but there are enough for fans to identify their struggles as the yips, a now familiar term. For a while, however, the affliction was mostly called something else: Steve Blass disease, after the Pittsburgh Pirates pitcher who, in 1973, became the first known case in the Major Leagues.

In June, 1975, just after Blass was forced into early retirement, the great *New Yorker* editor and writer Roger Angell profiled him for the magazine. For half a century, until his death in 2022, at the age of a hundred and one, Angell wrote about baseball with unmatched elegance, companionability, and knowledge. Pitchers may have supplied his best material. He called their showdowns with batters "a permanent private duel over their property rights to the plate." The men on the mound, Angell liked to point out, tended to have the upper hand. They knew what they were throwing, whereas batters could merely react. "A great number of surprising and unpleasant things can be done to the ball as it is delivered from the grasp of a two-hundred-pound optimist," Angell once wrote. "The first of these is simply to transform it into a projectile."

The piece opens with a description of an iconic photograph of Blass, leaping in ecstasy after leading his team to a World Series victory, in 1971. Here was an optimist, until he wasn't. Blass had just finished two of the best seasons of his career when, as Angell puts it, "the roof fell in." It began with an errant pitch, then whole innings of them; a bad outing, then two.

“You can’t imagine the feeling that you suddenly have no idea what you’re doing out there,” Blass tells Angell. “It was kind of scary.”

Few sports are as defined by fallow periods as baseball. There are slumps, patches of mediocre play, doldrums of various kinds. As the cliché goes, a Hall of Fame batter is hitless seven out of ten times at the plate. Was Blass’s mental block a sign of what lurked on the other side of these quotidian failures? For a pitcher, Angell writes, there is always the unavoidable thought of “whether he will now join the long, long list—the list that awaits him, almost surely, in the end—of suddenly slow, suddenly sore-armed pitchers who have abruptly vanished from the big time, down the drain to oblivion.”

I’ve always loved Angell’s patience in unspooling a mystery that he knows won’t be solved as a matter of science or psychology. This is the story of how Blass, in spite of himself, goes on loving a game that his mind, rather than his body, won’t allow him to play any longer. Angell interviews players, managers, and Blass’s friends. He airs the going theories. The most devastating moments come when the anguished player gives way to the smiling father and the stoic partner. With an athlete’s discipline, Blass refused to let his pitching darken his mood at home. No amount of shouting or wailing seemed commensurate with his suffering, so he mostly didn’t bother getting angry. “I got to hate the frustration and pain of this more than he did,” Blass’s wife, Karen, said. “He always found something to hold on to—a couple of good pitches that day, some little thing that he had noticed.”

Sitting in Blass’s family room, at the conclusion of his reporting, Angell proposes that the two of them play “an imaginary ballgame together.” He wants to hear how Blass, who “still possessed a rare body of precise and hard-won pitching information,” would throw to the 1975 Cincinnati Reds. Blass pours some coffee, lights a cigar, and selects his first pitch. Two lovers of the sport could not resist sharing one last game. ♦

Read the original story.

Down the Drain

In 1973, Steve Blass was an extremely successful and useful big-league pitcher. Then baseball suddenly stopped being fun for him.

Jonathan Blitzer is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His book, "Everyone Who Is Gone Is Here," received the Hillman Prize and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award in 2025.

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Now That I Run the Zoo**
  The tigers eat tofu. “Child care!” / chant kang’roos. / And the sea slugs debate the best / pronouns to use.

Shouts & Murmurs

Now That I Run the Zoo

By Patricia Marx

September 29, 2025

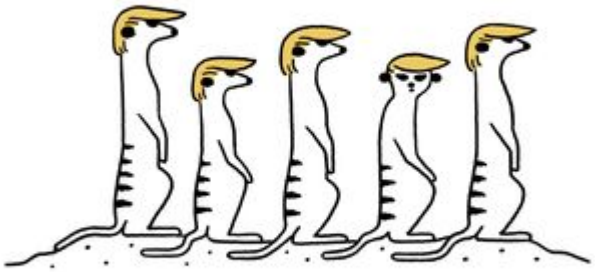


Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

> President Donald J. Trump signed an Executive Order restoring truth and sanity to American history by revitalizing key cultural institutions. . . . The Order directs the Vice President . . . to work to eliminate improper, divisive, or anti-American ideology from the

> Smithsonian and its museums, education and research centers, and the National Zoo.
>
> —*White House fact sheet, March 27, 2025.*

> Dr. Seuss Enterprises . . . reviewed our catalog of titles and made the decision last year to cease publication and licensing of the following titles: *And to Think That I Saw It on Mulberry Street*, *If I Ran the Zoo*, *McElligot's Pool*, *On Beyond Zebra!*, *Scrambled Eggs Super!*, and *The Cat's Quizzer*. These books portray people in ways that are hurtful and wrong.
>
> —*Dr. Seuss Enterprises, March 2, 2021*.

I am Big Shot Despot—tremendous, colossal!
My name's on the zoo, it's in letters real bossful!
I'll make it the hugest—incredi-bling to see,
And real soon all the people will cheer, just for me!

But zoo's now a shithole. So sad and so woke-y.
The pandas perform kumbaya karaoke.
The tigers eat tofu. "Child care!" chant kang'roos.
And the sea slugs debate the best pronouns to use.

Octopi want unions. Ladybugs, human rights,
And the owls hold elections on alternate nights.
Lemurs, they say, are the very worst-ever-est,
Conspiracy commies and lunatic leftists!!!

I'll take care of this mess—green-light a coup or two,
And bring back the greatness of my big beautiful zoo.
"So, Despot, what's the plot . . . to get rid of the Grots?"
Oh, I'll squash all those Grots with my pet Snarls-a-Lots.

They will clompety-clomp past the ducks (such big quacks!)
And then round a few up for their "treasonous acts."
Your stripes go the wrong way? Is your fur too flingfloo?
Watch out! You'll be hauled to the Lame Land of Else-Zoo.

The hyenas get laughs? Platypuses push pot?
I'll fix all that nonsense—'cause I'm B. S. Despot!
Breaking news! The Despot hassilenced the chorus:
No oinks, baas, or brays (even you, Brontosaurus!).

Get 'em right now, at the Loot-Zoot gift shop!
Wombats that shout "Witch hunt!"—ten bucks a pop,
Meerkat snow globes—too hot for the snow,
We take dollars, rubles, crypto—and blow! ♦

Patricia Marx is a staff writer. Her children's book "Tired Town," illustrated by Roz Chast, was published in October, 2023.

Fiction

- **“Amarillo Boulevard”**
  Jean stepped out of the car as Nia approached—lean and arrogant, a cigarette pinched between her lips. Then her swagger slipped, her expression unsettled.

Fiction

Amarillo Boulevard

By David Wright Faladé

September 28, 2025

Illustration by AJ Dungo

When Jean and her fiancé arrived at the Jamesons', the Juneteenth goings on were already in full swing. The back yard brimmed with raucous laughter and talk of high-school sporting successes and the tribulations of the Dallas Cowboys. Old-school R. & B. groaned from speakers in a propped-open window, Bill Withers's lament about the absence of sun at odds with the big Texas sky and the garish heat.

Mrs. Jameson—Miss Sammie to all—a pitcher of Red Drink in hand, called over the music, "Jean! You bring that boy over here right this instant and introduce us."

Crossing the yard, Jean and Wole were greeted with fist bumps and back claps as they wended their way through the crowd. Miss Sammie hugged Jean then pushed past Wole's outstretched hand and hugged him, too. Jean's mama, in a kente-print muumuu (as much out of self-consciousness about middle-aged weight gain, Jean figured, as in celebration of the day), hovered nearby, smiling on.

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

Since Wole's arrival, the day before, Jean's father had been probing him in the methodical manner of his engineer's training, but Pops Jamal—Mr. Jameson—now grilled him in earnest. "So you aim to be a doctor, huh?"

"Yes, sir."

Others congregated, eyeballing the cross-examination.

"Medicine ain't a career for the faint of character, or so I'm told."

"No, sir," Wole said, his smile tight, his gaze focussed on Pops Jamal's face. He understood this to be, essentially, a "meet the fiancé" party, and Jean imagined that he was doing his best to keep any signs of New York City snark at bay.

She escaped unnoticed into the house and sat on the couch, counting the minutes until they could get out of there.

The Jamesons' home—at least this front room, where Jean sat—hadn't changed for as long as she could remember: the upright piano in the corner; the rows of mammy figurines on the built-in shelves instead of books; the framed portrait of Jesus above the mantel. Bougie homes in Atlanta, where Jean had been born and where, as a rising senior at Spelman, she currently lived, would shame those in her home town's tiny Black hood, not just in terms of scale but also of flavor and brass. But Negroes were gonna Negro, here in Borger and in Atlanta and probably even in Timbuktu, and Miss Sammie could hold her own with anyone.

Jesus, in profile in the frame, had shoulder-length waves like late-stage Michael Jackson but a coloring that was more African than His Mediterranean birth would imply, though not as dark as Jean, and much less so than Wole, an actual African. Wole—short for Omowole—was from Nigeria by way of Brooklyn; his father had moved the family there so he could pursue a surgical residency when Wole was in diapers. This was Wole's first trip west of Georgia.

The visit had been impromptu, arranged just the week before. The therapist they'd begun seeing had counselled that, given their recent troubles, it might be time for Wole to get to know Jean's home and the people who had shaped her, even if it felt difficult and awkward. But "awkward" hardly described it.

Wole had slipped. He'd cheated on her with his study partner—a onetime thing, he'd insisted, at the end of a long academic year of studying 24/7 for his medical-licensing exam, when he'd been exhausted and stressed and everything was on the line. After the apologies and the tears, she'd told him that she needed some space and was going home, and he'd accepted it. Then, during their last phone call, he'd recalled the therapist's words and added that his mother thought the visit a good idea, too.

Jean wondered how much he'd told his mother about why she'd returned home. She'd met Mrs. Abiola a few times and knew that mother and son were very close. When Wole had confided his intention to propose, Mrs. Abiola had volunteered her own mother's ring to offer to Jean. So, regardless of how much or little he'd disclosed, how could Jean say no or put off the visit, even?

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to David Wright Faladé read "Amarillo Boulevard."

Glancing from the wall clock beside Michael Jackson-Jesus to the window, she watched as Wole regaled her father and his friends, gesticulating and laughing, the huddle of onlookers struggling to mask their delight behind stone-faced cool. Black macho was real. Form-fitting shirts and bulging muscles; primping more than she and her sorors did—this described Wole to a T. He lifted weights and was chiselled through the shoulders and arms, down his back.

Like that would make him a better surgeon.

The patio door slid open, and Miss Sammie entered, carrying an aluminum-foil pan filled with rib bones, Jean's mama trailing behind her, hands full with pitchers in need of refilling.

"What you doing all by yourself, baby girl?" Miss Sammie said, looking surprised to find Jean there.

"Just getting out of the heat."

Miss Sammie placed the foil pan on the coffee table and sat and wrapped her arms around Jean, rocking back and forth. "I'm so glad to have you home, even if only for a few months."

"Me, too," Jean said. "I'm glad to be back."

Which was closer to true than untrue, she supposed. She hadn't told anyone about Wole and his study partner, blaming her abrupt return on an internship that had fallen through.

Miss Sammie flashed the scolding look Jean had known since childhood, though playfully now. "Don't you lie to me. I've *been* to Blacklanta. Borger, Texas, is no Atlanta."

Jean's mama moved on to the kitchen, somehow managing the empty Red Drink pitchers and the foil pan, too.

Miss Sammie continued, “You might not believe this, but Jamal and I about up and quit here for there.” She settled in, remembering. “This was back in the day, well before your family came to town. He and I had finished Borger High, and Jamal didn’t see many prospects hereabouts, or even down to Amarillo. Atlanta had the Black mayors, and Hank Aaron had done his thing and Dominique was doing his, and Jamal said we ought to give it a shot. So I thought, Why not?”

“What happened?”

“Jerrald!” she said, laughing toward Jean’s mama, who’d returned and was perched on the arm of the sofa. “I got pregnant and Jamal got onto a crew out at the refinery and, well, that was that.”

She leaned in closer. “I always hoped that you and Jerrald might find your way to each other.”

Jerrald was a few years older, a high-school senior when Jean was a sophomore, and he and Jean had never become friends, much less the sweethearts that the Jamesons had so clearly wished for.

Jean’s mama jumped in. “Jean was always set on college, and you know good and well that Jerrald wasn’t ever interested in all that!”

“The boy would’ve gone,” Miss Sammie protested.

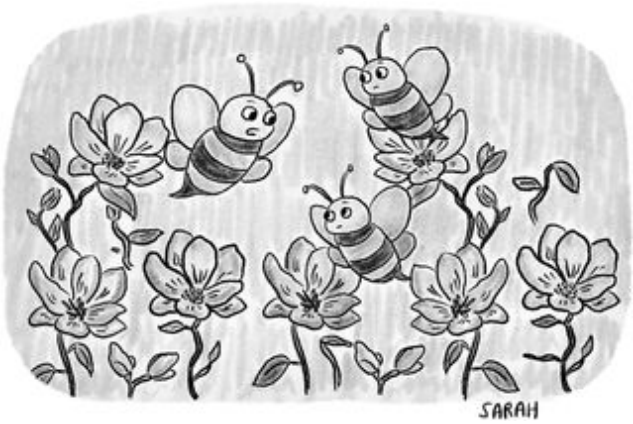
Jean’s mama sucked her teeth.

They were like twins separated at birth who’d found each other as adults—her mama, a Sweet Mu Pi from Spelman, like Jean herself was now, and Miss Sammie, who cleaned offices around town after hours. So different, yet so alike.

“Besides,” her mama said, “you told me Jerrald *enjoyed* working alongside his daddy.”

“He would so have gone,” Miss Sammie said, “had that coach come through with the scholarship he promised.” Then, to Jean, “You’ve done well for yourself, though, baby girl. More than well.”

Jean followed her gaze out the window, to where Wole was bantering with Jean’s brother Sylvester and Jerrald and some of Jerrald’s cousins who’d been staying with them since Katrina, the summer before.



“I spent my entire life working, and look where we are now—on the brink of extinction.”
Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

Miss Sammie asked, “Do Atlanta Juneteenths be like we do around here, with the collards and the mac ’n’ cheese and the rest? You know, putting your foot in it.”

“Truth be told, I don’t remember Juneteenths from when I was a girl,” her mama said. “Jubilee Day at the New Year, but no Juneteenth.”

“Maybe they’ll make it a national holiday one day,” Miss Sammie said, “and everybody all over will celebrate it.”

“You’re dreaming for real now,” Jean’s mama shot back. “Juneteenth?”

They both laughed.

“You right, you right,” Miss Sammie said, rising and moving toward the door.

To Jean, she said, “Come on back outside. Everybody wants to hear about your new life.”

Jean nodded. “I’ll be right out.”

The clock beside Michael Jackson-Jesus read three-forty. An hour had passed since their arrival. Jean slipped outside into the still swelling party, the yard filled shoulder to shoulder now, some folks dancing. As she came upon Wole, his New York accent sounded thicker than usual: “Three-on-three *toouh-nuh-ments*? No way! The city leagues are where the best ball is at.”

Jean gently tugged his shirt. “We need to get going. I still have that errand to run before the store closes.”

For Jane Carter hair cream. She didn’t really need any, but the errand provided a good excuse to leave.

Wole looked nonplussed but said goodbye to those around him.

Jean’s mama saw through the ruse but misread it. When Sylvester said, “I’ma come, too,” she told him, “Boy, leave those two be for five minutes.”

“It’s all right, Mama,” Jean said, waving for Sylvester to join them.

She handed Wole the keys to her mama’s Mitsubishi wagon, his preference being to drive, and went around to the passenger side. Sylvester climbed in back, buds in his ears, iPod in hand, his head bobbing to some beat. She directed Wole to Cedar Street.

“Where we headed?” Sylvester asked, leaning up between the bucket seats.

“Nowhere,” Jean said. “Just riding.”

“How about Amarillo, then?”

Wole asked, “Back where I flew into?”

It was an hour away, but there was more going on there than in Borger and Jean needed the time to go by.

“It’s where we’d go in high school,” she explained to Wole. “They have a mall and more restaurants—”

“And Wonderland Park!” Sylvester jumped in, like he was eight rather than eighteen. She couldn’t tell if he was being serious or facetious.

Both he and Wole peered at Jean, Wole glancing back and forth toward the road.

“O.K.,” she said. “Why not?”

She pointed to where he should turn, onto State Highway 136, past Bulldog Stadium and out of town.

Wole, eying Sylvester in the rearview, asked about his plans for college, about the high-school basketball team. Their mama corrected Sylvester when he spoke like his crowd and, at home, mostly he didn’t. But here he was, all hand gestures and loud, carrying on. “Them fools cain’t ball! For real, bruh—they booger.”

Turning toward Jean, Wole patted his breast pocket. “Why don’t we fire one up.”

She laughed as though he’d told a joke. “Quit playing,” she said.

But he persisted, pulling out what remained of the spliff she’d rolled earlier, and Jean snapped, firm and definitive, “No!”

Wole faced fixedly forward, both fists clenching the steering wheel.

“Dang, Negro,” Sylvester said from the back. “Please don’t tell me you think I don’t smoke.”

Jean didn’t respond. She gazed out at the sandy canyon faces cut with oil derricks and scrub.

Of course she knew that Sylvester smoked weed. She’d known it after his friends took to calling him Sly and his walk shifted to a lazy strut, his big laugh to an airhead giggle. But she didn’t want to smoke it with him. There were some things she would rather not know.

Jean also recognized that Wole wasn't being inconsiderate or flip. Just the opposite. He was trying to connect—with her baby brother, with her people back at the party—doing everything he could to show himself to be the man she'd fallen in love with. She appreciated the effort.

Stark canyons became mottled grassland as they neared Amarillo. Flat, unending—for all intents and purposes, Kansas. Old Highway 40 turned into Amarillo Boulevard at the city limits. This was the city's bad stretch: hourly motels, boarded-up businesses, stripper joints. In high school, when Jean and her friends would come down for a movie or to go to a club, they used to cruise Amarillo Boulevard, watch as prostitutes got approached by rednecks in tight jeans and dingy ball caps, wallet in hand, or by clean-cut men in suits who refused to get out of their cars, or by West Texas A. & M. boys, three in the cab and even more in the beds of their pickups, whooping and laughing and the women still sashaying up, not running away. Once, they saw a man be thrown through the window of a seedy bar, just like an old-timey Western, except that four bikers in leather jackets immediately emerged from inside and began stomping and kicking him while he lay motionless on the ground.

Sylvester was eagerly explaining this very thing to Wole—"This here the hood Amarillans be most proud of"—pointing to three prostitutes clustered in the parking lot of an abandoned dollar store, when Jean noticed the figure in the middle, in stiletto heels, a stunningly short skirt, and a rabbit-fur jacket despite the scalding heat.

"That's Nia," she said.

Wole kept on smiling. "What's 'nia'?"

But Sylvester, his face registering, said, "The white girl?"

He turned back, stared more intently.

"That can't be Nia," he said. "Are you sure?"

Nia had been Jean's best friend in Atlanta, before the family moved from there. She'd always had a runway model's legs, even in junior high, but in

anything other than flats she walked like a heron. Jean hadn’t seen her in eight years, but she was sure.

Wole didn’t understand, still smiling, and Jean rotated in her seat, toward Sylvester. “Do we turn around?”

Sylvester’s face, a glass of soda that had lost its fizz.

Jean said, “Turn around, Wole, turn around!”

He swerved the car into the middle lane, wheeled it in the other direction, and pulled into the parking lot that Jean was indicating. Jean stepped out as Nia approached—lean and arrogant, a cigarette pinched between her lips. Then her swagger slipped, her expression unsettled.

“Nia,” Jean said, “what are you doing here?”

“Girl! How you been?” Nia said. She pulled Jean close, hugging her so hard that the cigarette fell from her mouth.

“And look at you, Sylvester!”

He was out of the car, hands deep in his pants pockets, and she crossed to him and hugged him, too.

“Hi, Nia,” he said. “How are you?”

When they were kids in Atlanta, he would follow Nia around like a puppy dog, and Nia stepped back now, to take him all in.

“Ain’t you grown? Voice all like a man.”

Jean repeated, “What’re you doing here?”

“Oh, I’m just down for the weekend with Andre.”

Nia was natural.

“Andre?”

“My boyfriend,” Nia said.

The heat was so sharp it was blinding.

“Where’s your baby?” Jean couldn’t remember his name.

“He back in Oklahoma City, with some friends.”

Oklahoma City?, Jean thought.

She asked, “How is he?”

“Oh, he fine, just fine.” Nia was natural, cool, as though this were the most normal thing—as though they shared a common geography and had crossed paths at a party or a club, neither expecting to see the other but unsurprised by it. “And big! Walking on his own.”

“How’s Miss Claudette?”

“Mama O.K.—same old, same old,” Nia said. “And Miss Flo, Mr. James? I ain’t seen them since that summer I stayed with y’all up to Borger. Y’all still in Borger?”

Jean nodded. “Mama’s fine. Daddy, too. Still in Borger.”

“They still got that African mask?”

Jean hadn’t thought about it in years, though it sat right there in their front room. Her father had bought it at the county fair; the vender, mistaking it for yet another replica Native ceremonial mask, had all but given it away.

“On the bookcase, yeah,” she said, a smile pushing open at the memory.

Then she thought of Wole. He was halfway out of the car, one foot on the ground though still seated behind the wheel. She wondered what he must be thinking.

She didn’t wave him over—feeling vulnerable maybe, exposed.

Or maybe protective of him.

“Well, we better go,” she told Nia. “We’re supposed to meet them at some friends of theirs who live down here.” She wasn’t sure why she’d lied. “Juneteenth, you know.”

Though her phone was in her hand, she didn’t ask for Nia’s number.

Nia hugged her. “You be good, girl.”

Jean didn’t let go first. “You, too.”

In the car, no one spoke until Wole finally asked for directions. Jean said, “Pull over. I’ll drive.”

Sylvester stared out the side window, buds in his ears but head still now, expression blank. From the corner of her eye, Jean could tell that Wole was staring at her.

She took the exit toward the Olive Garden—she needed a glass of wine, maybe some food, too. She’d managed not to eat at the Jamesons’; she hadn’t been hungry. Though she wasn’t sure she felt so now, the idea of fried calamari or spinach-artichoke dip seemed calming.

It was early, not yet five, and, unusually, a band—Biscuits & Grease!, according to the poster—had set up near the bar. Slightly Stoopid wannabes, even more soulless.

Jean performed cheeriness after the waitress left with their order, raising her voice over the music and talking ceaselessly, asking Sylvester about his senior schedule and teasing him about his new Nelly style. “Look at you, boy, all retro Air Force 1s and a big white tee!” Her dodge didn’t fool her brother one bit, even as it had the intended effect of silencing whatever he might have hoped to ask about Nia. He excused himself—to go to the bathroom, he claimed, though she watched him stop to chat with the lead guitar player as the band took a break.

“That was strange, wasn’t it?” Wole said.

Jean glanced over at him, seated next to her on the pleather banquette, then away.

“Your friend, I mean,” he added.

“There was going to be a fight at recess, but at the last minute they decided to opt for sanctions.” Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

She knew what he meant, but she had no idea how to explain to Wole the encounter with Nia when she couldn’t find the words to articulate to herself what she was feeling. Apologetic? But what did she have to apologize for? And why to him and not to Sylvester, whom she’d casually brushed off when he was surely pretty shaken?

It was maybe to Nia she owed an apology. Down-home Nia, her choir partner at Ebenezer Baptist, Dr. King’s church, street-walking now, in Oklahoma City, in Amarillo. . . . Elsewhere, too? Roving the Southwest and passing off the money to her “boyfriend”? And why that silly jacket in the middle of June?

Wole asked, “How long has it been since you’ve seen her?”

“A while,” she said, deliberately curtly.

But she recognized his pressing as an attempt at kindness, so she added, “Eight years,” trying to be less shut off.

“From when you still lived in Georgia?” he said, startling her with his recall of the details of her past.

The last time hadn’t been in Georgia, actually, but in Borger, the summer Nia had spent with them there. Jean’s father had been transferred to the refinery outside town, and he’d moved the family to Keeler Heights, a more upscale neighborhood, instead of the Flats, where nearly all of Borger’s Black population lived. To Jean, who was in seventh grade at the time, no part of it was acceptable—not the neighborhood nor the move nor leaving all her lifelong friends. She’d raised Cain, being either dangerously insolent or gloomy and silent, until her mama had offered to have Nia come visit, to help Jean adjust.

Given how close Jean’s and Nia’s mothers were, it surprised no one that the girls were tight, too. But where Jean’s parents saw Nia as simply the knock-kneed girl that Jean most liked to play with, she’d always, in fact, been Jean’s id. That summer in Borger, they would shoplift candy from the Toot’n Totum convenience store or, whenever they could catch a ride, blouses and swimsuits from the Kmart across town. Sharing a bed, they’d listen to music and talk until dawn. Jean’s father doted on the wooden Ashanti mask, his once-in-a-lifetime find, but one late night, while Jean tried to watch a VHS tape of “Sankofa,” Nia, in panties and a T-shirt, had held it over her face and oogah-boogah danced around the living room. Jean could not stop laughing, and Nia refused to stop chanting and dancing—until Jean’s father stormed out of his room, demanding to know what was funny enough to warrant keeping him from sleep when he had to be up at “five-goddam-thirty!” the next morning.

(They’d giggled under the covers later, repeating, “Five-god-DAM-thirty!” over and over.)

Jean swivelled on the banquette, facing Wole. “Here, in fact. It was Nia who connected me to the girls who became my best friends. Like Kelly, the one who visited Atlanta, spring break my first year.”

She still wasn’t sure what she was trying to say, and judging by his expression, Wole wasn’t either.

“Out at Lake Meredith,” she went on. “Mama would drop us at the boathouse and leave us for the afternoon. We’d play video games and Ping-Pong, and there would be these girls I recognized from around town. They’d see us, too, but none had talked to us, ever. One day, they were in a doo-wop circle, dancing—or trying to. White girls, you know.”

She smiled, despite herself, at the memory. Jean had gone to the bathroom, and upon her return she’d found Nia in the middle of the group, teaching them to Crip Walk. She’d waved Jean over and they’d all introduced themselves, Nia adding, “I’m just visiting. I live in Atlanta.”

She still talked proper then.

“Kelly and them,” Jean told Wole, “they thought Nia was white.”

“You mean she’s not?”

“No, of course not,” she said, “but that’s not the point”—unsure, herself, what the point in saying it had been.

Wole shook his head. “Mixed-race children—my mother warns about them. They’re just so confused.”

Before Jean could say more, Sylvester plopped down on the banquette opposite them.

“Check it out,” he said, breathless. “The band all work here, and the lead guitar, who’s a waiter, came up with their name after serving a cowboy and his date one night. You know—in a pearl-snap shirt and skin-tight Wranglers, with a rodeo belt buckle.”

He began laughing as he told the rest.

“So, apparently, lead-guitar waiter dude drops off menus and the warm breadsticks and pours olive oil onto a saucer for dipping.” Sylvester pointed to their own, wiped clean, in the middle of the table. “When he comes back later and asks if they’re ready to order, old cowpoke says, ‘Not yet, nah. But we’d ’preciate it if y’all could bring some more of them biscuits and grease. They’s good!’ ”

They beat their parents home by only a few minutes, in time with the nightfall, though their folks were only coming from across Borger. Hearing the Beamer pull into the driveway, Sylvester said, “We shouldn’t tell Mama and Daddy about Nia, huh?” and Jean shot back, “Of course not!”

“You haven’t even turned on the lights,” their father reproached them, entering the still dark house.

Their mama clapped and the lamp in the entryway clicked on. “I don’t even want to know what you three have been up to,” she said. “I’m going to bed.”

It was uncommon for them to stay up this late, much less be out and about, and they carried their exhaustion in their slumping shoulders. Jean’s father crossed to Wole, shook his hand firmly. “Good night, son. We’ll see you in the morning.”

Wole returned his gaze, equally sincerely, but Sylvester jumped between them, grabbing Wole’s hand as their father let go.

“Yes, good night, son,” he mimicked, his voice archly low.

Their father cuffed his head.

“You best be getting to bed soon, too,” he said, dragging himself down the hallway. “Give these two some peace.”

“Not too much peace,” their mama added, following, warning in her voice.

What she meant was that Wole should still be sleeping by himself in the guest room, next to their own, and that they would be checking.

Instead of church with her family, Jean arranged to meet Kelly at the lake the next morning to water-ski. Kelly’s father owned a pontoon boat that, in high school, had been off limits. (He’d claimed it was because Kelly was too young, but her younger brother could use it; Jean knew that it was because she was a girl.) When Jean arrived with Wole, before the sun was high-hot, Kelly was already there, sitting tacky under Mickey Martinez’s arm, inside his red F-150, the boat hitched behind. Kelly scrambled down the bench seat, jumped out the passenger side, and ran over and hugged Jean’s neck.

Mickey stayed in the cab, a can of Budweiser in hand, nodding his chin toward them, the bill of his sweat-stained ball cap tilting up then down.

Wole greeted Kelly formally, with a handshake that he held a beat too long. “Jean’s spoken a lot about you. I’m sorry I didn’t get to meet you when you visited Atlanta.”

He strode over to the truck to introduce himself to Mickey.

“He’s a keeper,” Kelly said when he was out of earshot. “Have you set a date?”

“Not yet.”

“Was it like in a dream? Did he get on a knee? Where’s the ring?”

Jean raised her left hand, wiggling her fingers to show off the stone—but not like a dream, no. Kind of everyday, really. She and Wole had been lying in bed in her room, it was a Saturday morning. Chuckling while telling a story about his academic adviser and his wife, who home-schooled their children, he’d just blurted out, “That could be us in a few years. If you wanted.”

This was months before his slip. They would study in the library most afternoons and lounge in front of the TV most nights, at either his place or hers; they shared nearly every meal. After a year and a half like that, practically living together, marriage had felt like the natural next step—a thing she wanted with him, though until that very moment she hadn’t realized that it was, in fact, the thing she most wanted.

“It’s always different from how you’d thought it would be,” she told Kelly.

Jean thought about one of her sorors, a senior from tony Niskey Lake named Buffy. (She’d never met a Black Buffy before.) She was pre-law but barely getting by, and after yet another grade report of C-pluses and B-minuses, she’d joked about making progress on her “M.R.S. degree,” and Jean and the other Mu Pis had laughed. The expression had been new to Jean. And now here she was, blithely on the way to an M.R.S. of her own.

Kelly's face contorted, more a sneer than the frown she seemed to intend. "I'm gonna be the old maid among us. Mickey'll never get married."

She slapped Jean's arm. "Why didn't you introduce me to my own Wole when I was in Atlanta?"

It was all Jean could do not to laugh out loud. Kelly, with a Black man?

White girls like Kelly—the ones who lived in the houses with pools out by the country club—didn't date Black guys. Mexican, maybe, but not Black. They never expressed a distaste for it, not to Jean, anyway. They just didn't do it.

Jean and Kelly watched as Mickey backed the boat trailer down the ramp, Wole standing to the side, holding his and Mickey's beers. Music thumped from the boathouse, the same songs as when Jean and Kelly and their friends used to spend afternoons out here—"Hard Knock Life," "Gin and Juice."

When Kelly had told Jean, during their first year out of high school, that she wanted to visit, Jean had been shocked. She'd taken Kelly to a Braves game and to the World of Coca-Cola and to the Margaret Mitchell House—doing anything but hanging out on campus. She hadn't been concerned so much about Kelly's discomfort, a first-time minority in a sea of Black, as that Kelly might say something that would irredeemably mark Jean among her Spelman friends. She felt some guilt about this still, though not that she'd been wrong.

It made Jean wonder now: had it been for some reason like that—subconscious, though real all the same—that she'd never tried to contact Nia since returning to Atlanta for college?

When Nia had left Borger, all those summers before, she and Jean had sworn to phone each week and to spend every summer together. But the calls had dwindled, becoming now-and-again letters then snapshots in e-mails—of Jean on her eighth-grade choir trip to California, of the Friday-night sidelines after she made the cheer team. It was Jean's mama who'd informed her about Nia getting pregnant, about Nia dropping out of school. Since Jean's arrival at Spelman, the idea of reconnecting with Nia hadn't entered

her mind, and she had to admit what was so glaringly clear: Nia wasn't Sweet Mu Pi material, and how their friendship would look to her sorors mattered to Jean.

They decided against water-skiing and just tooled around the lake. Mickey sat at the controls while Jean and Kelly sunned on the aft deck. Wole, wearing a waterproof fanny pack for his phone and still working on his first beer, sat halfway in between. Jean didn't know what to do to help him fit in (though losing the fanny pack might have been a good start), and she wondered if she hadn't made a mistake, organizing the outing. He'd been completely comfortable at the Jamesons', yet with Kelly and Mickey he seemed so ill at ease.

Mickey piloted the boat to the cliffs, dropped anchor, and the four of them swam to shore. They followed the red-dirt trail up the incline single file, Mickey in the lead. At the top, he charged forward and plunged over the fifty-foot drop. Kelly went next, frantically waving her arms before finishing in a cannonball. She resurfaced, laughing. Mickey, already back up top, stretched a graceful dive that made no splash.

Sensing Wole's apprehension, Jean dangled her legs over the cliff's edge, and he sat beside her.

She pointed to Kelly, below, splashing water at Mickey, and tried to explain. "Kelly always says it was our friendship, hers and mine, that opened her mind so that she could . . . you know, date someone who's not white."

Wole laughed. "Well, she didn't venture too far out on a limb with that one."

No doubt, Jean thought. Mickey, though Mexican American, was a redneck through and through. A pipe fitter for Drover Drilling Co., he'd never been farther from Borger than New Orleans, for an annual "boys' trip" in February. Still, the comment seemed more about Kelly than her boyfriend and sounded kind of judgy—about where Jean was from, about her choice of friends growing up.

His phone rang, an audible vibration inside the fanny pack.

"I didn't think I had bars," he said, squinting at the screen.

Then he smiled and spoke into the receiver. After a moment of listening, he held the phone to his chest.

“It’s Mama. She asks to speak with you.”

“Yes, of course,” Jean said, and she took the phone. “Hello, Mrs. Abiola.”

“Hello, dear. I’m sorry to disturb you during your vacation with family, but I just wanted to offer my sincere heartbreak about your friend.”

“My friend?”

“Omowole told me she has taken a turn for the worst.” Jean realized that she must mean Nia. “Just remember, Where you fall, it is where God has pushed you down. Jesus only gives us what we can bear. We say this at home, and it guides my life.”

Who was she to judge?

And why was Wole even talking to his mother about Nia anyway?

“Thanks, Mrs. Abiola,” Jean said. “Here’s your son.”

She handed him the phone and lay back on the scorching dirt and closed her eyes.

Just then, there was a commotion on the lake. Mickey burst up out of the water and backward. “It’s a baby diamondback!” he called.

All craned to see, Jean and Wole from above, Kelly on shore below.

The snake, maybe a foot long, stretched its head above the surface of the lake, its body slithering as though on land. It swam toward Mickey—Mickey slapping water at it—then away, and Mickey kicked a wake of white foam, chasing it into a cove. He cornered it between the cliff face and a mound of dirt.

Jean rushed down the path to the water, Wole just behind her. They joined Kelly, close but not too close, drawn to the deliberate dance—to the violent

hurl of stone, then Mickey's helter-skelter retreat as the slim tan-pink body struck back.

He pounded the snake to death, first with rocks, then he found a small boulder.

Mickey picked the carcass up by the tail, Kelly clapping and rushing forward. "Welcome to Texas," he said, smirking and extending it toward Wole.

Wole looked horrified.

Wole's back had burned in the sun. (Mickey thought it a funny joke, "I didn't know y'all could," and Kelly had dared to smile; Jean was glad, so glad, that she'd not mentioned seeing Nia to her.) Jean's mama reproached her for not having been more careful and babied Wole, ordering him to remove his T-shirt and retrieving an aloe lotion, telling him to stretch out on the couch and instructing Jean to spread it over the tender areas. As she disappeared down the hallway, Jean squeezed onto the lip of couch cushion beside him and did as she'd been told, the cords of muscle in his shoulders releasing as she rubbed. He let himself go, closing his eyes and cooing.

Jean stood back up, Wole rolling over—his expression one of confusion.

She didn't want to baby him. She didn't want to rub him.

She left the room then left the house. Walked up Davenport Street and on to Rigdon, past Keeler Baptist, the squat church imposing, nightfall looming. Cars passed, some beeping their horns. Whether the drivers recognized her or were just being neighborly, she didn't know. It occurred to her that she should maybe feel unsafe—as a woman, as a *Black* woman. But she hadn't ever in Borger, and she didn't then.

She headed down the hill, past the radio station where the Toot'n Totum used to be, wishing the boxy building was still the store, pining for a bag of Twizzlers. Her phone vibrated repeatedly—"Wole," "Wole," "Sylvester." To her mama, she tapped back, "Am running errands w Kelly. Start supper wo me," then turned off the phone.

The steady flow of traffic on Gardner surprised her, though it was dumb that it would; people were headed out to drag Main, typical summer-evening entertainment, no matter that it was bumpkin. She veered onto quieter streets, wending her way past houses she'd known for what felt like her entire life, but which, in reality, had only been eight years of it.

"Kill something pretty."
Cartoon by Sam Gross

At Crockett Elementary, she reversed course, though she varied her path—Tristram Street this time, to Primrose, to Evergreen, to Union. Teague Street, to Ozmer, to McCarthy. Keeler Baptist, haloed in street lights. Just around the corner, home.

The house was still. Jean could hear the murmur of her parents' TV beyond their closed bedroom door. Sylvester's was silent; she figured that he'd gone out to meet friends. She slipped into the guest room and switched on the light.

Wole lay atop the sheets, an open textbook across his bare chest, and his smile, as he pulled himself from sleep, let her know that he forgave her earlier abandonment, that he was thinking she'd come for something else. He propped himself on his elbows.

"My friend Nia, from yesterday," Jean whispered, sitting on the edge of the bed. "She's not mixed race or confused by it, just light-complected—"

Wole fell back onto the pillow, sighing a sigh whose meaning he didn't even try to mask.

“And she wasn’t fast or slutty or anything like that when I knew her, not any more than I was.” Which was the point, because what, after all, was the difference between her and Nia? Or between Nia and Kelly—or Kelly and Buffy, for that matter? Just the question of degree?

She looked away from Wole then back, took all of him in: the freshness of his face, now frustrated; the wasted sculpture of chest and arms; the angry lift beneath his boxers. He would become a doctor—an orthopedic surgeon, as he always proclaimed, like his father.

She rose and slipped out the door.

The next morning, while her mama was having the coffee she usually enjoyed before everyone else got up, Jean came out of her room. She stood at the bookcase, fingering the ridges of the Ashanti mask, and told her about Nia. She had to say it twice for it to sink in, her mother’s expression gone blank, even as stuff underneath rustled the surface. “Oh, poor Claudette,” her mama said. “They had so much trouble after Harold left.

“I’ve got to call,” she continued, more to herself than to Jean. “It’s been so long since we’ve spoken, and how can I not call?”

There was movement down the hall, Jean’s father about to emerge from the back, and Jean remembered then, out of the blue: Nia had named her baby Khalil.

“How do I tell Daddy?” she said, and her mama shot back, “You don’t, not a mumbling word.

“The man’s too tenderhearted,” she explained. “It would eat at him and what could he do, anyway?”

This sounded about right to Jean—oddly true—and was a disappointment, too.

Her mama smiled then, placing a hand over Jean’s.

“Oh, baby, I’m so proud of you. Your Wole’s beautiful, and I’m so proud.”

Sylvester rode with her to drop Wole at the airport in Amarillo, later that morning. Jean insisted on driving, and the other two bantered the whole way.

“Shut up!” Wole blurted. “You did not . . .”

“Of cose, I did,” Sylvester said, and he tsked. “Chile, please.”

He’d been telling the story their mama had told Jean, about the high-school basketball coach. Sylvester wasn’t tall, but he was very good, and he, his friend D’Shawn, and a few others—other Black boys—ruled the outdoor courts and church leagues in Borger, Pampa, Fritch, and Stinnett. The coach kept hounding Sylvester to join the school team, but her brother steadily refused (though Jean very seriously doubted that he’d told the man to kiss his Black ass, as he’d just boasted).

“How’m I gone hoop on a squad where ain’t nothing but white boys?” he said to Wole. “Shit. That’d be like me big-lip chomping on some bananas in the cafeteria. Huh-uh. No way.”

Which was dumb, Jean thought. He liked basketball, and he liked bananas, so why not?

Just plain dumb.

At the airport, Sylvester waited in the lot while she walked Wole into the terminal. At T.S.A., Wole stared at his feet, over her shoulder, anywhere but into her eyes. He told her how happy he was to have finally met her parents, saying it the exact same way as when he’d said it *to* her parents, pretty much word for word. Walking back to the car, she couldn’t remember the kiss goodbye.

Sylvester was in the passenger seat, his earbuds in, though it was obvious no music was playing. “You sad?” he asked.

She shrugged, settling in behind the wheel.

“Are *you* dating anyone?” she said, pulling the car into the flow of traffic.

His head began bobbing to an imagined beat. “I be getting mine.”

Which told Jean that he wasn't.

It didn't piss her off—the affected code-switching, the fronting—like when Wole did it, and she wondered why.

"He cheated," she said, quickly adding, "Wole," as though this wasn't already clear.

Sylvester stared.

"With his study partner," she said. "It was during prep for this big exam, for his medical license, and he said he was stressed and it just happened."

Her brother removed the earbuds and sunglasses and turned sideways in his seat—his face, so earnest.

"Look, we all do dumb shit, right? Especially when the going's really tough. Don't get me wrong, I'm mad at the brother now, too. But we're all trying to do what we do, you know? And we're flailing. And maybe we all deserve a little grace."

Sylvester—Sly—all full of swagger and light, mansplaining at her like Wole might.

"Maybe," she told him, and the car went silent.

As they reached Old Highway 40, Jean turned left instead of toward home.

"Seriously? With all these girls out here?" Sylvester said. "No way."

"I know," Jean said.

"And say we do find her. Then what?"

"I don't know, baby brother," she said.

And it was O.K. not to. ♦

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The Critics

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A Critic at Large

Where the Battle Over Free Speech Is Leading Us

Doxing, deplatforming, defunding, persecuting, firing, and sometimes killing—all are part of an escalating war over words. What happens next?

By Louis Menand

September 26, 2025

In the debate over speech freedoms, we'd do well to remember that any standard we apply might be applied to us.Illustration by Miguel Porlan

The United States is in a speech war. Normally, human beings fight over money or land or love, but that is not what is happening today. Today, people are fighting over words. People's lives are being damaged and sometimes destroyed not for something they did but for something they said. We live in a society of doxing, trolling, cancelling, sanctioning, slandering, deplatforming, defunding, persecuting, prosecuting, firing, and sometimes killing over the expression of an opinion. A big part of the craziness is that some of the people going to war over words are casting themselves as champions of free speech. It's the people they are trying to silence, they claim, who are the enemies.

The lord of misrule here is the person you would expect. On January 20th, his first day back in office, Donald Trump issued an executive order titled "Restoring Freedom of Speech and Ending Federal Censorship." It accused the Biden Administration of chilling speech it disagreed with and announced that

> It is the policy of the United States to:

(a) secure the right of the American people to engage in constitutionally protected speech;

(b) ensure that no Federal Government officer, employee, or agent engages in or facilitates any conduct that would unconstitutionally abridge the free speech of any American citizen;

(c) ensure that no taxpayer resources are used to engage in or facilitate any conduct that would unconstitutionally abridge the free speech of any American citizen;

(d) identify and take appropriate action to correct past misconduct by the Federal Government related to censorship of protected speech.

The President and his Administration then proceeded to ban the Associated Press from certain press events because it did not refer to the Gulf of Mexico as the Gulf of America, sanction law firms that represented clients whose political views the Administration regards as unfriendly, arrest and seek to deport immigrants legally in the United States for opinions they expressed in speech or in print, defund universities for alleged antisemitic speech and leftist bias, sue the *Wall Street Journal* for libel, extort sixteen million dollars from the corporate owner of CBS because of the way a "60 Minutes" interview was edited, set about dismantling the Voice of America for being "anti-Trump" and "radical," coerce businesses and private colleges and universities to purge the word "diversity" from their websites, and order the National Endowment for the Arts to reject grant applications for projects that "promote gender ideology."

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After threats from the head of the Federal Communications Commission, a late-night television personality had his show suspended because of some (rather confusing) thing he said about Trump's political movement. Other media outlets were advised to get in line. Trump has proposed that licenses be withdrawn from companies that air content critical of him. The Administration has opened Justice Department investigations into and yanked security details from people whose political views it dislikes. It has also warned that it may revoke the visas of and deport any foreign nationals who joke about the death of Charlie Kirk. West Point cancelled an award ceremony for Tom Hanks, after having already winnowed its library of potentially offensive books.

The President is suing the *Times*, which he calls "one of the worst and most degenerate newspapers in the History of our Country," for libel. (In the initial iteration of the case, the judge threw out the eighty-five-page-long court filing as "decidedly improper and impermissible.") A top complaint in his lawsuit is that the paper ran its "deranged endorsement" of Kamala Harris on the front page. Apparently, this is tortious behavior. At press conferences, Trump makes noises about investigating reporters whose questions he doesn't like. (Who's the snowflake now?)

This is not social shunning. This is not speaking from the bully pulpit. Apart from the libel suits, which the President can add teeth to by threatening regulatory sanctions or by slow-walking mergers and other business deals that require government approval, this is the persecution of people and organizations based on point of view. Much of this is exactly what the Supreme Court has said the First Amendment prohibits the federal government from doing. The Administration is not even pretending to

follow the law, let alone its own proclamations about free speech. It's getting results, so why should it?

Compared with all this, a bunch of college students shouting down the conservative political scientist Charles Murray—an incident at Middlebury College now immortalized through endless retelling—is small potatoes. Somehow, though, in the war of words, college students tend to get the blame. "Charlie Kirk was assassinated while speaking on a college campus," the president of Barnard College, Laura Ann Rosenbury, wrote in a recent *Times* opinion piece. "This is a grim moment for higher education, for our country and for freedom of speech. Violence is never a legitimate means of disagreeing with a speaker on a college campus."

What is she talking about? Neither Kirk nor his alleged shooter was a student. The incident says nothing about tolerance for speakers on college campuses, and it is irresponsible for a college president to suggest that it does. Rosenbury notes disapprovingly that there was a petition to rescind Kirk's invitation. A petition is classic First Amendment-protected expression. Surely the president of Barnard is not suggesting that students are inciting violence when they sign a petition. She is effectively throwing a bone to the White House, which can claim that Kirk was the victim of academic cancel culture.

As many people have rightly remarked, the response to Kirk's murder is emblematic of the current hypocrisy. Kirk is being celebrated as a champion of free speech who was willing to debate anyone anywhere and who was killed by someone who could not tolerate his views. At the same time, Kirk's admirers are campaigning to get people who make negative comments about those views—which are, after all, highly controversial and designedly so—fired from their jobs. And many have been. The Attorney General initially suggested that Kirk's detractors could be prosecuted for hate speech (which happens to be constitutionally protected). Evidently, saying racist things is not hate speech, but calling someone out for saying racist things is.

All this suggests that Christopher L. Eisgruber's new book, "Terms of Respect: How Colleges Get Free Speech Right" (Basic), is not ideally timed. Eisgruber is the president of Princeton University. It is a truth

universally acknowledged that university presidents should not write books about their own schools, to which they have a fiduciary duty. The terms of their tenure require that they not do or say anything that might damage the school's reputation or fund-raising capacity. It is therefore impossible for them to comment disinterestedly or openly on topics bearing on their own institutions.

Within the self-censoring limits of the genre, Eisgruber has sensible things to say, maybe too sensible. His main practical point is that, as he puts it, "speech must be both uncensored *and* regulated." This seems to mean that we should be in favor of what are called "time, place, and manner" restrictions on campus speech—no chanting in the library, no bullhorns in the quad, and so on. Fair enough. There are all kinds of things you cannot lawfully do in public spaces. The problems arise when you try to draw the line of permissibility, and Eisgruber doesn't help us much here. His own reactions to speech controversies at Princeton, as he relates them, seem to have been largely seat-of-the-pants. And, so far, reasonably successful.

Eisgruber also believes that speech should conform to norms of civility. "It is possible to believe in free speech *and* insist that people ought to address one another civilly and politely," he writes. Again, nice to say. But the right to free speech is intended to protect what the Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., called "opinions that we loathe and believe to be fraught with death." In the free-speech marketplace, "fuck you" is legal tender. But private universities can constrain speech in ways public universities cannot, and, if Princeton wants to impose civility constraints on its students, it may. No one is being forced to go there.

The same is true of the workplace. There is what we might call a free-speech norm in the United States, such that we are sensitive to the suggestion that someone is being penalized—not getting a promotion, say—for things they have said or beliefs they espouse. Most Americans would not want to give up this norm. But it is unenforceable. You have a right to say what you like, but you do not have a right to host a late-night talk show. A lot of campus speech regulation is an effort not to violate this norm, but this is not because students need a "safe space." It's because maintaining an

ethos of free speech is central to the educational mission. You can't run Princeton like Disney.

In general, Eisgruber thinks that "free speech is more robust on college campuses than in other sectors of our polarized society" and that "when it comes to getting free speech right, colleges and America's young people deserve higher marks than they get." A lot of what look like acts of censorship from the outside, he argues, are actually attempts to negotiate a level playing field.

There may be some whistling past the graveyard here. Many surveys show that college students are fearful of saying something that will alienate them from their peers or invite the disapproval of their instructors. And faculty worry that teaching certain subject matter and texts might offend students and, if students complain, lead to administrative sanctions. The faculty experience has been that administrations often side with the complainers. If this is so, it is because, until recently, the complainers have had agencies on their side that enforce federal anti-discrimination law (Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, Title IX, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, plus, for public schools, the equal-protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment). Universities did not want to sanction the professors, but they did want the complaints to go away.

You could say, as Eisgruber does, that campus speech anxieties reflect the polarization in our society as a whole, but the freedom to say what you think is not the essence of most jobs, and it *is* the essence of liberal education. Without the ability to speak freely, teachers are not educating and students are not learning.

Eisgruber discusses some of the well-known campus disputes, many of them venerable chestnuts in the free-speech wars, like the picketing of Charles Murray, which happened eight years ago, and the blowup over Halloween costumes at Yale, which happened when Barack Obama was President and we were still living on the Big Rock Candy Mountain. All the same, it is hard to fight off the sense that Eisgruber is mainly interested in defending Princeton. He is doing, much less recklessly, what Barnard's president was doing with her opinion piece: he is preëmptively defending his institution against government attack.

That’s fine. That’s his job. But you would never know, reading his book, that there was a pro-Palestinian encampment on the Princeton campus in the spring of 2024. You would never know that there were sit-ins and that students were arrested. There is virtually no mention of Trump in the book, apart from a vague reference to “multiple Trump administration executive orders that targeted higher education” and a remark that Trump has not done a lot for civility norms. This is despite the fact, also not mentioned, that last April the Administration suspended hundreds of millions of dollars in federal grants to Princeton.

Eisgruber spoke out quite assertively at the time in defense of academic freedom, but he has said little publicly since. That Harvard is in court and subject to multiple phony “investigations” as the government tries to bully it into submission goes unmentioned in his book, too. Yet he does see fit to critique Harvard’s institutional-voice policy, which limits public pronouncements by the university to issues affecting higher education, that being the one subject academics are competent to opine on. He prefers an approach unconstrained by such “mechanical formulae.” Again, fine as long as it works.

You also would not know from the book that in 2020 hundreds of Princeton graduate students, staff, and faculty—including professors from thirty-four of Princeton’s thirty-six departments—sent the university administration a four-thousand-word petition demanding that it address systemic racism by, among many other things, rewarding departments that have hired underrepresented minority professors and denying new appointments to departments that have not, and granting extra pay and sabbatical time to professors who are members of underrepresented minority groups.

The petitioners further demanded that the administration

> constitute a committee composed entirely of faculty that would oversee the investigation and discipline of racist behaviors, incidents, research, and publication on the part of faculty, following a protocol for grievance and appeal to be spelled out in Rules and Procedures of the Faculty. Guidelines on what counts as racist behavior, incidents, research, and publication will be authored by a faculty committee for incorporation into the same set of rules and procedures.

This could be read, and by many people was read, as a chilling assault on the principle of academic freedom, which courts have interpreted as a component of the First Amendment protection of free speech.

Eisgruber's elision of this episode—there is an oblique reference to "widespread student and faculty interest in seeing the university do more to address the effects of racism on the university community and America"—is understandable. The petition was widely circulated in the academic world, and it was not received with enthusiasm. The idea of a faculty committee empowered to vet scholarly publications for racial bias has, ineluctably, a Star Chamber vibe.

The omission is particularly unfortunate because it bears directly on the main point Eisgruber wants to make, which is that free speech and equality are not rival ideals but, in fact, belong together. His key text is the Supreme Court's opinion in the 1964 case New York Times v. Sullivan. That is where the Court raised the bar in libel suits by public officials, ruling that, absent "actual malice," meaning willful or reckless disregard for the truth, you can publish anything you want about someone the Court recognizes as public—a category that has expanded over the years.

Eisgruber, who is a scholar of constitutional law, believes that Sullivan is the cornerstone of American free-speech law. And it is significant, he argues, that it was a civil-rights case. It involved an advertisement in the *Times* soliciting donations to Martin Luther King, Jr.,'s defense fund that contained some factual inaccuracies. Those were the basis for the lawsuit, which was filed by an Alabama official. In ruling for the *Times,* the Court was in solidarity with the civil-rights movement.

But, of course, the authors of the 2020 Princeton petition were also trying to strike a blow for racial equality. For them, a highly permissive interpretation of free-speech law gives cover to racists, and a permissive interpretation of the principle of academic freedom allows for the perpetuation of exclusionary scholarship.

Fara Dabhoiwala teaches in the history department at Princeton, but he was not a signatory to the petition. Which is surprising, since his new book, "What Is Free Speech? The History of a Dangerous Idea" (Belknap), is

entirely in its spirit. (Although it is a good rule never to sign a letter you did not write. You will be responsible for every word.)

When we see “a dangerous idea” in the subtitle, we naturally assume that Dabhoiwala means dangerously *good*, in the sense of dangerous to bullies and tyrants. But this is not what he means. He means that free speech is a bad idea. Eisgruber thinks that the maximalist character of American free-speech law is the best thing about it, but Dabhoiwala thinks it’s the worst.

When we think of the history of free-speech rights, we tend to think of the Anglo-American legal tradition. A virtue of Dabhoiwala’s book is that it is transnational, and there are discussions of free-speech traditions less familiar to American readers. The first free-speech law, for example, was enacted in Sweden, in 1766.

The point Dabhoiwala wants to make is that the Anglo-American concept is not universal. On the contrary, he says, “America is now the only country in the world where even local ordinances against ‘hate speech’ are treated as presumptively unconstitutional.” First Amendment jurisprudence is absolutist and libertarian. Other nations have speech rights, but they are qualified. Hate speech can be prosecuted in the United Kingdom.

For a historian, Dabhoiwala is rather judgy. He calls free speech “a kind of secular religion, with its own shifting dogmas and hagiography,” an “inherently unstable fiction,” and “a contrived, invented concept.” Of course, all our concepts are invented. They are tools for dealing with the world, which happens to include a lot of other human beings, many of whom, sadly, don’t agree with us.

“The creation and interpretation of rules about ‘free speech,’ ” he says, “is a perennially mutable and politicized process: freedom is never equally distributed.” And he shows that, ever since the idea of free-speech rights arose in eighteenth-century Europe, the concept has been, as he puts it, racialized and gendered. Freedom of expression, like, to a large extent, the franchise, was understood to be a right enjoyed by white men. Even John Stuart Mill, the model nineteenth-century liberal and a feminist, did not think that Indians in British India were ready for free speech. In other

words, free-speech rights—like all rights, really—reflect, and therefore can be enlisted to perpetuate, existing power relations.

But we don't think the right to vote is suspect because the franchise was once restricted. Those restrictions may be shocking to twenty-first-century sensibilities, but aren't they what we should expect? In a patriarchal and highly class- and race-stratified society like Mill's England, it is not surprising to find legal rights reproducing those inequities.

We are in a different place today, and one of the things that make us feel we are is the expansion of First Amendment freedoms throughout the twentieth century, beginning in 1919 with the dissents of Justices Holmes and Louis Brandeis, and then in Court rulings in the nineteen-fifties and sixties that protected not only political speech but artistic expression. Yet Dabhoiwala thinks that the trend is all in the wrong direction. He says that, since the sixties, "American free-speech jurisprudence has gradually abandoned any conception of the common good, beyond its abstract obeisance to 'free debate' as the highest ideal."

The right way to determine what speech should be tolerated, he says, is to give up the "dubious distinction" between words and actions. "Their supposedly different potency," he maintains, "is just a convenient myth." We should regulate speech in the same way we regulate behavior. It is "perfectly reasonable to oppose utterances that you believe to be seriously harmful," Dabhoiwala says, "and to argue that these shouldn't qualify as 'free speech.' "

Which is exactly what Trump argues. I hope that he has given Dabhoiwala second thoughts. When academics tried to stigmatize certain terms and beliefs, as they did at Princeton, they forgot the first rule of free speech: the postman always rings twice. Today's policed are tomorrow's policemen.

If the Administration's actions are so blatantly unlawful, why does everyone seem to be caving? Some of it is just cost-benefit analysis. Paramount, which owned CBS, wanted to merge with Skydance Media, a transaction that required government approval. The company calculated that it was not worth jeopardizing the deal over a news program, which is a tiny piece of its empire. Jimmy Kimmel's show was suspended after Nexstar, which

owns some thirty ABC affiliate stations, put pressure on Disney, which owns ABC. Nexstar intends to buy a competitor, Tegna, which owns thirteen ABC affiliates, and the transaction needs F.C.C. approval. (The following week, after a “thoughtful conversation” with Kimmel, ABC reinstated the show, but Nexstar and Sinclair said that their affiliates would not air it.)

Government agencies can be challenged in court, and some of those challenges have succeeded at the appellate level. But the buck has generally stopped at the Supreme Court. For some whom the government now casts as enemies in the free-speech wars, that’s a worry. Universities that shut down or rename their diversity offices are not merely trying to appease the President. They anticipate that the Court will back government agencies that interpret “diversity” as an alibi for impermissible racial classification, in violation of the equal-protection clause and Title VI. Professors who complain that their schools are “caving” when they drop the term “diversity” should know this. But university presidents can’t tell them the reason they are renaming diversity offices, because they would basically be telling the Court that they’re cheating and are just racially classifying students under a different rubric. So there is a lot of crosstalk.

In the case of the attacks on the First Amendment, one big concern (unmentioned by Eisgruber) is the future of Sullivan. Members of the Court, specifically Clarence Thomas and Neil Gorsuch, have indicated an interest in overturning that holding, thereby reinstating a lower bar for libel suits by public figures by removing the “actual malice” requirement. There is little reason to assume that, given the right occasion, this Court will not overrule Sullivan, handing Trump another weapon in his war against free speech. Of course, if the law were to change, it might not be a total win for him. After all, no one is more reckless with the truth than Trump. He could be sued almost every time he opens his mouth. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated the category of person covered by the “actual malice” standard in the original New York Times v. Sullivan decision.

Louis Menand is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His books include "The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War," released in 2021, and "The Metaphysical Club," which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for history.

Books

Gertrude Stein’s Love Language

How a self-appointed genius found her ideal helpmate.

By Judith Thurman

September 29, 2025

Stein called herself the “little hubby” and Alice B. Toklas her “precious wifey.”Photograph by Cecil Beaton / © Condé Nast

When I was six, my maiden aunt Eva gave me a first edition of “The World Is Round,” by Gertrude Stein. Eva, who worked in a used bookstore, was the only bohemian in our family, and she revered Stein. I had never seen a book with pink pages and blue type, so I guessed that all first editions must be pink and blue. “I think you can read this yourself,” Eva said. “It’s long, but the words are simple.”

“The World Is Round” was marketed as a children’s book, which leads me to suspect that few adults, apart from Stein scholars and biographers, have ever read it through. It’s the terrifying story of a girl named Rose who loves the color blue and doesn’t know who she is. One of the things that most troubled me about Rose was an obscure anxiety that we shared: “Why am I a little girl[.]” I didn’t notice at the time that Stein makes her own rules about periods, or that Rose is fixated on round shapes, and since girls have a round cavity between their thighs—a place we weren’t supposed to touch—and boys have something else (the boy in the story, whose name is Willie, knows who he is), you can make of all this pink and blue what you will.

On the third page, Rose cruelly punishes a little dog named Pépé, who isn’t hers, though she pretends he is. (See above.) Pépé “had been taught never to do in a room what should be done outside,” but, after he disobeys an order, Rose shuts him in a room where he is “so nervous being left all alone” that he does it. When he finally gets out, ashamed and traumatized, he bites her. I was terrified of dogs from then on.

“The World Is Round” only gets more upsetting. Rose cries her way through it, when she isn’t singing to ward off her phobias and sadness. One morning, she sneaks away from home carrying a blue garden chair, aiming to scale a mountain and sit atop it. Several days pass; the nights alone in the wilderness are especially fearful. At one point she reaches a waterfall, and in the grotto behind it she finds three words traced on the wall: “*Devil, Devil, Devil*.” “It was too bad that Rose could read writing otherwise she would not have known that it said devil three times there.”

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If writing makes sense to you, Stein implies, it can summon your demons. There's a lot of nonsense in her writing. But our first experience of language is nonsense, and if you listen to Stein with the ear of a child you relive that primal bewilderment. She listened with that ear herself. She was one of the first writers to channel the insistent voices of her unconscious, telling her why and who she was.

Stein's early fiction was plainly written and unremarkable. She invented the language of her avant-garde prose and poetry in the first decades of the last century, as an expatriate in Paris, living with her brother Leo and supported by a family trust that financed their growing art collection. As the siblings discovered Cézanne, Matisse, and Picasso, their atelier on the Rue de Fleurus became a shrine for paintings that redefined what art could be. Gertrude set out to generate the same kind of shock—modernism's disruption of form and perspective—by using words to compose a fractured picture.

"What do they mean?" a critic asked of the Cubists, in 1911. Have they "taken leave of their senses?" Publishers would raise the same questions about the novel Stein finished that year, "The Making of Americans," a plotless, nine-hundred-page saga, based cryptically on the Stein family, which was widely considered unreadable. But philistine incomprehension never deterred Stein. She classed herself as a writer with Homer and Shakespeare, and she boasted that "The Making of Americans" was one of three masterpieces that heralded a new age in literature. (The others were "Ulysses" and "In Search of Lost Time.") Future generations, she prophesied, would revere her—not only a coterie of adventurous readers but a vast public.

Stein was always esteemed by a small public, the guests in her salon: initially visiting Americans and French bohemians, and later the young writers of what she famously called “the Lost Generation,” most notably Hemingway and Fitzgerald. If she lacked an audience for her work, she had one as an oracle. “I always as I admit seem to be talking,” she wrote—holding forth in a mesmerizing voice that you can hear on YouTube, where she recites “If I Told Him: A Completed Portrait of Picasso”:

> Would he like it if I told him if I told him if Napoleon. Would he like it if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him. If I told him if Napoleon if Napoleon if I told him . . .

Stein’s Cubist portraiture was an outgrowth of her coursework in psychology, first as an undergraduate at Radcliffe, under William James, then as a medical student at Johns Hopkins, where she did research in neurology. For a while in Paris, she practiced amateur psychoanalysis, treating a neurotic family friend. She thought of herself as a behaviorist who could help people “change themselves to become what they should become.” (“To listen to her,” Picasso complained, “anybody would think that she’s manufactured me piece by piece.”)

Stein’s authority as an arbiter was bolstered by an ambiguously gendered seduction. Genius, she believed, was a masculine trait, and she felt that her own genius was male. After she cropped her hair, friends remarked on her resemblance to a Roman emperor. Her bullish head was perched atop a majestically massive silhouette, and her clothes—Chinese robes and corduroy caftans—gave her a shamanic aura. But if blithe grandiosity was Stein’s armor, there was a chink in it. While waiting to be immortalized, she longed desperately to be understood, if only, she wrote, by one ideal reader—someone who “says yes to it”—and in 1907 she met her.

Alice Babette Toklas, the ideal reader who became Stein’s wife, made a name for herself by writing a witty cookbook that included a friend’s recipe for hashish fudge. She also lent her name to “The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas,” a best-selling work of coy ventriloquism, celebrity gossip, and self-promotion by and about Gertrude Stein. Like the penthouse comedies of the Depression, it appealed to a public living through hard times, with its glamorous setting and naughty characters—an operetta cast of artists and

their mistresses. In 1934, a year after the book was published, its protagonists embarked on a six-month lecture tour of the United States, where crowds and reporters greeted them at every stop.

One might think that in middle America this odd couple would have been spurned as deviants, but ordinary people didn't seem shocked that two patrician spinsters should share a home. In many respects, theirs was an old-fashioned marriage. Stein privately called Toklas "precious wifey" and signed herself "little hubby." In one of my favorite sentences from "The Autobiography," the Alice puppet reports that Gertrude "always says she dislikes the abnormal, it is so obvious." The irony is that Stein's emphasis on Alice's subservience and her own supremacy as a grand seigneur (she boasted of never lifting a finger for herself) dramatized their deviance. Worldly readers had to wonder what really went on when the geniuses and their wives went home after dinner.

Stein's latest biographer, Francesca Wade, plumbs that question judiciously in the second half of "Gertrude Stein: An Afterlife," which begins after Stein's death, of cancer, in 1946. (The first half, a vivid but condensed account of her life, doesn't break much new ground.) Wade's original research relates to the "Katz interviews." Leon Katz was a graduate student of Talmudic zeal, and Stein's texts were his Mishnah. But the story of what he learned is something more novelistic: a Jamesian intrigue, in which a persistent sleuth woos a writer's bereft widow, who knows where the bodies are buried.

Few literary vestals earn a place of their own in the pantheon of writers. Vera Nabokov is one. Toklas is another. In both cases, their cultish devotion to a spouse has generated enduring curiosity, part of which may be envy, since many women have aspired to serve as a muse to genius. But ostentatious self-abnegation in any of its guises—religious, sexual, domestic—arouses uneasy feelings. What magnetic force keeps such a union intact? Is the enthrallment mutual? Is the resentment?

Katz wondered, too. In 1952, he wrote to Toklas deferentially, asking if they could meet. Despite her wariness of snoops, she agreed, and beginning that autumn they spent eight hours a day for the better part of four months talking in her Paris apartment. He'd done his legwork before he arrived,

tracking down key figures from Stein's youth, some of whom she had snubbed when fame went to her head, or to placate Alice, who was jealous of her past. They were happy to debrief him on an unknown Gertrude: a "gawkish," "slovenly," and "naïve" figure, opinionated but inconsistently so, who was discovering her attraction to women.

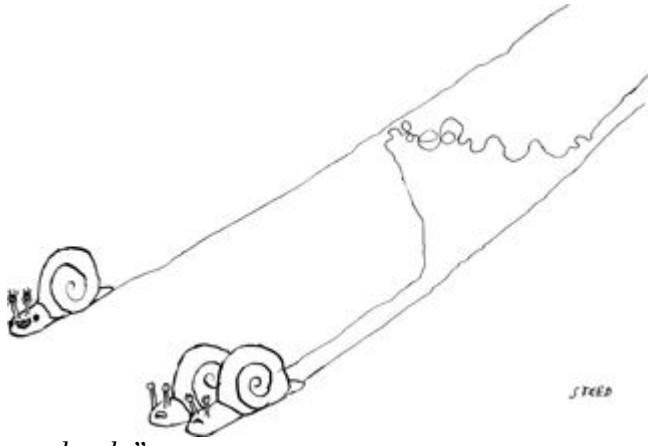
But Katz also came with a unique credential: exclusive access to Stein's early notebooks in her archives at Yale, a trove of documents that she began shipping to America ahead of the Second World War. They included nearly every scrap of paper in her possession: manuscripts, journals, scrawled love notes, laundry lists. When Alice had "urged her to be more selective," Wade writes, "Stein had replied that it wasn't for her to dictate what future readers might find useful," and she quotes Stein's dictum that "facts of life make literature."

By holding nothing back, Stein seems to have foreseen Katz's great epiphany: that her work needs a Rosetta stone, and that her life provides one. Toklas filled in the blanks for him, sometimes unwittingly. Back at home, he typed up his notes, but he never got around to making them public. He died in 2017, at ninety-seven, leaving his papers to Yale, and Wade, she says, was the first to read them.

One of the bodies Katz exhumed was that of May Bookstaver, Stein's first great love. The two met in Baltimore when Gertrude was a student at Johns Hopkins and May a recent graduate of Bryn Mawr. In later life, Stein was impossible to argue with. As James Lord writes in an elegantly caustic memoir, if anyone had the temerity to contradict her, "she would repeat herself . . . in a louder voice . . . then if necessary yet again and louder still." But she wasn't yet "Gertrude Stein" when she met May, who "baulked at the way [Gertrude] 'intellectualised everything,' " Wade writes. They clashed about feminism, Bookstaver as "a passionate campaigner for women's suffrage" and Stein as the author of "Degeneration in American Women," an essay which "affirmed that a woman's natural place was . . . in the home."

May was inconstant; she was cheating on a rich girlfriend, whom she eventually went back to, breaking Stein's heart. Toklas, in contrast, was a "natural" wife by training and temperament. She was born in San Francisco

in 1877. Stein's parents moved to Oakland from Baltimore three years later, so the spouses grew up in the same climate. Michael Stein, Gertrude's eldest brother, married there. After their father's death, he built the fortune in real estate and cable cars that gave Leo and Gertrude a private income. In the small community of "good" Jewish families, the Steins and the Toklases were acquainted.



"It was just one time. I was drunk."
Cartoon by Edward Steed

Michael and his wife introduced Toklas to Stein, not realizing that they were matchmaking. Gertrude was Alice's senior by three years. They both came from merchant clans of Central European origin, and their mothers both died young of cancer. Alice, at twenty, was left to manage a household of male relations, arranging meals and flowers in a miasma of cigar smoke. Like certain heroines of Henry James, her favorite writer, Alice flaunted a chic that was notable in a backwater. Though she was never a beauty, her presence had an edge. A severe bob dramatized angular features (Picasso joked that her bangs hid the stump of a horn); she brandished an ivory cigarette holder; her wardrobe—floral dresses and tailored suits—sent mixed messages, and she flirted with a series of interested parties, male and female. But, after a decade of listening to old men's stories, she felt starved for fresh diversions. The San Francisco earthquake of 1906 seemed to be a cue from fate. Not long after the fires subsided, she borrowed money for a ticket to Paris. In "Ada," a three-page fairy tale, Stein evokes her escape:

> The daughter did not like them to live with them and she did not like them to die with them . . . Her grandfather had left some money to

> them each one of them. Ada said she was going to use it to go away from them. . . .

The narrative supplies a storybook ending for Ada: “She came to be happier than anybody else who was living then.” But it wasn’t obvious when Toklas met Stein that they would become a couple, much less a doting one. Stein was drafting “The Making of Americans,” the rare book that gave her trouble. (She claimed to write for half an hour a day, without revising.) Her struggle was to animate her characters: “I know the being in each one of these three of them and I am almost despairing for I am doubting if I am knowing it poignantly enough to be really knowing it. . . . Always now I am despairing.”

An unlikely champion rescued her from this crisis. She had been reading the English translation of “Sex and Character,” by the tortured Viennese philosopher Otto Weininger. Weininger, a Jew by birth who converted to escape the stigma, was an antisemite and a misogynist. He blamed the decadence of the fin de siècle on women, whom he deemed soulless and amoral, and on Jews, because “Judaism is saturated with femininity.” (The Nazis loved him.) Paradoxically, however, he considered human nature inherently “bisexual,” with every character possessing aspects of the opposite gender—a variable quotient of “active” and “passive” qualities. An enlightened male would strive for “universal consciousness” by suppressing his female attributes. Women could not transcend their innate baseness, but Weininger gave lesbians a pass: a “half-male” queer woman could “possess traits of genius,” which he defined as the ability to know “everything without having learned it.”

Stein thought “Sex and Character” was itself a work of genius, and she was inspired by its catalogue of female stereotypes—mother, prostitute, servant—to elaborate her own: mistress prostitute, pure prostitute, perfect spinster, and variations thereof. Her first impression of Toklas comes straight from Weininger. Alice, she confided to a notebook, was “a liar of the most sordid, unillumined, undramatic unimaginative prostitute type. Coward, ungenerous, conscienceless, mean vulgarly triumphant and remorseless, caddish,” an “elderly spinster mermaid” who “dressed in whore clothes.” Toklas seems to have triggered this venom with a negligible offense—she

had been late for their first tête-à-tête. But she redeemed herself. She volunteered to type “The Making of Americans,” she listened raptly, and she showed a gift, as Stein wrote, for “giving people what they wanted.” By 1910, she had conquered Stein’s resistance to “being owned,” and they moved in together.

In the last pages of “The World Is Round,” Willie rescues Rose from the mountaintop, “and so they married and . . . lived happily ever after.” Even at six, I found this tidy fantasy disappointing, but Toklas might not have. She was thirty and at loose ends when she met Stein. She had studied piano at a conservatory and was talented enough to play Schubert with an orchestra but not, she felt, for a career. Stein provided one that satisfied her ambitions and perhaps mitigated a sense of mediocrity. Whether or not Alice lived happily ever after, Gertrude seems to have done so, at least once her devils were banished by inscrutability. She evokes the nature of their attachment, which she likens to a bargain, in “Tender Buttons”:

> What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it. . . . very likely the little things could be dearer but in any case there is a bargain and if there is the best thing to do is to take it away and wear it and then be reckless be reckless and resolved on returning gratitude.

Some of the secrets in Stein’s archive are, like the contents of a laundry hamper, both poignantly human and embarrassing. She regressed to baby talk with Alice. She wrote graphically about her bowel movements. Her erotica revels in bodily fluids. It also celebrates an ecstatic sex life, though one infers that Gertrude was what is known in current parlance as a “stone top.” The couple’s pet word for orgasms was “cows.” (Several examples of Stein’s love poetry, encrypted in Steinese, were anthologized by the Library of America, including “A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow,” and the sublimely titled “Lifting Belly.”)

Alice called Gertrude “Baby,” even to their friends. Her books were their progeny, Stein acknowledged, and without Alice’s mothering—and typing, proofreading, cooking, sewing, shopping, bookkeeping, and warding off bores—they might not have been born. Even during the Second World War, the couple managed to safeguard their life’s “delightfulness.” They holed up

in a country manor, in Vichy France, protected by their friend Bernard Faÿ, a literary factotum and collaborator with the Gestapo who was later tried and imprisoned. (Alice helped to finance his escape.) The scarcity of food was a challenge, but Gertrude befriended farmers on her cross-country walks. Toklas claimed that Basket, their white poodle, received special rations, thanks to the regime's allowance for purebred dogs.

Perhaps Stein was inured to racism, as many Jews were. But she never seems to have taken antisemitism too personally—she admired Hitler's toady Marshal Pétain and translated his speeches. The self-regard that gave her such complacency was defended by an exceptionalism that Weininger had helped to validate. In 1944, when the first American soldiers reached their village, Stein told the journalist Eric Sevareid that "with all the difficulties . . . these had been the happiest years of her life." A year later, she published "Wars I Have Seen." This next-to-last book, a memoir, is a uniquely dark work of realism in which Stein reckons eloquently with fear and anguish, though without mentioning that she and Toklas were Jewish. Back in Paris, she recovered her maddening insouciance.

For four decades, Alice nurtured Gertrude's self-mythologizing. By saying yes, she insulated Stein from an examined life. (The examining has fallen to her biographers, and Wade rises to it.) But Alice knew her leverage as a magic shield, and God help Baby if she fudged on their bargain: to forsake all others. The threat of an old romance, or of a too cozy friendship (she curdled Stein's with Hemingway), turned Alice into a Fury.

Toklas confessed to Katz that she'd "tormented" Stein with her possessiveness. A shocking instance of that torment was revealed by Ulla Dydo, a scholar with whom Katz discussed his findings. In 1932, Stein rediscovered the manuscript of her early novel "Q.E.D.," a lightly veiled autobiography. When Toklas read it, she figured out what May Bookstaver had meant to Stein. Studying her notebooks in the late seventies, Dydo found early drafts of Stein's "Stanzas in Mediation." Wade writes, "Turning the pages, [she] noticed a strange pattern of corrections. Each time the word 'may' occurred, it had been crossed out and replaced with a different word, 'to-day,' 'day', or 'can' . . . In the typed version, too, every appearance of the word 'may'—as a month, or a verb, or as part of the compound

‘maybe’—had been obliterated with a black scribble, sometimes almost cutting through the thin paper.” “A strange pattern of corrections” would make a good subtitle for “Afterlife.”

The “Afterlife” of Wade’s title is really Alice’s: she outlived Gertrude by twenty years. It is largely a bleak story. In contrast to her expansive mate, Toklas was a waspish temple gatekeeper who never ceased to hold grudges. Her grief was the bitterest one, and it couldn’t be assuaged. Janet Flanner described her as “the most widowed woman I know.”

At eighty-five, Alice published a memoir, “What Is Remembered,” in which she recalls her first sight of Gertrude: “It was [she] who held my complete attention, as she did for all the many years I knew her . . . and all these empty ones since.” Death only shifted Toklas’s focus from the woman to her legacy. She converted to Catholicism, hoping to join Gertrude in Heaven. In the meantime, she devoted herself to prodding an indifferent world to read and love Stein as she had. Her dogged efforts to get every manuscript into print succeeded, and Wade makes the best of a musty publishing saga. But she was screwed over by Stein’s will; she quarrelled with the estate’s lawyers, who sometimes paused her allowance, and she didn’t own the art. Eventually, old friends melted away, and the pictures she had dusted so reverently were removed to a bank vault. Picasso’s portrait of Gertrude went to the Met, depriving Alice of a presence that felt alive to her. She shrank with age as she sank into illness and near-destitution. Yet Wade’s measured sympathy for Toklas redeems her from pathos by treating her not as a casualty but as a stoic.

Nearly eighty years after her death, Stein is still remembered, but principally as what Wade calls “a larger-than-life character.” Even among the academics who consider her a pioneer of modernism, or an icon of transmasculinity, or a forerunner of deconstruction, her greatness as an actual writer is generally an article of faith. It is for Wade, who quotes Stein gingerly. Citing two lines from “Tender Buttons”—“Why is a feel oyster an egg stir,” “Why is it orange center”—she calls these images “a celebration of mutability, a rejoinder to rules, where words are set free from the shackles of meaning and grammatical function, made unfamiliar, and charged with power to make the world afresh.” Stein described this

technique as a form of dissociation—stripping language of the feelings that link it to our shared experience. Yet we tend to love writers who speak to us of that experience, not abstractly to themselves.

“Ulysses” was published in 1922, “The Making of Americans” in 1925, and “In Search of Lost Time,” in its entirety, in 1927. All three novels break with the past, question the nature of perception, and mirror the anxieties of postwar modernity, whose anomie Stein suggests in her famous koan “there is no there there.” She, Proust, and Joyce each intended to make meaning in a new way—that stream of consciousness in which, as T. S. Eliot puts it in “Burnt Norton”:

> Time present and time past
> Are both perhaps present in time future,
> And time future contained in time past.

But her ambition, more radical than theirs, was to deprogram and rewire a reader’s brain, frustrating her ingrained expectations for the emotional rewards of great literature. And, whatever you think of Stein, she forces you to reckon with your prejudices about what great literature can be.

Stein’s pride in scientific objectivity may be the greatest irony of her work, since it proves to be so opaquely subjective. Through the act of listening, which she claimed always to be doing (even though she was always talking), she believed that she could learn everything about everyone—“the bottom nature” of human beings collectively and individually across the ages. “I was sure that in a kind of way the enigma of the universe could in this way be solved,” she wrote in a lecture on “The Making of Americans,” “and if I went on and on and on enough I could describe every individual human being that could possibly exist.”

Everything is a lot of knowledge for one mind to contain, much less convey, but Stein’s unique invention, as she saw it, was a coding language for the data she collected, using English instead of digits or amino acids to create long word-strands that she repeated insistently, as she did her opinions. They acquire, if you hang in, a kind of hypnotic rhythm, akin to the ethos of durational performance art, which, in a way, her writing is. It reminds you that boredom is a deficiency of receptiveness, not of sensation. In that

respect, Stein’s notion of engagement is a guru’s formula for beatitude: settle on your mat and ignore your discomfort; empty your mind of its detritus; listen to my voice intoning a mantra; surrender to a higher power. Her cult lives on. ♦

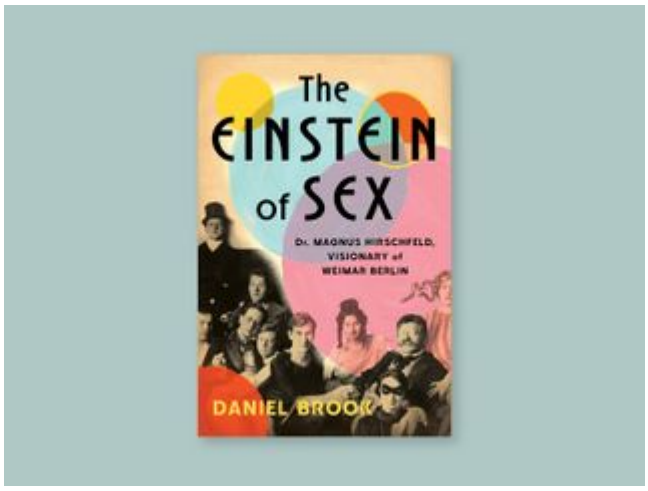
Judith Thurman began contributing to The New Yorker in 1987 and became a staff writer in 2000. A second volume of her essays for the magazine, “A Left-Handed Woman,” was published in 2022 and received a PEN award for the art of the essay..

Books

Briefly Noted

“The Einstein of Sex,” “Stan and Gus,” “Heart the Lover,” and “Muscle Man.”

September 29, 2025



The Einstein of Sex, *by Daniel Brook (Norton)*. In 1896, the Berlin-based Jewish physician Magnus Hirschfeld published a pamphlet with the startling thesis that sexual orientation is inborn and exists on a continuum. As Brook shows in this elegant, timely biography, the pamphlet caused a sensation, as did Hirschfeld’s later works on the “relativity” of gender and the social construction of race. If Hirschfeld’s pioneering research remains understudied today, the reason, Brook forcefully argues, isn’t simply that the Nazis burned his books and medical files (in which various Nazi leaders appeared); it’s that contemporaries who had once been allies, including Sigmund Freud, “went silent on him,” fearing that their own causes would be discredited by association.

Stan and Gus, *by Henry Wiencek (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. This engaging account of the Gilded Age is focussed on the collaboration and the colorful personal lives of two men who helped define the era's aesthetic: the architect Stanford White, whose designs included the second Madison Square Garden, and the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, whose innovative works included a bronze relief of the Civil War colonel Robert Gould Shaw and his all-Black regiment. Wiencek compares White's bon-vivant life style with Saint-Gaudens's "monkish poverty." He also documents their erotic interest in men (both were probably bisexual) and their marital infidelities: Saint-Gaudens maintained a secret second family, and White allegedly assaulted a teen-age model, whose abusive husband shot him dead in the Garden's rooftop theatre.

What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Heart the Lover, *by Lily King (Grove)*. The relationship between Jordan, the narrator of this affecting novel, and Yash, the man she falls in love with in college, is complicated from the start. (Before they get together, she dates his best friend.) King's book is broken into three parts: in the first, the two fall in love and travel; in the second, Jordan is married to someone else; in the last, they navigate grief and illness. As the novel encompasses their relationship, from start to finish, it questions whether a person can inhabit any moment other than the present. Jordan thinks, at one point, "Maybe it's true what the philosopher said, that the past and the future don't exist, that this is the only moment we ever have, this moment right now and this moment and this—"

Muscle Man, *by Jordan Castro (Catapult)*. This mysterious, occasionally nightmarish campus novel follows a professor of literature during a single, eventful day during which he commits petty theft, attends a departmental

meeting, and—most thrillingly to him—goes to the gym. The book's uncomfortably tight lens on the professor's interior life reveals it to consist largely of resentment for his co-workers and a strong desire to exercise. Throughout the day, as the professor's thoughts cascade from Dostoyevsky to YouTube fitness influencers, nearly every one of Castro's acerbic, unfiltered paragraphs contains a bristling insight about literature, weight lifting, or academic politics.

The Current Cinema

“One Battle After Another” Is a Powerhouse of Tenderness and Fury

In Paul Thomas Anderson’s film, starring Leonardo DiCaprio and loosely inspired by Thomas Pynchon’s “Vineland,” the fight against American fascism is a family affair.

By Justin Chang

September 26, 2025

In Anderson’s action thriller, Sean Penn plays a U.S. Army officer hellbent on capturing a former militant played by Leonardo DiCaprio.Illustration by Chirrikenstein

At a crucial moment in “One Battle After Another,” Paul Thomas Anderson’s electrifying new action thriller, someone cries out, “Who are you?!” A fair question. The man being asked is Bob Ferguson (Leonardo DiCaprio), who, in a past life, was known as Pat, Ghetto Pat, and Rocket Man. The movie opens in that past life, with Pat a member of the French 75, a ragtag band of militants who free imprisoned migrants and bomb the offices of pro-life politicians. Their objective is for America to one day be “free from fear,” to quote Pat’s partner, who has only one name, Perfidia Beverly Hills, but it’s enough. She’s played by Teyana Taylor, who lit up the independent drama “A Thousand and One” (2023) as an ex-con

determinedly raising a son. Here, with a flinty gaze and revolutionary fervor, Taylor casts maternal instinct to the winds. In a startling image, a pregnant Perfidia fires off rounds with a machine-gun butt pressed against her swollen belly. You worry about the poor kid's ears as you jam fingers into your own.

The film's opening half hour is loud, tense, and extraordinarily propulsive: we follow the French 75 through raids, robberies, blown-up buildings, and smashed-up cars. Compounding the cacophony is a Jonny Greenwood score that veers between manic percolation—imagine a xylophone humping a coffeepot—and grandly operatic surges of synth. The music sweeps us up in the queasy thrill of revolt, but also in the heat and momentum of an impetuous romance. Perfidia and Pat are like an Antifa-pilled Bonnie and Clyde, minus the impotence.

There is, alas, a snake in their Eden. One night, as Perfidia's team swarms an immigrant detention center, she accosts and arouses a U.S. Army officer (Sean Penn) whose name, Steven J. Lockjaw, is as comically blunt as hers. A sexual cat-and-mouse game ensues, complete with kinky phallic gunplay. It's a strange match, to say the least. Perfidia is the most determined of agitators, and Lockjaw is a scowling racist; in Penn's tightly wound performance, we see lust spiked with self-loathing. But Anderson knows that, amid clashing political extremes, racial and ideological purists can make surprising, and treacherous, bedfellows. Shortly after Perfidia gives birth to a daughter, Charlene, everything goes horribly wrong: many members of the French 75 are captured or killed, and Pat and newborn Charlene go into hiding. Perfidia vanishes for good, and you miss her terribly; Taylor is so vivid that even her absence becomes a presence.

Sixteen years pass. Hunkered down in the Southwestern city of Baktan Cross, Bob (as Pat is now called) learns that his fugitive past is about to catch up with him and Charlene (who now goes by Willa). He asks his old rebel comrades for help, prompting the film to spring another important question: "What time is it?" The question, delivered via pay phone, is an old security prompt, and Bob, with a memory fried by pot and booze, cannot remember the answer. (No two-factor authentication here.) He responds with an instant-classic rant, a string of escalating, expletive-laced

threats. But the question reverberates for a man who's spent years wasting away, always watching his back, never looking forward. What time is it? In more than one sense, Bob hasn't a clue.

It was shrewd, if counterintuitive, to cast DiCaprio as a man aging into oblivion. In the opening stretch, as young Pat fights the power, we're touched by the actor's boyishness, still clinging to him at fifty. Almost two decades later, that youthful air has gone endearingly to seed. Anderson, a big-hearted farceur, brings out the humor in Bob's devolution without treating him like a punch line; DiCaprio, sporting a plaid robe and a dishevelled man bun, hasn't been this shamblingly funny since "The Wolf of Wall Street" (2013). He gives this bedraggled stoner a screwball nobility, plus a heart of girl-dad gold. Bob may be a fuckup, but he's done right by Willa.

A smart, plucky teen-ager with a purple belt in martial arts, Willa is played by the remarkable Chase Infiniti, and not even Anderson would have dared make that name up. The moniker, though befitting a sports car, almost perfectly describes the high-stakes pursuit that consumes the remaining two hours. Lockjaw, who has only tightened over the years, has discovered Bob and Willa's whereabouts, and has sent in troops to apprehend them. His pretext is a crackdown on migrants—a reminder, if we needed one, that there is no easier scapegoat when it comes to the seizure and abuse of power.

The sixties haunt "One Battle After Another," in ways obvious and not. The French 75 is clearly modelled on that decade's countercultural rebels; at one point, Bob throws on "The Battle of Algiers" (1966), watching through a haze of nostalgia. Anderson's primary source is Thomas Pynchon's 1990 novel, "Vineland," about a former hippie, Zoyd Wheeler, nursing a hell of a Reaganite hangover. The novel is set in 1984, but the plot keeps sliding backward into the sixties, in woozy reveries that engulf Zoyd like quicksand. Anderson handles the text far more loosely than he did Pynchon's "Inherent Vice," which he adapted for the screen in 2014. In replanting "Vineland" in the acrid soil of the present day, Anderson wisely dispenses with flashbacks entirely. The characters barrel forward from first frame to last, wired into the urgency of the now.

The film was shot, by Michael Bauman, on VistaVision, a 35-mm. format whose Hollywood glories include “The Searchers” (1956) and “Vertigo” (1958). Bauman’s images, however, have a raw, anticlassical, guerrilla-documentary immediacy: migrant families crowded into pens, a protester throwing a Molotov cocktail at riot police. The camera goes hurtling after the characters, none of whom move the same way. Note the stiffness of Lockjaw’s gait as he marches, hopeful yet anxious, through the upper corridors of Christofascist power. See Bob race to keep up with a group of shadowy young skateboarders during a rooftop escape—a resonant portrait of generational slippage. (The punch line is a tumble worthy of Wile E. Coyote.) Best of all, watch Willa’s suavely resourceful martial-arts instructor (Benicio del Toro) as he steers Bob through the bowels of his “Latino Harriet Tubman situation,” an elaborate safe house for immigrants. More stories surely lurk within these labyrinthine hallways, and there could be no wittier, more charismatic guide than del Toro, who strolls and even dances through the movie with Zen grace.

Much of the film, for all its bristling kineticism, unfolds in closeup; Anderson’s favorite vistas and visions can be mapped out in the human face. Regina Hall, as a rebel who comes to Willa’s aid, makes a near-tableau of every stricken, hellbent glance. A different stillness, both sillier and chillier, suffuses the hushed gatherings of the Christmas Adventurers Club, a Christian-nationalist cabal targeting America’s “lunatics, haters, and punk trash.” If that line reminds you of Brigadier General Jack D. Ripper, from “Dr. Strangelove” (1964), railing against Communist threats to “our precious bodily fluids,” you’ve caught the film’s absurdist wavelength, though Anderson’s brand of satire has none of Kubrick’s icy perfectionism. Anderson is a rare and rangy breed of cinematic maximalist—a satirical quasi-historian and pop-cultural magpie with a gift for weaving disparate influences into a marvellously unruly synthesis.

Again and again, Anderson follows the threads of his inspiration wherever they take him. Invariably, they draw inward, into a dense tangle of human relationships, where the tallest tales and truest stories lie. “There Will Be Blood” (2007), a masterpiece about oil, religion, and other desert-grown commodities, hinged on a subterranean war between father and son. “The Master” (2012), teased as a juicy swipe at Scientology, was instead a

seductive, corrosive postwar bromance. With the gothic perversities of “Phantom Thread” (2017) and the shaggy, smiley hijinks of “Licorice Pizza” (2021), Anderson cemented his standing as the most wildly inventive period craftsman in Hollywood. He still is, but, this time, the period is ours.

“One Battle After Another” is a father-daughter epic, with an unusually personal gush of feeling. A viewer who’s unaware that Anderson has four kids might leave the theatre suspecting as much, and wiping away tears. You can count on one hand the number of scenes that Bob and Willa share, but their connection—a swirl of protectiveness, exasperation, and fiercely unconditional love—binds the movie and its madly whirling parts together. What will audiences make of it all? A great deal, I hope. Many thrillers end with shoot-outs and chases—in this case, a mighty three-car affair, brilliantly staged over a rolling desert highway. Far fewer have the nerve to suggest that, as a beleaguered antifascist remnant stares down a white-supremacist police state, a biracial child will lead them.

The times have seldom been more hostile toward political mythmaking as nervy as this, or blockbuster intelligence of this scale. Anderson’s timeliness is undeniable, but timeliness alone has never been an argument for greatness. “One Battle After Another,” as great an American movie as I’ve seen this year, doesn’t simply meet the moment; with extraordinary tenderness, fury, and imagination, it forges a moment all its own, and insists that better ones could still lie ahead. ♦

Justin Chang is a film critic at The New Yorker. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

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Poems

Poems

From “Handkerchief”

By Robin Coste Lewis

September 29, 2025

Handkerchiefs, ties, an old man
on the street selling loose
freshly roasted nuts

from a bright blue cart.
Is there anything
lovelier?

I know—now—
it is only a matter
of days (if I am lucky)

until I, too, stand somewhere hoping
another human will stop
and find what I’m offering interesting.

This is drawn from “Archive of Desire.”

Robin Coste Lewis received the 2015 National Book Award for poetry. Her books include “Archive of Desire” (2025).

Poems

New Here

By Nick Laird

September 29, 2025

A human being has no purpose
thus everything one does
is metaphor, I guess,

& some attempt to counterpoint
the adenoidal hum of time
with syncopation of one's own—

& I'll admit I like the poem
for its casual insistence
on the weirdness of—for instance—

standing in the post office on Tenth
& Sixth, between classes,
adjusting to detail, to local flavor.

The usual sunlight buttressing
the upper windows & a little dust
suffering a pummelling

from millions of invisible atoms
as the queue inches forward,
& stops.

Behind the counter Layla squints
like a village judge & bawls out
the man in shorts who hasn't filled

the form in right & a large part
of me is transfixed by all of this
thisness, & I feel like I’m

new here, sometimes,
like I’ve just come out of hospital
or been in the forest for too long,

& don’t remember what stamps are
or my own name, & Layla
is enraged when I tell her

I could post this anywhere:
Budapest, Kathmandu, Ballyhackamore;
to you, or you, or, no, not you.

Nick Laird wrote the poetry collection “Up Late,” the novel “Modern Gods,” and the children’s book “Weirdo,” among other works.

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the October 6, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Monday, September 29, 2025**
  A challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Monday, September 29, 2025

A challenging puzzle.

By Will Nediger

September 29, 2025

loading

Will Nediger is a crossword constructor from London, Ontario, who publishes puzzles independently under the name Bewilderingly.
