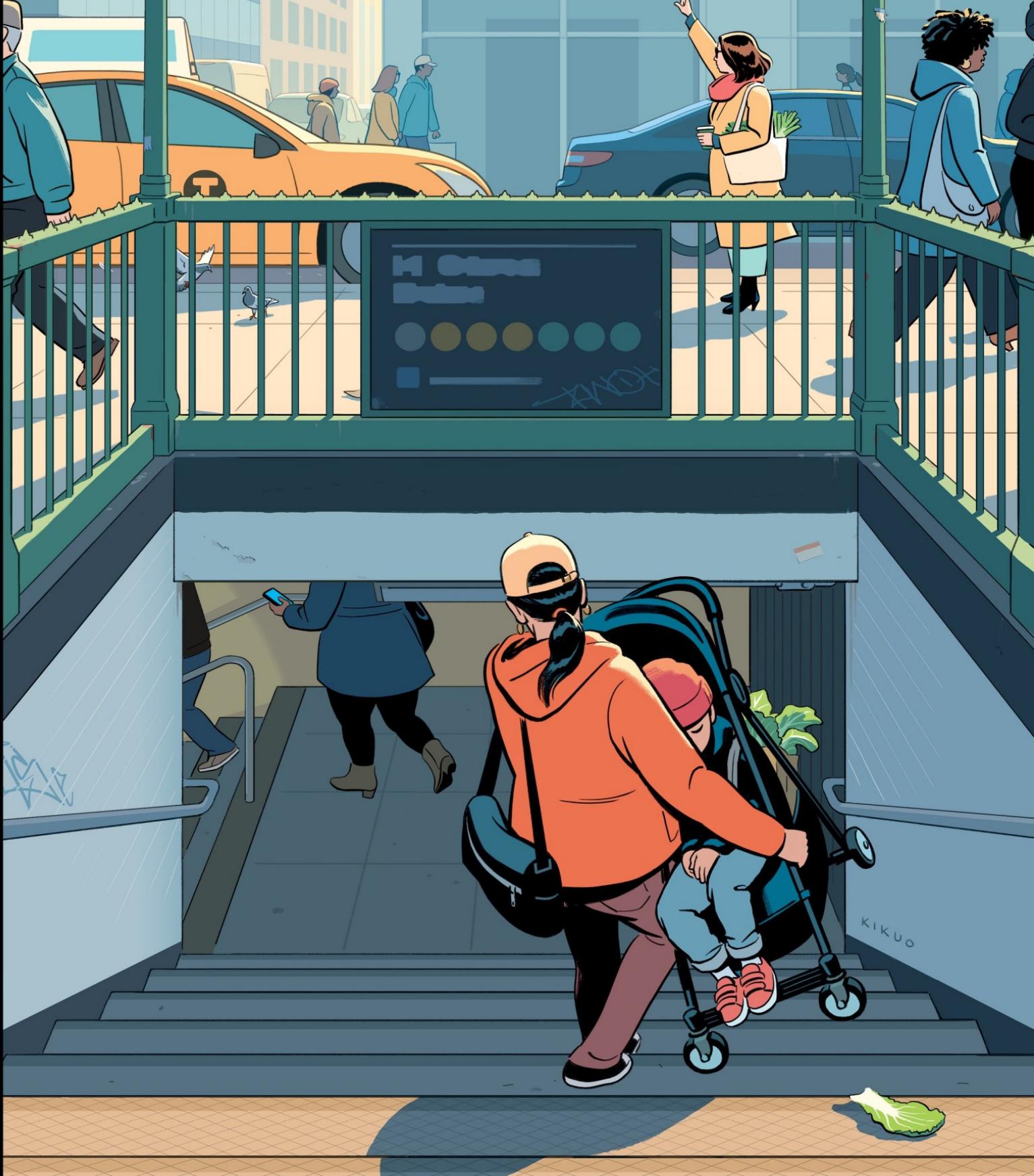


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# THE NEW YORKER



# The New Yorker Magazine

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## Goings On

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By Sheldon Pearce, Helen Shaw, Jane Bua, Vince Aletti, Brian Seibert, Richard Brody, Inkoo Kang, and Helen Rosner | Also: the audacious Andy Kaufman; Richard Learoyd's haunting new photography; and the Wooster Group gets wistful.

- **La Tête d'Or and the Revenge of the American Steak House**

By Helen Rosner | The ne plus ultra of expense-account dining is making a comeback, with help from the indefatigable French chef Daniel Boulud.

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# What to Watch That Isn’t “The White Lotus”

*Also: the audacious Andy Kaufman; Richard Learoyd’s haunting new photography; and the Wooster Group gets wistful.*

*By [Sheldon Pearce](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Jane Bua](#), [Vince Aletti](#), [Brian Seibert](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Inkoo Kang](#), and [Helen Rosner](#)*

*March 21, 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.](#)*

The musician **Tamara Lindeman** founded the Canadian folk band **the Weather Station** in 2006, but it could be argued that she didn’t truly find the project’s calling until 2021, with the band’s majestic album “Ignorance.” [One of the best LPs of that year](#), the music explored our ongoing ecological emergency, mustering up personal meditations from inside the climate crisis. “I feel as useless as a tree in a city park / Standing as a symbol of what we have blown apart,” Lindeman sang on “Tried to Tell You.” The songs are scenic, and filled to the brim with the wonders of the outside world—wild roses with crumpled petals, misshapen reeds and rushes; shearwaters, robins, crows, and thrushes; the wind on the water; the sun in all its splendor, setting or slinking through the blinds; pink clouds amassing against the cliffs.



Photograph by Brendan George Ko

The musical possibilities of the Weather Station seemed to open up with “Ignorance,” and then 2022 brought a companion release, and together they capture the beautiful fragility of our planet. On the followup, “How Is It That I Should Look at the Stars,” the elevated folk-pop of the original blurred into an awe-inspired jazz, unfurling into a boundless, tranquil expanse, where the great outdoors isn’t just a refuge from an unfeeling digital society; it’s a panacea for human self-absorption.

On the Weather Station’s new album, “Humanhood,” Lindeman’s way of seeing the world deepens. Trying to figure out “how to be an activist and talk to people about this issue emotionally,” as she put it to *Interview* magazine, led her to self-analysis, to thinking about dissociation and the importance of staying connected to one’s feelings and to the natural order. In exploring this connectivity, Lindeman extends the reach of her music further than ever, while also continuing to grow the Weather Station’s sound into a vespertine orchestral domain all its own. “Some people don’t want to see the seams / They want it all done by machine,” she sings on “Sewing,” her voice gently breaking apart amid subdued piano and drums. “Straight and plain, no traces of making / But no two days are ever the same.” Finding and embracing the traces of making—on both intimate and environmental scales—has become her guiding creative principle. The Weather Station plays Bowery Ballroom on April 1 and Music Hall of Williamsburg on April 2.—*Sheldon Pearce*



## About Town

### Off Broadway

The Wooster Group explores its archive with the wistful **Nayatt School Redux**, returning to a 1978 piece composed by Elizabeth LeCompte and Spalding Gray, with Libby Howes, Joan Jonas, and Ron Vawter. Originally, Gray played T. S. Eliot’s “The Cocktail Party,” on a record player, his monologue exploding into zany antics. Now Scott Shepherd channels Gray, and with his fellow-actors reenacts juddering, black-and-white documentation from the period. The Wooster doyenne Kate Valk tells stories about that long-ago cast, recalling the day she had to commit Howes, after the actress began imagining mystic correspondences. Someone, Howes had insisted, was coming—her mania eerily reflecting Eliot’s play, in which a young ascetic follows inner voices into harm’s way.—*Helen Shaw (Performing Garage; through March 29.)*

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### Classical

The composer **Yoko Kanno** is a pioneer of soundtracking anime. She grew up in Miyagi, Japan, and, though her family had little interest in music, she learned piano and attended music school as a child, eventually going on to arrange songs for her college’s pop-music club and compose for commercials. Her unplanned crossover into anime feels unequivocally natural. Kanno wrote a particularly dynamic score for the 1998 show “Cowboy Bebop,” which channels the fever of the jazz subgenre. At Town Hall, Kanno showcases vibrant selections from “Cowboy Bebop,” with the help of the saxophonist Logan Richardson and a nearly twenty-person ensemble.—*Jane Bua (Town Hall; March 29.)*

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### Art



Photograph © Richard Learoyd / Courtesy Pace Gallery

If the range of subjects in **Richard Learoyd's** new photographs—portraits, nudes, still-lifes, landscapes—suggests an academic exercise, look closer. The work's mannerist formality is subverted by a haunting presence and an oddity that edges into the surreal. Credit Learoyd's unique approach to the camera obscura—here, a painstakingly elaborate process of his own design that gives his images a depth that tempts touch. In the portraits, solitary young women and an androgynous boy, all unconventional beauties, emerge from spaces that feel not just empty but endless: a seductive void. Arrangements of flowers—wilted tulips, tangled poppies—and a triptych of gnarly elephant skulls have the uncanny, 3-D quality of antique stereoscopic views.—*Vince Aletti (Pace; through April 26.)*

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R. & B.

The singer-songwriter **Ravyn Lenae** is a testament to staying the course. After joining the soul and rap collective Zero Fatigue, she signed with Atlantic Records in 2016. A pair of EPs earned her slots on tours with SZA and Noname, but she didn't release her début album, "Hypnos," until 2022. The music proved worth the wait, and revealed Lenae to be a master of R. & B. Shapeshifting songs incorporate stone-cold funk, electro, Afrobeats, and neo soul, her malleable, cotton-candy vocals dissolving into every luscious soundbed. For a followup, in 2024, she retrofitted an already

vibrant sound into something more precise. “Bird’s Eye” is enriching and fluid, imbued with the effortless execution of someone now invoking muscle memory.—S.P. (*Blue Note*; April 1-2.)

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## Dance



*Photograph by Camilla Greenwell*

Hip-hop dance troupes often specialize in precision, but **Boy Blue**, from Britain, takes exactitude to another level, perfectly synchronizing with the music. It surely helps that the company is run by a choreographer, Kenrick (H2O) Sandy, and by a composer-d.j., Michael (Mikey J) Asante. Much of Boy Blue’s previous work was darkly dramatic, heavy with messaging. But “Cycles,” the hourlong piece it’s performing for its return to Lincoln Center, is dance, dance, dance. The group choreography is somehow both jerky and smooth, sprinkled with flashes of individual freestyle brilliance. The music is British hip-hop—jungle, grime, sometimes short on funky groove. The meld between it and the dancing is simply amazing.—*Brian Seibert (Rose Theatre; March 27-29.)*

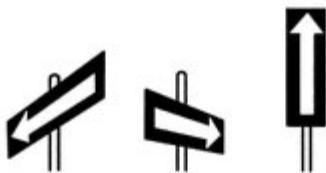
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## Movies

The meteoric career of the brilliantly inventive comedian Andy Kaufman—who appeared in the first episode of “Saturday Night Live” and became a household name with “Taxi”—gets a thrilling and troubling exploration in the documentary **“Thank You Very Much,”** directed by Alex Braverman. With access to troves of archival footage, Braverman shows Kaufman transforming the very nature of comedy by launching the put-on into

existential extremes. Interviews with friends and colleagues—including Bob Zmuda, Danny DeVito, Marilu Henner, and Lorne Michaels—show how his relentlessly creative audacity torpedoed his career, leaving him desperately isolated as he faced a terminal illness. Examining Kaufman’s childhood and his distinctive range of pop-cultural touchstones, Braverman celebrates the comedian’s uproarious art while probing the anguish that fuelled it.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release and streaming on demand starting March 28.)*

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## Pick Three

*Inkoo Kang on alternatives to “The White Lotus.”*

HBO’s “The White Lotus” is once again dominating the cultural conversation. But the current season isn’t as fizzy or as incisive as the two before. Here are three other shows to check out instead.

1. Mike White’s previous HBO series, “**Enlightened**,” remains an underwatched gem. Laura Dern plays a divorcée who experiences transcendence on an absurdly expensive spiritual retreat, and attempts to bring her vacation self back to her regular life as a suburban corporate drone. She faces skepticism from her no-nonsense mom (played by Dern’s mother, Diane Ladd), but does find an ally in a co-worker (White). Dern is in top form playing a woman who feels too much—and makes that everyone else’s problem.
2. In “**I Love Dick**” (Prime Video), a married feminist filmmaker (Kathryn Hahn) from New York ends up in Marfa, Texas, and finds creative rejuvenation in her overwhelming lust for the bohemian town’s artistic A-lister (Kevin Bacon). It’s a tour de force of a comedy—a hilarious and picturesque tale of unruly female horniness and the humiliations of desire.



*Illustration by Laura Simonati*

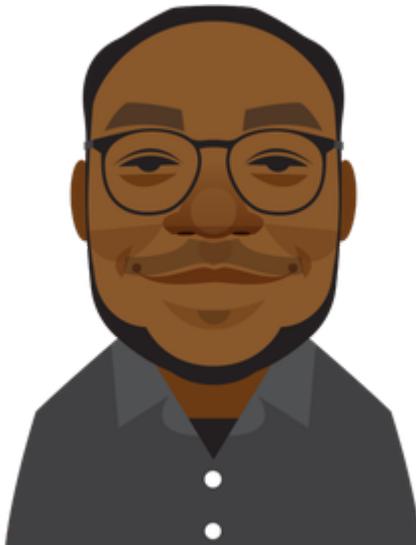
**3.** HBO's adaptation of Elena Ferrante's "**My Brilliant Friend**" tetralogy offers a lived-in beauty in its backdrops of a changing Italy, against which a difficult, lifelong friendship between two fiercely competitive women goes through its painfully recognizable convolutions. The series doesn't get enough credit for its charms: its urgent Max Richter score; the stylish, character-illuminating costumes; and the postcard-ready scenes of the island of Ischia, where so many bad decisions are made.

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#### **P.S. Good stuff on the internet:**

- [Here comes the sun](#)
  - [Bill Burr is having a moment](#)
  - [It's Gwenyth Paltrow's world](#)
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*An earlier version of this article misstated the date of Yoko Kanno's performance.*



[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.

[Jane Bua](#) is a member of *The New Yorker's* editorial staff.

[Vince Aletti](#) is a photography critic and the author of “[Issues: A History of Photography in Fashion Magazines](#).”

[Brian Seibert](#) has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2002. He is the author of “[What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing](#),” which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in *the New York Times* and *the New York Review of Books*. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.



[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of [“Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard.”](#)



[Inkoo Kang](#), a staff writer, has been a television critic for *The New Yorker* since 2022.



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

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[The Food Scene](#)

# La Tête d'Or and the Revenge of the American Steak House

*The ne plus ultra of expense-account dining is making a comeback, with help from the indefatigable French chef Daniel Boulud.*

By [Helen Rosner](#)

March 16, 2025



*The star of the menu at La Tête d'Or is the prime rib. Photographs by Amy Lombard 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.](#)

Through most of the twentieth century, the American steak house was the ne plus ultra of expense-account dining and billfold flexing. In many places, it remains so: the nicest joint in town, the only place to celebrate a milestone or to close a deal. But over time, in some cities, New York among them, the totemic simplicity of a man eating a steak fell out of fashion, replaced by more heterogeneous modes of conspicuous connoisseurship: nouvelle cuisine, the auteur-chef tasting menu, the thousand-dollar omakase, the members-only supper club. It wouldn't be right to say that the steak house is back, since it never really went away, but there's something in the water, and in the air, and in the newspapers, and in the pit of everyone's stomach. Hemlines are dropping, or are they rising? The trend feels, if not promising, by any means, at least narratively cohesive: the rise

of [trad wives](#), the end of the flu vaccine, “[quiet luxury](#),” the [return of polio](#), the return of [Donald Trump](#) and his taste for, among other dubious things, well-done meat. To a person of a certain stripe, perhaps bored of being asked to broaden his horizons or consider experiences outside his own, the resurgence of the steak house, with its familiar social and gastronomic codes, forged in the fires of the mid-century middle class—Father at the office, Mother at the kitchen sink—might come as a restoration of the proper order, a glorious, carnivorous relief.

New York has always been a steak-house town, even when steak houses weren’t cool. Arising from the working-class chophouses and upper-class beefsteak supper clubs of the Victorian era, the city’s more classical institutions wear their mythologies with the ostentatiousness of a rib eye’s fat cap: [Luger](#) with its surly waiters and Teutonic brusqueness; Keen’s with its theatre-world pedigree and its collection of clay pipes; [Delmonico’s](#) with its long-reaching history; Sparks with its sidewalk bloodstains. The newcomers sport somewhat more varied identities: [4 Charles](#), a charismatic clubbiness; Cote, a K-BBQ sleekness; Quality Meats, a party-bro cacophony; Carne Mare, an Italianate opulence. Crane Club, which opened late last year in the soaring space that once housed [Mario Batali](#)’s Del Posto, seems to be going all-in on a sort of pan-European maximalism. Time and Tide, another new joint, has described itself as a “steakhouse for seafood,” with concordantly incoherent results.

By a long shot, the most exciting new steak house in New York right now is La Tête d’Or by Daniel, the latest restaurant from the indefatigable French chef and restaurateur [Daniel Boulud](#), who for more than three decades has embodied the soigné sophistication of ultra-high-end dining in New York. Daniel, his namesake establishment on the Upper East Side, a colonnaded sanctum of caviar and white linen, has remained both gastronomically and culturally [relevant](#) since its opening, in 1993. His dozen-odd other restaurants in town, from the sleek, Mediterranean-inflected [Boulud Sud](#) (currently closed for renovations) to the fast-casual Épicerie Boulud cafés, have in common a clarity and a classicism, a sense of fluid, almost rapturous perfectionism. Boulud restaurants never come across as stale—a remarkable accomplishment, given both the length of his career and the beige-cashmere wealth of his core clientele—though they also rarely attain

a sense of trendiness or urgency. La Tête d’Or may be his first foray, in quite a long time, that feels buzzy, even hot.

La Tête d’Or, as a steak house, is inherently and intensely American, though Boulud has dressed the place up in somewhat French tailoring—French onion soup is *soupe à l'oignon*; the restaurant’s name, which translates to “the golden head,” is a reference to the largest, most beautiful public park in Boulud’s native city of Lyon. Housed on the lobby level of a Flatiron office tower, La Tête is Boulud’s farthest-downtown restaurant, though there’s little downtown about the restaurant itself: it is vast, formal, and luxurious, très Boulud, from the plush, hotel-like reception area to the plush, burgundy-swathed lounge to the plush, sweeping dining room decorated in brown marble and blue velvet. The ceilings soar, the art is large and muted and gently abstract, the white linens on the tables glow like cream in the halo of Art Deco sconces and dramatically tubular chandeliers.

The steak house (a “restaurant concept” if ever there was one) is built from such well-worn tropes—whiskey, iceberg wedges, myoglobin, leather—that it’s impossible for a new iteration to avoid at least winking conspiratorially at those defining elements, if not embracing them wholeheartedly. Boulud and crew seem, here, to be particularly interested in playing with the genre’s built-in theatricality. A proscenium-size cutout in one wall reveals a dreamy tableau of a steak-house kitchen: butcher block and white tile, countertops artfully arranged with carnelian hunks of meat. It’s mostly for show: the real action of the real kitchen is hidden behind the rear wall of the diorama, though movement is visible, occasionally, around the edges of the backdrop, and white-jacketed cooks occasionally step into the show kitchen, plating and finishing this or that with the stoic composure of actors playing out a silent scene. A horizontal line of mirrors mounted periscopically across the top of the aperture allows diners to gaze at the workstations without any need to leave their very comfortable seats. Besides, much of the action comes to you: several of the restaurant’s dishes are prepared or plated tableside, on wheeled carts that servers glide showily around the dining room, dispensing Caesar salad and Dover sole in intimate command performances.

Putting on a performance is no sin; I adore a dining room that knows it's a stage. After all, we customers perform, too, especially at a steak house. Is the piece of meat large enough? Marbled enough? Rare enough? The meal is a constant, anxious audition: for the choicest cut, the hardest sear, the blackest caviar, the frothiest heartburn. You get the truffled baked potato not out of any desire for truffles but to demonstrate your indifference to their cost; you ask for a rib eye with a good-sized spinalis not because you've got any idea what that means but because you've heard someone say it before, and it sounded strong and intelligent and in the know. You can follow your heart when you're at a steak house, certainly, but every mote of smoke and stitch of leather in the room is telling you to follow the rules.

At La Tête d'Or, you can skip many of the dishes listed as starters, which seem to serve mostly as space fillers, both on the menu and on the table—though I enjoyed a nice little scallop crudo with nubs of pomelo and green herbs, and a novel, New York-ish take on marrow bones, served split lengthwise and topped with squares of pastrami and dollops of sauerkraut. Far more exciting things are happening elsewhere in the lineup: chilled seafood, sweet and plump across the board, available piece by piece or piled up in a tiered plateau; a traditional Lyonnaise frisée salad—poached egg, mustard vinaigrette—given a delightful upgrade with chicken-liver croutons. (The dish is a Boulud staple, on the menu at several of his restaurants, and always thrilling.) Despite the spectacle of its tableside preparation, the Caesar salad is disappointingly bland; go instead for the “French wedge,” a Gallic take on the inevitable and iconic steak-house staple: iceberg lettuce with a Roquefort dressing, fried shallots, and, in the role traditionally played by bacon, crispy, salty bits of smoked beef tongue.



*A seafood plateau.*

All of that, though, is just warmup—maybe foreplay? The meat is the thrust of the thing. The restaurant offers a dozen or so cuts of beef, of various breeds and provenances, some remarkable (an olive-fed American Wagyu from Stonefall Farm), others generic (an anonymous Black Angus filet mignon, which perhaps the filet mignon eater deserves). If you don't eat red meat, you can avail yourself of a lovely Sasso chicken or a firm-fleshed, elegantly filleted Dover-sole meunière, the fish flown in daily from Holland. Per steak-house rules, ordering a steak gets you a steak, nothing more: sides are sold separately (get the baked-potato *tartiflette*, decadently cheesy, the tender haricots verts amandine, and the marvellous frites), as are sauces and flavored butters.

The steaks are cut cleanly and well fired: a forty-five-day-aged rib eye had depth and a gentle funk; a Snake River Farms bavette, while a bit petite, was deep and flavorful. But the only one to get, in my book, the star of the menu, the possible raison d'être of the entire operation, is the prime rib. As the various table-service trolleys zigzag through the dining room, few diners look up from their conversations (or their phones). Not so when the wagon carting the “primal” of beef, from which each slab is sliced, comes around. Boulud takes his prime rib extremely seriously: only one primal is cooked at a time, a long, slow process that demands exacting attention; on one of my visits, a server sorrowfully conveyed the news that the most recent cut hadn't been up to chef's standards, and so none would be available for at least two more hours. Once carved and plated, each slice is draped on one end in a yellow veil of béarnaise from a copper pot, and on the other end in wine-dark bordelaise. The flesh of the meat shades from a carnation-pink medium-rare center to a deep, herb-scented outer crust. The near-melting fat cap shines like polished quartz. Bite for bite, it is truly one of the most beautiful steaks I've had the pleasure to consume, and it nearly earns every silly, self-serious flourish. Ignore the climate-ravaging effects of cattle ranching; ignore the plaque building up in your arteries; ignore the hundred-and-thirty-dollar price tag (which gets you sauces, two sides, and a black-pepper-inflected popover—something of a deal, compared with the nickel-and-dime exorbitance of a meat-and-sides meal à la carte). A well-prepared steak is goddam delicious. Why wouldn't you want to wrap it in ritual and make it an avatar of social power? Why wouldn't you want to

return to its raw, unadorned, masculine simplicity when you feel like the well-established hierarchies of the world are threatened, when the doors to American life seem too wide open, when the old-fashioned purity of “normal” is shifting in discomfiting ways?

I doubt that Boulud means to associate his restaurant with any sort of political moment or ideological bent. Certainly, nothing on the menu or in the service seemed to communicate anything beyond polished, murmuring attentiveness. But a restaurant, like any work of art, cares little for its author’s intentions. Midway through one meal at La Tête d’Or, my companion looked around the room, dropped his voice, and said to me, “You know, I think you might be the only woman in here.” That wasn’t strictly true—we’d passed at least one lady sipping cocktails at the bar, and a few more eventually trickled in to be seated for dinner—but the room was, on each of my visits, overwhelmingly a room of men. I observed them in pairs, sniffing at a decanter of Burgundy; in quartets, loosening their ties; in thorny post-work acts of bread-breaking, chuckling at one another’s bons mots, presumably discussing getting the satellites up, or talking to Lockheed, or closing the funding round. The steak house speaks its own language, no matter how much of the menu is retitled in French.

### **Helen, Help Me!**

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

At the end of the meal, once all the meat is masticated and the lingering potatoes waved away, it’s time for an ice-cream sundae. It is a strict rule of the steak house that dessert should be both childlike and wondrous, a reprieve after all the posturing and peacocking that came before. A menu might offer chocolate cake, apple strudel, a slice of cheesecake, a sticky slab of bread pudding, or, as at La Tête d’Or, a selection of oven-warm cookies. But just as essential to the steak house experience as the steak itself is the sundae—complex, frilly, multicolored, slightly absurd, an indulgence earned through innocence rather than through brute force. La Tête d’Or’s features soft-serve, your choice of swirled-together chocolate and coffee or swirled-together vanilla and a seasonal fruit flavor, their alternating stripes spiralling upward like a circus tent. It’s served in a metal

coupe surrounded by a roulette of toppings in little bowls: tiny marshmallows, dehydrated berries, little bits of brownie, house-made rainbow sprinkles. The ice cream is, of course, magnificent, the chocolate sauce luscious, the bits of brownie divine. But something about this version was off, unsteady, a little wrong. There was no whipped cream—is it still a sundae without it? And there was no cherry on top. ♦



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

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# The Talk of the Town

- **[The E.P.A. vs. the Environment](#)**

By Elizabeth Kolbert | With the help of the agency, the Trump Administration is doing everything it can to make emissions grow again.

- **[The Art Works in Flannery O'Connor's Attic](#)**

By Charles Bethea | In an old Georgia mansion, a team of the writer's devotees found a dusty wooden box: inside were two dozen of her never-seen oil paintings.

- **[Alabaster DePlume Grapples with It](#)**

By Nick Paumgarten | The saxophonist and jazz poet (real name Angus Fairbairn) hit the jujitsu mat at a Wall Street dojo.

- **[Carol Leifer Can Make You Funny](#)**

By Emma Allen | In a new book, the "Seinfeld" and "S.N.L." writer shares the secrets to the perfect toast: don't drink too much, and, remember, the Gettysburg Address was only two minutes long.

- **[Story Time with the Man Who Oversaw SEAL Team Six](#)**

By Mark Yarm | After a military career that included helping take out bin Laden, Admiral William McRaven has assembled a new squad: Caring Cow, Persevering Penguin, and Forgiving Frog.

[Comment](#)

# The E.P.A. vs. the Environment

With the help of the agency, the Trump Administration is doing everything it can to make emissions grow again.

By [Elizabeth Kolbert](#)

March 23, 2025



*Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty*

The first person to head the Environmental Protection Agency, which was created by [President Richard Nixon](#), in late 1970, was an up-and-coming Republican politician named William Ruckelshaus. Ruckelshaus, known to his friends as Ruck, came from Indiana, where, during a single term in the state's House of Representatives, he had managed to get elected majority

leader. On being chosen to lead the E.P.A., he moved quickly to establish the new agency's credibility. Just a week into his tenure, he warned the cities of Cleveland, Detroit, and Atlanta that they could be sued for polluting their own waterways, and over the next few months he took action against several major corporations, including [U.S. Steel](#). In an interview with *Time* a year into the job, Ruckelshaus described his strategy as focussing on the “violators with the greatest visibility in order to get the message across.” He likened the task of getting the agency organized while at the same time pursuing polluters to “trying to run a hundred-yard dash while undergoing an appendectomy.”

Since Ruckelshaus, the E.P.A. has had, depending on how you count, fifteen or sixteen more chiefs. Several of them have been, to put it politely, clunkers. Ronald Reagan’s first pick for the post, Anne Gorsuch (Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch’s mother), implemented deep budget cuts, tanked staff morale, and ended up getting cited for contempt of Congress. (To clean up her mess, Reagan called Ruckelshaus back; hence the kink in the count.) [Donald Trump](#)’s first E.P.A. administrator, Scott Pruitt, produced an even bigger—or, at least, more bizarre—public-relations debacle. He was investigated for, among other things, charging the agency for first-class flights, travelling with a security detail to Disneyland, and installing a soundproof “privacy booth” in his office at a cost to taxpayers of more than forty thousand dollars. When he resigned, in the summer of 2018, Carlos Curbelo, then a Republican congressman from Florida, called Pruitt’s tenure “an embarrassment.”

Among this not so august company, the E.P.A.’s current administrator, Lee Zeldin, still stands out. In the two months since he was confirmed, Zeldin, a former Republican congressman from Long Island, has announced his intention to roll back dozens of environmental rules and to shrink his agency’s spending by two-thirds. Reportedly, he wants to eliminate the E.P.A.’s scientific-research arm, which employs more than a thousand people. In a two-minute video released earlier this month, Zeldin, wearing a green striped tie, seemed to go so far as to renounce the agency’s foundational purpose. The E.P.A., he said, would work to “lower the cost of living,” by making it cheaper to buy a car, heat a home, and run a business. Nowhere, the *Times* noted, “did he refer to protecting the environment or

public health.” Zeldin’s assault on the E.P.A. is so broad that it could affect everything from arsenic pollution to zebra-mussel control. But the administrator has trained his heaviest ammunition on efforts to limit climate change.

The same day that Zeldin released his video, he published an op-ed in the *Wall Street Journal* in which he boasted of “driving a dagger through the heart” of climate regulation. To carry out this bloody deed, the E.P.A. is planning to rescind a set of [Biden](#)-era rules aimed at curbing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from power plants, unravel another set of rules aimed at curbing emissions from cars and trucks, and revise the way that the government assesses the damages of climate change. (This last move involves the so-called social cost of carbon.) Most gruesomely of all, the E.P.A. wants to revisit what’s known as the “endangerment finding.”

The finding, issued by the E.P.A. back in 2009, labelled CO<sub>2</sub> and other greenhouse gases a threat to the public’s health and welfare, and this, in turn, became the basis of the agency’s efforts to regulate them. The finding relied on scores of peer-reviewed studies and on voluminous reports by groups such as the National Research Council. Since then, the United States has experienced one climate-related calamity after another—including, most recently, the Los Angeles fires—and the evidence that increasing CO<sub>2</sub> levels are dangerous has only become more overwhelming. “There is no possible world in which greenhouse gases are not a threat to public health,” is how Kim Cobb, a climate scientist at Brown University, put it to the Associated Press.

With the help of the E.P.A., the Trump Administration is doing everything it can to make emissions grow again. It is bestowing favors on the fossil-fuel industry, by, for example, opening up more land in Alaska for oil drilling. It is also kneecapping the industry’s competitors: the President, in an executive order issued on his first day in office, announced that he would halt leases for offshore wind development. The other day, on social media, he said that he wanted the country to burn more coal, the most carbon-intensive fuel.

Undoing regulations of any sort—lawfully, at any rate—is an arduous and time-consuming process. The first Trump Administration went about the effort so sloppily that, more often than not, it lost in court. The same could be the case with “driving a dagger through the heart” of climate regulation; ultimately, the victim may survive. But the E.P.A. could squander years on the endeavor. The task of limiting climate change, meanwhile, could not be more urgent. Last week, the World Meteorological Organization released its annual “state of the global climate” report for 2024. It noted that signs of human-induced warming have “reached new heights,” with consequences that will be “irreversible over hundreds if not thousands of years.”

One person who seems to have foreseen this disaster is Ruckelshaus, who died in 2019. The E.P.A.’s first administrator was probably better known for his subsequent role as Deputy Attorney General. Ruckelshaus resigned from that post on October 20, 1973, when Nixon tried to get him to fire the Watergate special prosecutor. (The events that led to his resignation became known as the Saturday Night Massacre.)

In the summer of 2016, Ruckelshaus grew so alarmed at what he was hearing from then candidate Trump that, together with another former Republican E.P.A. leader, William K. Reilly, he endorsed [Hillary Clinton](#). “That Trump would call climate change a hoax—the singular health and environmental threat to the world today—flies in the face of overwhelming international science,” the two men wrote in a statement. Speaking to *Greenwire* shortly before the election, Ruckelshaus predicted that, if Trump won, he would appoint someone to lead the E.P.A. “who didn’t believe in it and would try to dismantle the agency.” He added, “I think Trump is scary.” ♦



*Elizabeth Kolbert*, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 1999, won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction for “[\*The Sixth Extinction\*](#).” She is also the author of “[\*H Is for Hope\*](#).”

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[Georgia Postcard](#)

# The Art Works in Flannery O'Connor's Attic

In an old Georgia mansion, a team of the writer's devotees found a dusty wooden box: inside were two dozen of her never-seen oil paintings.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

March 24, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

In May of 2023, about two dozen small paintings were discovered in a box in the attic of a two-hundred-year-old clapboard mansion in Milledgeville, Georgia, where the writer Flannery O'Connor lived between the ages of eight and twenty-one. They were her work. The house's most recent occupant, Louise Florencourt—lawyer, pack rat, and protector of her cousin

Flannery's legacy—had died the previous summer, at ninety-seven. Relatives, academics, and acolytes duly sifted through the decades of family debris. The other day, Bruce Gentry and Sarah Gordon, the current and the former editors of the *Flannery O'Connor Review*, and retired professors of English at Georgia College & State University, in Milledgeville, poked around the house with a visitor. The college put the works on display this month.



*Paintings by O'Connor, nineteen-thirties to forties, oil on board. Art works by Mary Flannery O'Connor / Courtesy Georgia College & State University; Photographs by Anna Gay Leavitt*



On the way over, the two compared notes on “Wildcat,” the 2023 O’Connor bio-pic that Ethan Hawke directed. “It has five hundred factual errors in it,” Gentry said, singling out O’Connor’s supposed crush on the poet Robert Lowell, whom she met at Yaddo. “But it does capture the tension between mother and daughter, which appears in some form in almost every story,” he said. “Even if the characters are male.”

“I refuse to see it,” Gordon said of the film. She’d watched an interview with Laura Linney, who played Flannery’s mother, Regina. “She said Regina sent her daughter North to college. Well, I just almost went up in flames right then. I mean, she went to college here.” She went on, “I knew Regina, and I knew she was a pistol and she took pride in what Flannery did. But it is doubtful that she understood much of it.”



“They had a peculiar relationship,” Gentry added. “But she allowed Flannery to just write. Flannery would box up her laundry at the Iowa Writers’ Workshop and send it back to Regina to wash it.”

“Her uncle gave her bourbon to bring to Iowa,” Gordon said. She wrote to her mother once, “I drank at a college party. But don’t worry I only had three martinis.”



The group arrived at a white federalist-style house that had seen better days. Inside was “a few theses’ worth of stuff,” Gentry noted, picking up a sheaf of paper in a musty parlor room—sheet music for the 1917 song “Joan of Arc, They Are Calling You.” There were books on Catholicism (“Signed Ones in Plastic,” a label read); scholarly works on O’Connor; and, hanging in Louise’s closet, three chiffon evening gowns. “Straight out of Faulkner’s ‘A Rose for Emily,’ ” Gordon said.

They entered a dining room with panelled walls and a long table. “This makes me think of her story ‘The Crop,’ ” Gentry said. “It’s about a woman

writer struggling to get started with a story. There are references throughout to the big house that she lives in, with all these relatives who are constantly calling her away from her writing and who think she's silly."

They paused in O'Connor's teen-age bedroom. A suitcase with her name and address on it sat beside a single bed. An old radio occupied a desk with a small lamp. A book called "Nathalie's Chum," from 1902, rested on a table beside a pair of white gloves and a cross. Gentry peered inside a wardrobe. "At Andalusia," Gordon said, referring to the farm that O'Connor later moved to, "three books about homosexuality, which Flannery had obviously hidden, were found behind a bookcase."



O'Connor lived in the Milledgeville house with at least eight others, and Gentry explained that she'd seek refuge in the attic. Sometimes she played Monopoly on a stairway landing, halfway up, with her cousins. A sampling of the attic's current contents: a bottle of "Glycerin Tonic Comp.," Thomas Mann's "Joseph in Egypt," tax records, loose hay, and a toilet seat affixed to an old chair. Did attics figure in O'Connor's œuvre? "Not as much as barns," Gentry said. "But, in 'The Lame Shall Enter First,' a child commits suicide in an attic so that he can be reunited with his mother."

A desk had once sat near an attic window overlooking the yard and a duck pond. The box of paintings, oil on board, had been discovered near it. They were done in a quick and loose style, depicting faces with exaggerated traits: snuff-stained lips, protruding teeth, long yellow hair. “They’re all done with her satirical, sarcastic eye,” Gentry said. “Very Flannery.” Also in the box: a diagram of a human eye, a golf ball marked with O’Connor’s initials, and a few images of a Colonial figure captioned “Lord Flannery,” the nickname she gave herself as a child. “One thing Flannery never lacked,” Gentry said, “was confidence.” ♦



*[Charles Bethea](#), a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2008. He covers crime, politics, food, local media, and the American South.*

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[On the Mat](#)

# Alabaster DePlume Grapples with It

The saxophonist and jazz poet (real name Angus Fairbairn) hit the jujitsu mat at a Wall Street dojo.

By [Nick Paumgarten](#)

March 24, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

The invitation read, “Down to do some jujitsu with a jazz-poet and redefine your concept of dignity?” Sure is a lot going on there, pal, but, O.K., why

not?

The day arrived, and the recipient found himself at a Brazilian-jujitsu gym near Wall Street, donning, for the first time in his life, the loose-fitting martial-arts uniform known as a *gi*. The word “*TRIAL*” was written on the *gi*’s belt, denoting the novice’s provisional status. To the other fighters, he was the Trial Guy.

The jazz poet, already on the mat, practicing chokes from the mounted position, was Alabaster DePlume, a forty-four-year-old recording artist from Manchester, England. He plays saxophone (jazz) and speak-sings his lyrics (poet) to often-improvised accompaniment. The approach and even the sound can bring to mind Van Morrison’s “Astral Weeks,” though the songs are often political (“I Was Gonna Fight Fascism”) or earnestly affirming (“Don’t Forget You’re Precious”). His real name is Angus Fairbairn, but a dozen years ago, when he was walking in London in some flamboyant clothing, he heard, from a car speeding by, a man shouting an insult at him, which sounded to his ears like “Alabaster DePlume.” It being his nature, or maybe his practice, to convert negative feelings and experiences into positive energy, as one might do with an opponent’s gambits on the mat, he adopted this as a nom de guerre—and de plume.

DePlume was in town prepping for a tour in support of his new album, “A Blade Because a Blade Is Whole.” Three years ago, he started doing jujitsu whenever he could, which was never enough. (“I come back from a tour and everyone else has new belts,” he said.) The discipline gave him clarity and solace, after some personal troubles, and it figured into some of the songs on the album.

Tall and lean, with bright eyes and a mischievous grin that recalled Peter O’Toole in one of his friskier moods, DePlume switched positions to lie on his back on the mat, beneath a partner. The instructor, Thiago, told the Trial Guy to straddle a young blue belt named Eric, who began to teach him some moves from the mount. “Are you ready to choke someone?,” DePlume called out. “Get a little strangle in! They won’t strangle themselves.” After a while, everyone switched partners, and suddenly the Trial Guy was rolling with Chad, a sweaty young man with a mouth guard.

Five minutes of full-on grappling, a tangle of limbs and toil that felt a little like a fight for survival: concept of dignity redefined.

Nearby, DePlume was rolling with a bulldog of a man and whispering comments to himself with a gentleness that seemed almost carnal. “One thing at a time.” “Yes.” “What are you going to do now?” “Yes.” Afterward, he sat down on the mat and, resting his head on the Trial Guy’s shoulder, said, “If I try to do one of the things I’ve learned to do, it’s a symptom of my failure to be present.” He was talking both about making music and doing jujitsu: better to react without thinking. “When you’re rolling with someone, as soon as you’re *trying* to do a thing, you’re fucked. It’s like playing music. What’s the opposite of sleep? It’s trying to sleep.”

In the locker room, DePlume undressed and put on many necklaces and rings, a T-shirt reading “Sonic Liberation Front,” a kaffiyeh, and a sweeping topcoat, while he answered the other fighters’ questions about himself. On the back of his left hand, he had a tattoo of six stick figures in a row. “These are the people I have been in the past and that I have killed off, rejected, and denied,” he said. “I could tell you all about them, but I don’t wish to. I don’t need to treat them with cruelty anymore.”

He shouldered his saxophone case. Eric the blue belt, who works in real-estate finance, led the way to a café in an old bank on Exchange Place. The grapplers had coffee and talked of humility and acceptance, and of the act, as DePlume put it, of “graciously receiving” remarks and experiences, be they good or bad, as one might absorb the efforts of another fighter. “What do I mean?” DePlume paused. “Being glad.” He recited some verses of “Thank You My Pain,” a song on the album. Then he said, “I was recently having dental surgery, remembering this: it is rude to escape from your pain. The pain has made time for me.”

The Trial Guy, though loath to seem rude, noted some fresh aches: hip flexors, ribs, mat burn on the tops of his toes.

“I always tell the Trial Guy,” DePlume said, “the Trial Guy is making more courage than the rest of the room put together.” He spoke into the Trial Guy’s recording device. “To you who is listening, who is a different you from the one who sits with me, and who knows something that the you who

sits with me now does not yet know: you are amazing, you are magnificent.” ♦



*[Nick Paumgarten](#), a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2000.*

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[Side Hustle Dept.](#)

# Carol Leifer Can Make You Funny

In a new book, the “Seinfeld” and “S.N.L.” writer shares the secrets to the perfect toast: don’t drink too much, and, remember, the Gettysburg Address was only two minutes long.

By [Emma Allen](#)

March 24, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

Carol Leifer, the prolific sixty-eight-year-old comedian and television writer (“S.N.L.,” “Seinfeld,” “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” “Hacks,” etc.), has many skills. One, perhaps unsurprisingly, is delivering funny speeches, a gift for which she’s now giving back, with a book titled “How to Write a Funny Speech . . . for a Wedding, Bar Mitzvah, Graduation & Every Other

Event You Didn't Want to Go to in the First Place,” co-written by Rick Mitchell. Another talent: dancing, which might come as a surprise to those who’ve heard the rumors that the rhythm-challenged “Seinfeld” character Elaine is based on Leifer, who dated Jerry Seinfeld in the late seventies.

The other day, Leifer—“schlubbed out,” as she put it, in a white hoodie and glasses—sat in her office in front of a cue card for a Bob Hope special she appeared on (“Hope: Milton, you played them all, didn’t you?”), a poster for “A Hard Day’s Night,” and photos of the Beatles, whose 1966 Shea Stadium show she attended. (She had also just gone to a Paul McCartney concert at the Bowery Ballroom with Seinfeld.)

Her book has some handy rules. For instance, “Don’t drink too much,” “Keep it classy,” “Avoid platitudes,” and “Keep it under five”—“the Gettysburg address was 272 words, and it lasted around two minutes,” she writes. “There’s a reason Lincoln’s on the penny.” She noted that, although there are a lot of books about speechwriting, they’re mostly “from the fifties, on how to do a thing at the Diners Club.” She went on, “The point of the book was that anybody can give a good speech. It really isn’t that hard, and it’s really not that hard to make it funny, even if you’re not a professionally funny person.”

“How to Write a Funny Speech” does draw from the comedy playbook. Leifer invokes such Catskills terms as “callback,” “the rule of three,” and “runners,” as well as advice such as “Always be ready to pivot” and “A lot of time, profanity is a crutch.” “Standup is essentially a speech every night,” she pointed out. “The funniest question I get as a standup is ‘Do you hear the audience when you’re up there?’ It’s, like, Do I hear the audience? I have a stethoscope on the audience the entire time.”

In 1982, Leifer opened for the Beach Boys, and the band broke a number of cardinal rules of both entertainment and etiquette. “First of all, they would tune up while I was on,” she said. “I had to go backstage after the first show and say to them, ‘Beach Boys, can you please not?’ ” When it comes to speeches, she said, “if you’ve asked people to give a speech and you put this pressure on them to go out of their comfort zone, you have to create a really nice environment.”

In the book, she tells of a friend seeking help writing a toast for her daughter's wedding. Leifer asked some of her go-to questions: What's a funny story about the happy couple? What are the best and weirdest things about them? What outrageous things have they done? What loving or generous things? The mom's resulting speech was sweet ("As a little girl, she didn't love playing with dolls; she preferred playing with snails from our garden. You laugh, but, trust me, I saved a ton on Barbies"). As a control, Leifer fed the same anecdotes to A.I. and got a speech riddled with clunkers ("I tell you, she had more gastropod friends than human ones!").

Some people are naturals. "Barack Obama, he's the master," Leifer said. "The power of what he was talking about not only came through, but with eloquence and grace." President Trump, on the other hand, "violates a giant rule of speech-making, which is whoever you're speaking to, you need to be inclusive. That makes a good speech, because you're not alienating half the audience." (Ergo, don't tell a filthy frat-house tale with grandparents present.)

Leifer, who estimates that she's given between twenty-five and thirty nuptial toasts, hasn't ever bombed at a wedding, though she did have an early bad experience at a comedy club: "A guy was heckling me and I thought he was doing a Darth Vader voice." From the stage, she riffed on his "impression." "You know what's coming—he had a voice box, because he had throat cancer."

Larry David is an excellent speech-giver, Leifer said, "because people know his character, and the parameters of what he can get away with are that much bigger—he can go off the rails where normies can't." Leifer asked David to speak at her second wedding, but he declined, saying that the stress would ruin his morning golf game. Jay Leno and Bill Maher did speak, "and they were both killer." But the biggest laugh that evening, Leifer recalled, was for a bit she wrote for her non-comedian wife: "My wife said, 'Carol, you are the most loving, warmest, most beautiful, caring person I could ever meet.' And then she tore up the paper and said, 'Ah, enough with Carol's draft.' " ♦



*[Emma Allen](#) is The New Yorker's cartoon editor and edits humor pieces on newyorker.com.*

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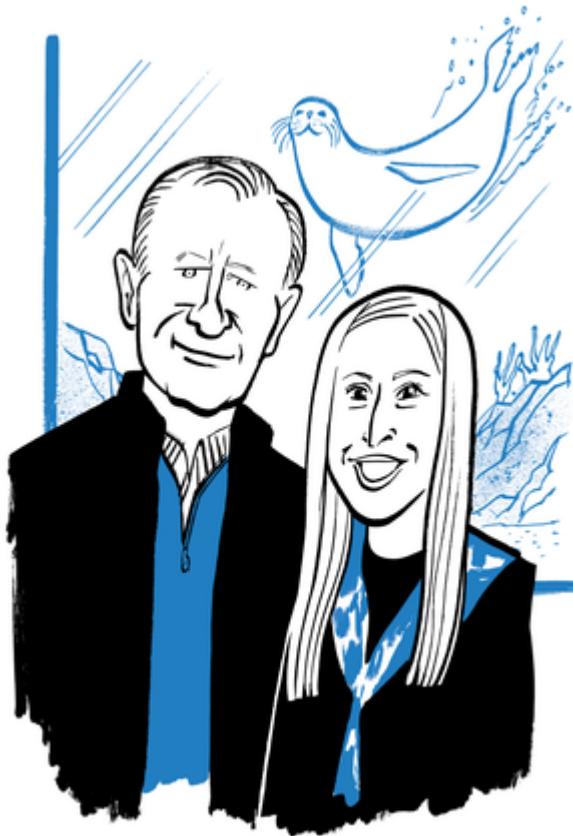
[Young Readers Dept.](#)

# Story Time with the Man Who Oversaw *SEAL* Team Six

After a military career that included helping take out bin Laden, Admiral William McRaven has assembled a new squad: Caring Cow, Persevering Penguin, and Forgiving Frog.

By [Mark Yarm](#)

March 24, 2025



*Illustration by João Fazenda*

You'd think that William H. McRaven, the former commander of the U.S. Special Operations Command, would be most famous for directing

Operation Neptune Spear, the 2011 raid that resulted in the killing of Osama bin Laden. But he sees it differently. McRaven, a sixty-nine-year-old retired four-star admiral, said the other day, “I’m best known for telling people to make their bed.”

McRaven was at the New York Aquarium in Coney Island to talk about his second children’s book, a sequel to his 2011 title, “Make Your Bed with Skipper the Seal.” That volume was a spinoff of a commencement address he gave in 2014, at the University of Texas, sharing wisdom gained during basic training to become a Navy *SEAL*: “If you want to change the world, start off by making your bed.” The speech went viral and became the basis for McRaven’s first book, “Make Your Bed: Little Things That Can Change Your Life . . . and Maybe the World.” The second kids’ title, “Be a Hero with Skipper the Seal,” is based on McRaven’s book “The Hero Code: What It Takes to Rise to the Occasion.”

He was visiting the aquarium with his thirty-four-year-old daughter, Kelly Marie McRaven, who co-wrote the new book. In “Be a Hero,” Skipper assembles a team of other animals—Caring Cow, Hopeful Hare, Persevering Penguin, etc.—at the behest of the President, a bald eagle in a blue suit and a rep tie. “Kelly contributed most of the rhymes,” the Admiral said. The alliteration he owes to his father, who used to tell him bedtime stories about a character called Elmer the Elf.

Kelly, who wore a black dress accessorized with a colorful scarf, lives in Alexandria, Virginia, and works in national security (“I’ll leave it at that,” she said). “My favorite character is the Forgiving Frog,” she said. “He is the one that really demonstrates one of the greatest values of being a hero.”

The Admiral, who had on a gray sweater over a collared shirt, prefers the Giving Gorilla. “Not sure why, other than he’s the biggest character in the book,” he said. He himself is more of a busy beaver. “I’m on the road four or five days a week,” he said. McRaven, who lives in Austin, is a geopolitical adviser at the financial firm Lazard, sits on the boards of several nonprofits, teaches national-security decision-making at the University of Texas’s L.B.J. School of Public Affairs, and writes poetry.



*“Everything became content, then content became nothing.”*

*Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan*

Father and daughter made their way to an indoor viewing area, where a trio of California sea lions slid back and forth through the water. “Look at how hydrodynamic they are,” the Admiral said, as one glided by upside down.

In the shark exhibit, the McRavens strolled through a long glass tunnel that afforded closeup views of marine life. In Skipper the Seal’s universe, sharks are bullies. “Whether they are the sharks in your classroom or the sharks in your boardroom, you’re going to have to deal with bullies, and you can’t always run away from them,” the Admiral said. Asked what kinds of bullies he’d endured, he said, “The enemy.”

He sketched out the plot of the new book. “It starts off with a shark bullying somebody, and, of course, the Courageous Cat comes forward and stops the shark,” he said. “But, at the end, it’s the Forgiving Frog that forgives the bully.” He mentioned how, as a commander in Afghanistan, he’d apologized for a civilian-casualty situation—“a terribly egregious incident.” The takeaway: “Don’t have so much hubris that you can’t say, ‘Look, I messed up, and I need to go make this right.’ ”

The bullying talk brought to mind President Trump, whom the Admiral took on last year in an op-ed for the *Wall Street Journal*, comparing him to “a disturbed 15-year-old boy.” (McRaven was approached by Kamala Harris’s campaign as a possible running mate, but demurred: “I was flattered to be considered.”) Now that Trump is back in office, the Admiral was more diplomatic. “I didn’t vote for him. But he’s the rightful President of the

United States, and, from the military standpoint, we have an obligation to follow the orders of the Commander-in-Chief,” he said. “As long as they are lawful orders.” ♦

*Mark Yarm, the executive editor for features and special projects at PCMag, is the author of “Everybody Loves Our Town: An Oral History of Grunge.”*

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- **Dirty Projectors Creates a Symphony for a Burning World**

By Anna Wiener | Between brutal fire seasons in Los Angeles, David Longstreth wrote “Song of the Earth,” an album that captures the beauty, and the peril, of nature.

- **Medical Benchmarks and the Myth of the Universal Patient**

By Manvir Singh | From growth charts to anemia thresholds, clinical standards assume a single human prototype. Why are we still using one-size-fits-all health metrics?

- **How Police Let One of America’s Most Prolific Predators Get Away**

By Ronan Farrow | When a prosecutor began chasing an accused serial rapist, she lost her job but unravelled a scandal. Why were the police refusing to investigate Sean Williams?

- **The Deaths—and Lives—of Two Sons**

By Yiyun Li | The truth is that however I choose to express myself will not live up to the weight of these facts: Vincent died, and then James died.

**[Onward and Upward with the Arts](#)**

# Dirty Projectors Creates a Symphony for a Burning World

Between brutal fire seasons in Los Angeles, David Longstreth wrote “Song of the Earth,” an album that captures the beauty, and the peril, of nature.

By [Anna Wiener](#)

March 24, 2025



*Longstreth describes his new album as “music that feels like the natural world.” Photographs by David Benjamin Sherry for The New Yorker*

In 2020, California was swept with some of the worst [wildfires](#) in its history. One morning in September, David Longstreth woke up at his home in Los Angeles to find the sky glutted with smoke. His wife, Teresa Eggers, was three months pregnant, and the couple decided to book a last-minute

trip to visit a friend in Alaska. The Burbank airport was deserted. They boarded their flight wearing masks and plastic face shields, and discovered that they had the plane nearly to themselves. The irony of burning more carbon to escape the consequences of burning too much carbon wasn't lost on them. When they got to Juneau, the landscape was cool and lush, and the air was clear. "The idea of the forests as the Earth's lungs, it felt literal," Longstreth recalled. "What an exhalation for us." It was the end of the salmon run, and the streams were thick with decomposing carcasses; other animals had set upon them, an interspecies feast. Bald eagles and red-tailed hawks stood sentry on lampposts. "The assertiveness of nature felt different," he said. "The number of birds in the sky, in the trees—just teeming life everywhere."

Longstreth is a musician, composer, and producer, best known for his work under the band name Dirty Projectors. The group, which he started as a college student, was a paragon of the [Obama](#)-era indie-rock ecosystem. "Is there a 23-year-old alive in northern Brooklyn who's not making music right now?" *New York* magazine asked in 2009. "What are they all after? It could be that they want to be David Longstreth." He has collaborated with [Joanna Newsom](#), [Solange Knowles](#), [Major Lazer](#), and [David Byrne](#). [Björk](#), who released an EP with Dirty Projectors in 2010, called Longstreth an "idiosyncratic talent," and told me that he is "psychic in his way of writing melodies for other singers." A classically trained musician, he has a complicated harmonic language and an incredible ear for a hook. His work draws on jazz, folk, pop, classical, West African guitar music, and Slavic choral traditions: chaos on paper, but it works. "There's lots of tricky musical stuff going on, like bars and measures in odd time signatures," Byrne told me. "These things contribute to the music sounding familiar but a little off-kilter." One of Longstreth's trademarks is treating production like an element of orchestration; another is his voice, a folksy, feral tenor that he pushes until it cracks. Hrishikesh Hirway, a musician and the host of the podcast "Song Exploder," said, "I don't understand how his brain works. With other musicians, it's my job to try and get deeper into their process—it's a matter of turning up the lights. With Dave, I feel like I'm walking into a pitch-black room."

At forty-three, Longstreth is tall, left-handed, handsome, and creaturely. He scrunches into chairs with his legs folded, and drives his car in a relaxed, almost reclined posture. Lately, he has worn his dark hair short and kept an articulated mustache. He tends to dress in loose earth tones, vintage sweaters, and chore jackets. In conversation, he is sincere and thoughtful, with the open, generous demeanor more typical of someone who has recently taken a heroic dose of mushrooms. The pleasantness of his company sits unsteadily beside his reputation for being, at times, hard-driving, harsh, and unempathetic. People in his orbit repeatedly described him to me as “intense,” with varying degrees of affection and animus.

“Dave is really funny, he’s devilishly smart—what a smiley, loving guy,” Katy Davidson, who performs as Dear Nora, said. “Underneath that, there can sometimes be turmoil and tension. Those things show up in the music. He’ll take you to a beautiful place, but there will be an edge to it.” Lucy Greene, a friend of Longstreth’s from high school and college, described him as “profoundly loyal” and sensitive to others’ struggles. “If you had his admiration, it could launch a thousand ships,” she said. “But he also had the capacity to lethally wound people—to injure people in a deep, deep place. If we were to try to connect it to the artistry, I would say he really feels the full range of emotions. Some of his songs are exquisitely beautiful. It’s very plaintive, and it gets excruciating.”

In 2021, not long after the fires, Longstreth began working on “Song of the Earth,” a song cycle inspired by [Mahler](#)’s “Das Lied von der Erde,” from 1908. He had long admired Mahler’s symphony for its expansiveness and audacity. “The idea of somehow capturing an experience of Earth, human or otherwise, in a song, seemed very grandiose,” he said. We were on a walk, squinting against the haze. “But it also seemed sort of magical.”

Longstreth’s “Song of the Earth,” which will be released as an album in early April, weaves the usual elements of Dirty Projectors—guitar, drums, and four voices, including Longstreth’s—through textured orchestral music performed by the chamber group Stargaze. (The piece was developed for the group.) It is moving and unusual. André de Ridder, the conductor of Stargaze, told me that the work has “a sense of space, a sense of longing, a sense of epic journey, a sense of urgency.” Longstreth thinks of it as “landscape music,” in contrast to portrait-oriented songs about people:

“music that feels like the natural world, and feels tilted on its side, like a landscape orientation.”

Two-thirds of the way through the album is a song called “Uninhabitable Earth, Paragraph One”: a near-verbatim setting of the first paragraph of David Wallace-Wells’s best-selling 2019 book about climate change, “[The Uninhabitable Earth](#).” Longstreth had picked it up on a whim at Newark airport. He read the first page with a sense of “giddy disbelief”: after decades of decorous scientific communication about global warming, Wallace-Wells leaned into truth and terror. “I felt like I had just been slapped,” Longstreth said. At one point, trying to convey the song’s intended energy, he played me the opening to [Nirvana](#)’s “Floyd the Barber,” then pulled up photographs of a Butoh performance. This was inscrutable. “There’s irony, there’s humor,” he explained. “It’s wearing a mask to tell the universal truth.” In the book, he said, Wallace-Wells “gets a little futurist Nostradamus on it,” and predicts that, one day, there may not be art about climate change: everything will just be embedded with the emotional texture of life during environmental collapse. “He presents it as far off, but I feel like we’re already there,” Longstreth said. “The simultaneous awareness of and inability to acknowledge our destruction of the planet could be the room tone of all twenty-first-century testimony.” All songs were climate songs; all paintings were climate paintings. He pointed to “[Twisters](#)” the recent tornado film, and “The Meg,” a 2018 movie about ancient, ferocious, enormous sharks. Rihanna’s “Umbrella” was a climate song, he suggested, in the same way that “White Christmas” was a Second World War song. “This already is our art,” he said. “And ‘Song of the Earth’ is a very pastoral contribution to that conversation.”

Longstreth was raised in Southbury, Connecticut. His mother, Carolyn, was an assistant district attorney for the state, and his father, John, left a career at a community bank to study at the Yale School of Forestry, eventually becoming the director of a local Audubon center. The pair, Stanford graduates involved in the back-to-the-land movement, were birders with a D.I.Y. sensibility. They kept a vegetable garden, raised sheep and chickens, and worked constantly on their eighteenth-century home. During one renovation, they pulled up a floorboard in the entryway and found a pewter coin from the seventeen-hundreds, commemorating the founding of the

country. The family had an extensive record collection, which was Longstreth's primary exposure to music. "I know now that there was a hardcore scene in Connecticut, but we were totally disconnected from that," he said.

In 1995, Longstreth, then thirteen, taught three of his friends to play drums, bass, and guitar, and started a band called Cartesian Divers. "He wanted to be in a band, he didn't know any musicians, so he made musicians," Peter Sobieraj, a childhood friend who played bass in the group, said. "There were times we were practicing twelve hours a day." That year, Longstreth's brother, Jake, went off to college, leaving behind a TASCAM 424 Portastudio, and Longstreth began experimenting with multitrack recording. "The tapes were amazing, just the layering," Jake, now a painter in Los Angeles, said. "They were crudely played, but the ideas were so rich." In the tenth grade, Longstreth transferred from the local public high school to Phillips Academy, a private boarding school in Andover, Massachusetts. "It's almost hard to talk about how sincere I felt about studying and learning and the value of knowledge, the reliability of history," he said. "I just ate it all up."



Cartoon by Rich Sparks

He went to Yale, but felt an immediate aversion to it. "Oh, this is where the children of the very wealthy learn to trade in the signs and signals of

power,” he recalled thinking. Lonely and alienated, he dropped out after two years, and crashed with Jake in Portland, Oregon. He had begun releasing music as Dirty Projectors, and, using MySpace, booked himself a national tour, playing “ice-cream shops, people’s apartments, moms’ basements.” The following semester, under pressure from his parents, he grudgingly returned to Yale, where he studied composition. To make money, and “in a slightly Charlie Kaufman-esque spirit,” he worked part time for Domino’s. (“The only weird part was delivering pizza to Yale,” he said.) The composer Missy Mazzoli, a graduate student at the time, recalled visiting his apartment and finding the floor covered in sheet music. “There was an obsession there, and a single-minded focus, which I was always really jealous of,” she said. “I thought, This is someone who feels he can, or has to, tune the world out.\_” Longstreth regularly performed in Brooklyn, where a passionate, scrappy indie-rock scene had taken root. Bands played in warehouses, basements, and unmarked, illegal venues on the Williamsburg waterfront. There was a sense of community; the stakes felt low, and the creativity was high. “Five-dollar cover, P.B.R. in a bucket behind a folding table, one of the bands, maybe in a biodiesel school bus, from DeKalb, Illinois—and they have a saxophone player,” he recalled. It was “an actual D.I.Y. subculture incongruously blooming beneath the scaffolds of rapid gentrification.”

Yale’s music program leans heavily on the classical canon. Longstreth’s senior thesis, an opera based on the testimonies of the disciples of the Heaven’s Gate cult, for which he’d designed an original notation system, received a D. But by then he had put out five full-length albums, and was getting attention in the music press. One review, published by *Pitchfork* in 2004, described him as “a nobrow genius, who claims to find similar solaces in the work of [Beethoven](#), [Wagner](#), [Zeppelin](#) and Timberlake.” After graduation, he didn’t want to move to New York. “It was too hard to live in big cities, and the music you would make was safe, or social, or functional in that way,” he said. “It wasn’t the product of idle experimentation, daydreaming, hours of unhurried exploration.” He wound up in Brooklyn anyway.

In 2006, Longstreth met Amber Coffman, a San Diego-based singer and guitarist. He told me, “She was this soulful, savant shredder,” as well versed

in prog rock as in nineties R. & B. Coffman moved to New York to join Dirty Projectors, and began attending practice sessions in a deteriorating Brooklyn brownstone where Longstreth lived with a revolving group of other musicians, including Phosphorescent's Matthew Houck, Ra Ra Riot's Wes Miles, and Ezra Koenig, the front man of [Vampire Weekend](#). At the time, Koenig was an English teacher with Teach for America; Longstreth recalled him leaving early in the mornings, wearing a tucked shirt, a braided belt, and a tie. "I'd never been exposed to Ivy League kids, or the East Coast at all," Coffman told me. "We were working ten- and twelve-hour days, rehearsing. No one I knew would even fathom doing that." Initially, she enjoyed it. "It's exhilarating to learn where your limits are, and push through them," she said. Longstreth described it as a "cone of focus," where everything else dropped away.

During rehearsals, Coffman and Longstreth began to fall for each other. "It totally caught me off guard," she said. "It just came over the room. It felt very innocent." At the time, Longstreth was working on "Rise Above," a reinterpretation, from memory, of a Black Flag album. The songs were written for the higher end of his own register, to strain his voice. "For me to be singing there, it's yelpy as hell," he said. Coffman, who had grown up singing R. & B., made intricate compositions more approachable. "Amber is one of the vocalists of our generation," Longstreth said. The album "Bitte Orca," released in 2009, pushed Dirty Projectors into the mainstream. By that point, the band had a relatively stable lineup, including the bassist Nat Baldwin, the drummer Brian McOmber, the multi-instrumentalist and singer Angel Deradoorian, and the vocalist Haley Dekle. Longstreth's songwriting played on sharp juxtaposition and counterpoint. "He has this amazing ability to cast a group together as one entity, like a collective voice," the artist Jacob Collier said. Onstage, Coffman, Deradoorian, and Dekle were thrilling to watch. "The harmonies of those three women were almost inhuman," the musician Tyondai Braxton told me.

More albums followed—the collaboration with Björk and, in 2012, "Swing Lo Magellan." The band played Letterman, Carnegie Hall, and Jay-Z's Made in America festival. By then, the scene had gone mainstream. Kanye West was collaborating with [Bon Iver](#); Jay-Z and [Beyoncé](#) showed up to see Grizzly Bear on the Brooklyn waterfront. Indie bands were featured in ads

for [Volkswagen](#) and [Taco Bell](#). A large mural of the album art for “Swing Lo Magellan”—a photograph of Coffman and Longstreth chatting with a neighbor—was painted on a wall near an exit of the Bedford L train. (It was an ad for an upcoming show at the bandshell in Prospect Park.) “Indie rock was in its imperial moment, it was a hot thing,” Longstreth said. “Maybe what the crowds truly longed for was something liquid and poetic and difficult to quite put a label on?”

By early 2013, Dirty Projectors had been touring for nearly a year straight. Longstreth was burned out. His artistic project had become a business, and it was in the red. He was exhausted and disillusioned. “Is it insane that the goal, at a certain level of touring, is to produce the exact same show every single night?” he asked me. As the tour came to a close, he and Coffman began looking for a new manager, with the plan to work on her solo début, then record another band album. That spring, [Noah Baumbach](#) enlisted the band members to appear in “Mistress America,” a film starring [Greta Gerwig](#) as a flamboyant, lost thirtysomething cavorting about New York with her future stepsister, a freshman at Barnard. “Greta and I wanted to depict the coolest night a college kid could possibly imagine,” Baumbach told me. “And part of that experience was getting to go backstage with a great downtown band.” In the film, Baldwin, Coffman, Longstreth, and the drummer Mike Johnson play to a packed house at the Warsaw, in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, then hop among after-parties. Onstage, Longstreth is beaming and convivial in a button-down and skinny jeans; per usual, he plays a right-handed Stratocaster, restrung and upside down. Coffman looks focussed but amused. When I watched the film recently, it felt less like a time capsule than like a fantasy.

Around 2014, Longstreth met with Rick Rubin, the producer and co-founder of Def Jam Recordings. Rubin set him up with [Kanye West](#), who at the time was hosting a series of informal songwriting sessions at his home in Los Angeles. “It was a ‘show up at this address in the Hollywood Hills at 10 P.M.’ thing,” Longstreth said. He recalls that West had recently married Kim Kardashian, and that the house, his former bachelor pad, was largely unfurnished. In each room was a different artist. Longstreth posted up near the laundry room with a laptop and a *MIDI* keyboard, and was given a folder with songs in progress, one of which was a fragment of a

collaboration between West and [Paul McCartney](#). “It sounded strange, and also classic,” he said. “I was looping it, and looping it, and suddenly thought, What if this thing had a bridge?”

A few months later, he flew to Mexico, where West was hosting another songwriting session, and added three-part vocal harmonies to the bridge he’d written. The song later became “FourFiveSeconds,” recorded by West, McCartney, and [Rihanna](#). “The small amount of time that I spent in the Kanye West world kind of blew my mind open,” Longstreth told me. West was an “inspiring figure, honestly—just effervescent creativity, energy on a level that you don’t encounter. I thought he was probably going to die soon, because of how much he was giving at every moment.” He was struck by West’s “Warholian” world view, which seemed to hold that life itself was the art work. He told me that more recent developments, such as West’s antisemitic rants on social media, were “beyond the pale.” Longstreth understood West’s trajectory, from artist to edgelord, as a contemporary phenomenon. “Kanye exemplifies the collapse of the twentieth-century ideal of avant-garde into the twenty-first-century online context,” he said. “The person who’s right on the edge.”

Around that time, Longstreth collaborated with Solange, produced an album for the Tuareg musician Bombino, and worked on an orchestral arrangement for Joanna Newsom. But it was also a period of uncertainty. He and Coffman had broken up, and the friendship was fragile. The band was on a hiatus of sorts. “I thought, The dynamic, it’s a little precarious,” Byrne, who released and performed music with the band in the late two-thousands, recalled. He’d observed frictions within the group. In any band, he said, “there’s more income for the writer than for the players and singers, and that can create great tensions.” Coffman chalked up some of the strain to Longstreth’s style as a bandleader. “For all of Dave’s gravitating toward outside-of-the-box, scrappy musicians to play this music, there was an insatiable ambition, an untethered ambition,” she said. “Dave doesn’t really have an Off button. That became a huge issue, because he also doesn’t have the ability to suss out other people’s limits, physical limits and mental limits. I think we probably could have achieved a lot of what we were doing with a little bit more balance.” Longstreth noted, “It was a combustible thing. It felt like we all, in our heart of hearts, were making concessions and

compromises we knew we couldn't sustain forever." He paused. "I guess I'm describing every rock band ever."

In Brooklyn, the indie-rock scene was giving way to something colder and more commercial. D.I.Y. venues were crowded out by condominiums and luxury stores. Artists felt pressure to self-promote on social-networking platforms. Spotify had entered the American market; [Live Nation](#) and [Ticketmaster](#), a monster conglomerate, had the events industry by the neck. Musicians found themselves struggling to accommodate a data-driven, algorithmic, corporate music culture. Longstreth felt "claustrophobic" being tied to a waning scene, and to the idea of Dirty Projectors as a rock band.

At the start of 2015, Longstreth and Eggers, who had recently begun dating, moved to L.A. There, he worked closely with Coffman, as a producer on her solo début album. "We were like family, and we were friends," he said. This went well until it didn't. Longstreth had also been working on an album; it featured Tyondai Braxton and Dawn Richard but was essentially a solo effort. When Coffman heard the music, she was floored. It was a bracing collection of breakup songs, packaged as a self-titled record by Dirty Projectors, with lyrics that swung from mournful to vicious. ("What I want from art is truth / what you want is fame / now we'll keep 'em separate and you keep your name.") She begged Longstreth not to release it, especially not under the band name. "I told him that if he did I would never work with him again," she said.

"Dirty Projectors" came out in early 2017. Coffman and Longstreth had never publicized their relationship; suddenly, fans and critics were trying to map the album's lyrics onto real life, dissecting a breakup that had happened years prior. Coffman felt humiliated and betrayed. "The agency I should have had over the narrative of my record was stolen," she told me. "I had waited my whole life to do this, and I felt I didn't get to experience it on my own terms." Eventually, she released a statement saying that she had left Dirty Projectors and ended her friendship with Longstreth. Save for the odd run-in, they have not spoken in nine years.

Longstreth is a world-builder. "The Getty Address," from 2005, is a concept album about the Eagles' Don Henley. "A song about Don Henley's suicide, and you knew you were up for something spicy," Björk said. (Henley is

alive.) Sometimes the narrative of Longstreth's work is more meta: he has said that "Bitte Orca" was intended to be "almost a kind of caricature" of the band. The self-titled album was an experiment in Warholian integration, an attempt to merge life and myth to create "a snow globe of clear feeling." (Coffman saw it as a "cowardly, vindictive piece of work." "I'm sure it was very cathartic for him," she said. "I was not touched.") The album was a bid for universality; it was received as a self-portrait. "Either I was doing some sort of trance on myself or I was really naïve about the separateness of art and life," Longstreth said. "Maybe I got into a tunnel with that album. I don't love to talk about it."



*"Maybe if we just keep having kids one of them will make enough money to send the rest to college."*  
Cartoon by Zachary Kanin

The record was a departure, too, from the version of Dirty Projectors that had crystallized in the public imagination. "This really fertile period of the Amber-Angel group defined the band in a lot of ways that maybe Dave never anticipated," Peter Berard, an executive at Domino, the band's former label, said, noting that the cover art for "Bitte Orca" featured photographs of Deradoorian and Coffman's faces. This was at odds with Longstreth's conception of Dirty Projectors as a "movable feast"—a fluid thing that followed his own musical exploration. For various reasons, his relationships with the other former band members from that era have grown brittle. "At that point in my life, I was pushing forward as hard as I could—we were trying to go somewhere, do something crazy, do something extraordinary," Longstreth told me. "I wasn't always mindful of other people's feelings." Baldwin, McOmber, and Deradoorian all declined to speak with me for this piece. (Dekle did not respond to my requests.) "I am unwilling to do any more free labor for Dave's benefit," a former collaborator wrote.

The fallout from the self-titled album was an “awakening,” and a reckoning. “I didn’t realize music could hurt people,” Longstreth said. “It was horrible. At the time, I felt misunderstood. But it was naïve and incurious of me, building these emotional worlds in song, not to imagine the actual emotional worlds of other people. Particularly the ones I love. Recognition of that brutal irony was the starting point of a journey for me.”

In 2022, Longstreth taught an online songwriting workshop with School of Song. He told the class that the self-titled album, then five years old, had been on his mind. “I lost myself making that album,” he said. “I got confused about the border between art and life.” He described a part of the songwriting process as going into “goblin mode.” (The phrase had become a kind of class meme.) “I want to live a good life, and do good for my community and the people I love, but I’m drawn into this strange relationship with a dark power,” he went on, illustrating the goblin-songwriter mind-set. “One that sometimes can make me monomaniacal, oblivious to the feelings of others, selfish.” Even so, he felt that this process was worth protecting. “Our gut decisions are smarter and truer than the choices we belabor with our conscious minds,” he said. “We might not like what we see if we allow ourselves to write this way, but that’s a question to resolve in the lives we lead as much as in the songs we write.” More recently, he quoted a short poem by Mark Leidner to me: “One does not begin a poem / one abandons one’s life.”

Longstreth works out of a studio apartment attached to his house, a drafty Victorian in Echo Park. When I visited last fall, a pomegranate tree, heavy with fruit, shaded the front stoop. Inside the studio were a Rhodes, a Wurlitzer, a baby grand piano, several guitars, a harpsichord, and, in a small wood chair, the Brazilian singer-songwriter Tim Bernardes. (“I think he’s like Elvis,” Longstreth said. “He’s as singular, expressive, and idiosyncratic in his low register as he is up in falsetto.”) Lately, Longstreth has been writing piano songs, with an eye toward making a new album. That morning, he had asked Bernardes to listen to some of the demos. Many of the recordings were made on his phone, and in some Alma, his three-year-old daughter, could be heard in the background. Bernardes, who is in his early thirties, with owlish eyes and long, wavy hair, looked enchanted.

At one point, Bernardes played a recording of Robert Schumann's "Dichterliebe," from 1840. A German tenor, operatics dialled to eleven, rang out. "This is sick. Could you sing this?" Longstreth asked Bernardes. "Imagine Elvis in the mid-seventies singing this." He played the song again, and began to warble, Elvisly, over it.

"The music I like the most is very beautiful music, but there's some small twist of poison," Bernardes said. "This has a lot, and many of your songs, too. The beauty is almost like a double exposure with some weirdness. It's not a weird song with beautiful stuff. It's beautiful songs with twisted feelings."

Things got back on track, and Longstreth played another demo: melismatic ornamentation, vocal harmonies, and shifting tonal centers. The refrain—"my feelings / are the only real things"—had been inspired by Alma's tantrums. "Could I own that?" he asked. "It's a ridiculous line."

"It isn't," Bernardes said.

"My feelings are the *only* real things?" Longstreth asked.

"I think it's very profound."

During our time together, Longstreth was in a generative moment. He had recently completed an eighty-minute orchestral score for "The Legend of Ochi," an A24 adventure film, directed by Isaiah Saxon, about a species of crypto-zoological primates who communicate through song. He'd started a Substack, Well-Tempered Zealot. The writing was good—ingenious and boggily baroque. He was working with other musicians, striving for mutual inspiration and good will. "Dave seems to be, with time, quite open, accepting, and almost seeking out a plurality of opinions and voices," Olga Bell, a periodic member of Dirty Projectors, who performs on "Song of the Earth," told me. "Good old wisdom and maturity come for all of us, right?" Parenthood had been transformative. "It's insane, the level to which emotion is just right there for me right now," he said. "I haven't felt this much change internally since I was a teen-ager." Music had always been a way for him to process emotion, and he felt preternaturally inspired. "All

that churn just makes me feel so alive,” he said. “And to see that reflected in literal life . . .” His eyes welled. “It’s just so, so lucky.”

The first version of “Song of the Earth” came together in six weeks. One of Longstreth’s practices is to write chamber-music versions of songs in progress, to better understand their arrangements. During the pandemic, he found himself returning to unused scores he had written in his twenties. “I always liked the idea of mulching them, letting them become something else, become something new,” he said. In the process, he noticed a special affinity between “ecology, wilderness, Gaia,” and orchestral music. This, in turn, influenced “Song of the Earth.” He had not set out to write about fossil-fuel extraction or planetary destruction, but “climate definitely entered the chat,” he told me. “My feelings about water and air and trees and mountains and wilderness and rain and heat had all become a bit strange and pocked.” Last year, I saw Dirty Projectors perform a version of “Song of the Earth” with the [Los Angeles Philharmonic](#). Longstreth, in a moss-green cotton suit, cut an odd silhouette against the uniform polish of the orchestra. The performance was exhilarating and unsettling. “In Dave’s work, conflict is both a huge theme and approach,” Saxon said. “It feels like there’s a battle happening.”

In 2018, Longstreth and Johnson were joined by the singers and musicians Felicia Douglass, Maia Friedman, and Kristin Slipp. (Slipp has since left the band.) Dirty Projectors performs only occasionally; all the members have their own music projects. Longstreth, for his part, was excited about the prospect of writing more concert music. He had always been drawn to “epic, multipart works that were worlds unto themselves,” like [Philip Glass](#)’s *Qatsi* trilogy or Lil Wayne’s “Tha Carter” series, and wondered if “Song of the Earth” could be the start of something bigger. The prospect of a ten- or twenty-year project was appealing.



*“He’ll take you to a beautiful place, but there will be an edge to it,”* one friend said, of Longstreth.

A few weeks after the listening session with Bernardes, Longstreth drove up to West Marin with his dog, Lou. He had two shows lined up in Point Reyes Station, a rural town with a fragile water system and world-class birding, and planned to visit his parents, who have lived in the area for almost twenty years. Driving through the Central Valley, a crucible of industrial agriculture, he found himself writing new lyrics to some older Dirty Projectors songs that he planned to perform. “A song is a living thing,” he told me. “How capacious is it? How elastic?” He compared rewriting lyrics to twice-exposed film, and to pentimento. “Like an old Giotto painting, where some of the pigment has faded,” he said. “You see a previous painting underneath the one you’re invited to regard as finished. If I’m giving the audience the opportunity—or the inconvenience—to hear two songs at once, I like that.”

Point Reyes is a small, nosy town. Outside the Dance Palace, which had the folding-chair feel of a community center, a group of concertgoers discussed whether Carolyn and John Longstreth were full-time residents or second-homers. “His mom’s a big native-plant person,” a member of the group

reassured the others. That night, Longstreth played some of the in-progress piano songs, and the entirety of “Swing Lo Magellan” alone on guitar. The performance was unpolished, even unrehearsed, but it was a warm room. Watching him felt, pleasurable, like hearing someone think out loud. Afterward, he asked his longtime engineer, Robby Moncrieff, what he thought about the show. “I think you need to practice more,” Moncrieff said.

A few days later, we drove out to the beach. It was late afternoon and overcast. We parked at a trailhead, and Longstreth, who wore a purple wool sweater over an inside-out hoodie, paused under a tree, looking for owls known to live in its branches. We followed a narrow path along a marsh, over a sand dune, and onto the beach. On my visits to Los Angeles, Longstreth had shown me around a bit—his brother’s painting studio, the art gallery where Eggers is a director—and I’d found it funny to spend so much time talking about the natural world while sitting in, or looking at, traffic. It felt like a luxury to be out of the built environment, sheltered by dramatic, snaggy cliffs.

Longstreth removed his sneakers and placed them behind some beach grass. While writing “Song of the Earth,” he’d thought often of Olivier Messiaen’s “From the Canyons to the Stars,” a symphony from 1974. “It seems to suggest a connection between the expansiveness of wilderness and the limitlessness, call it the psyche, of the human,” he said. I asked for clarification. “You’re looking up at the stars, and, you know, the stars are in your brain,” he offered, bafflingly. Later, listening to “Song of the Earth,” I thought I understood a little better what he meant. Down by the water, a man lay alone on his back, his head covered with a black shirt. “He has the right idea,” Longstreth said.

In early January, I took an evening flight to Los Angeles, planning to spend another few days with Longstreth. As we approached the greater metropolitan area, passengers began holding their phones up to the plane windows; the Palisades Fire, which had broken out that morning, glowed beneath us. A few minutes later, as the plane began its descent into Burbank, people began to murmur in alarm. A second fire, farther east—the Eaton Fire, around Altadena—had started while we were in the air. The

Santa Ana winds, which were driving the fires' spread, buffeted the plane; the pilots weren't able to land on the first attempt. When we eventually reached the tarmac, gale-force winds rocked the fuselage. At baggage claim, I called friends and asked if I could crash with them, instead of staying in Pasadena as planned. Through the sliding glass doors, I watched a woman vomit neatly into a trash can.

The following morning, the sky was dark, the air was full of ash, and the horizon was a murky crimson. My friends and I decided to leave the city. As we drove east, we passed tractor-trailers lying on the shoulder of the road, blown over by the wind. A few hours later, Longstreth and Eggers packed their car and drove to the desert, where they gathered with friends and family. "The desert is very alien," Longstreth said. "The nothingness is very existential." That day, Nonesuch announced "Song of the Earth" and released the Wallace-Wells setting as its first single. This had been scheduled for weeks, but it felt almost too apt. "Some combination of sadness—alienation—implication—whatever the word is for 'negative kismet'—for releasing this song into the world the same day as the fires destroyed so much of the city where I live," Longstreth wrote in Well-Tempered Zealot. "I can't embrace what it feels like for life and art to blur like this."

A few weeks later, we met back in Los Angeles. Echo Park is downwind from [Altadena](#), and Longstreth's block had been covered in a light dusting of toxic ash. He was in a strange headspace. The fires were still burning, and the city felt subdued. A number of his friends had lost their homes. He had spent hours in a mask and gloves, cleaning ash from between the tiles of the patio and the bricks of the house. Painter's tape lined the window frames, a makeshift sealant. Longstreth approached the situation with a kind of fatalism. "Los Angeles is always a dreamscape and an apocalypse," he said. He was underslept and over-caffeinated, in a loose and voluble state. Squirrels had got to the pomegranate tree outside his house, and fruit hung hollow on the branches.

We went to his studio, and he put on Mahler's "Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen," sung by the mezzo-soprano Janet Baker. He had first heard the mid-century recording as a teen-ager at boarding school digging around in

the music library, and immediately felt that he understood it, despite not speaking German. “There are certain singers who just have an entirely somatic quality, you feel their soul,” he said. A minute in, folded into his chair, he silently began to cry.

“Sorry,” he said, when the song ended. I had given him a tissue, and he passed it over his face. “I think there’s something, to me, about the sense of being in nature, and being at one with nature, and the way that puts you a little bit at odds with society,” he went on. “I’m not seeing a mirror of my life—certainly, when I was sixteen years old and discovering this, I don’t know how it was hitting me. But, yeah, this sense of being lost and then discovering something else, or being dead and being alive.” He was staring at the computer, where he’d pulled up an English translation of the lyrics. “The way she comes in very quiet—she emerges out of this very quiet instrumentation. She says, ‘I am.’ ” He paused, and suggested that we talk about something else. Then he began to cry again. “This is an odd involuntary reaction,” he said. “It’s very embarrassing.”

We sat together for a little while, not uncomfortably. Songs were “little imagination machines,” he told me. At their best, they could inspire others to open a door, go deeper, change their lives. He said that he wanted to read me something he’d recently written, and scrolled through notes on his laptop. “A song possesses its own internal logic,” he read, then looked up apologetically. “This is annoying, but I just want to get to the thought.” He turned back to the computer. “Every song becomes a model of an alternative world, a little allegory of what is or might be possible, a little signpost to the listener.” He gestured faintly toward the window. “Do you want to move your life a little bit more in this direction? Could you imagine a world where things are a bit more this way?” ♦



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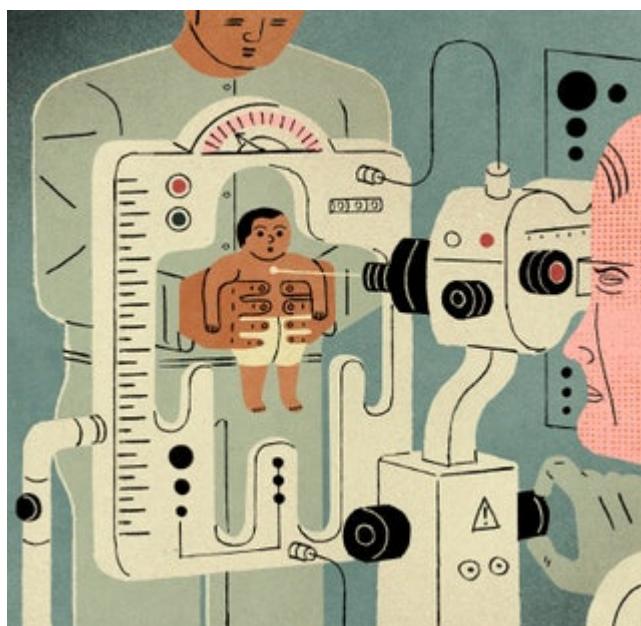
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# Medical Benchmarks and the Myth of the Universal Patient

From growth charts to anemia thresholds, clinical standards assume a single human prototype. Why are we still using one-size-fits-all health metrics?

By [Manvir Singh](#)

March 24, 2025



*Universal health standards inform the way we define malnutrition, obesity, growth abnormalities, and more, underpinning broad statistical claims. But they don't account for human diversity. Illustration by David Plunkert*

When my daughter was ten and a half months old, she qualified as “wasted,” which UNICEF describes as “the most immediate, visible and life-threatening form of malnutrition.” My wife and I had been trying hard to keep her weight up, and the classification felt like a pronouncement of failure. Her birth weight had been on the lower end of the scale but nothing alarming: six pounds, two ounces. She appeared as a dot on a chart in which colored curves traced optimal growth; fifteenth percentile, we were told. She took well to breast-feeding and, within a month, had jumped to the

twentieth percentile, then to the twenty-sixth. We proudly anticipated that her numbers would steadily climb. Then she fell behind again. At four months, she was in the twelfth percentile. At nine and a half, she was below the fifth.

Our pediatrician was worried. Ease off the lentils and vegetable smoothies, we were warned; we needed to get more calories into our babe. Ghee, peanut butter—we were to drench her food in these and other fats and wash them down with breast milk and formula. And that's what we did. When we came back a month later, though, we learned that she had dropped further—and crossed into “wasted” territory.

Was this what malnutrition looked like? She seemed to be flourishing. She was happy, adventurous, and exuberantly social, babbling incessantly and forever engaging strangers with flirtatious stares. She had cheeks as plump as the juicy clementines that she loved to eat with full-fat yogurt. Although slow to hands-and-knees crawling—scooting was her preferred means of locomotion—she was hitting most of her other milestones. She was also growing longer and longer, shooting from the twelfth percentile at birth to the thirty-sixth at ten months.

In “[Adaptable: How Your Unique Body Really Works and Why Our Biology Unites Us](#)” (Avery), Herman Pontzer, an evolutionary anthropologist at Duke University, recounts facing a similar conundrum. While Pontzer was visiting a semidesert village in northern Kenya to study the Daasanach pastoralists, a German charity representative told him that the community was being devastated by malnutrition. Charity workers had plotted the heights and weights of Daasanach children on World Health Organization charts—the same ones our pediatrician used to monitor my daughter’s growth—and determined that more than two-thirds of the kids were malnourished. As a result, families were enrolled in a nutrition program and provided with high-calorie, industrially processed supplements. Yet, as with my daughter, the numbers didn’t align with ordinary observation.

“Everywhere we went, children were running, playing, and laughing,” Pontzer writes. “Kids being kids. They didn’t seem low on energy, nor did they seem particularly short, or ‘stunted.’ ” He saw no other signs of

chronic starvation, such as bloated bellies or reduced fertility among adult women. The kids were slim, but in the lanky way typical of so many East African pastoralists.

When Pontzer and his team tracked the growth of Daasanach children, they uncovered patterns that sharply diverged from the W.H.O. curves. At around age two, these kids gain height at rates seldom seen elsewhere in the world. At five, they stand taller, on average, than well-fed kids in Europe and North America. At the same time, they put on weight more slowly, developing lean physiques that are optimal for heat dissipation. Where the German charity diagnosed deficiency, Pontzer saw adaptation.

“Adaptable” offers an engrossing, richly informative exploration of human biological diversity. By revealing how our variable bodies respond to a wide range of environments, it challenges us to rethink universal health benchmarks. These standards inform everything from how we define malnutrition and micronutrient deficiencies to how we estimate the risks of growth abnormalities, metabolic disorders, and cardiovascular dysfunction. They drive global funding priorities, shape international aid programs, and inform social policies. They guide individual clinical assessments, like my daughter’s, and underpin broad statistical claims: seventeen per cent of humans are zinc-deficient; nearly a quarter of Asian-Pacific children are stunted. Yet these benchmarks rest on a monolithic image of human health—a prototypical *Homo sapiens* whose vulnerabilities remain unchanged across climates and genetic histories. We’ve entered the age of neurodiversity, precision medicine, and “bio-individuality,” but we still assume that malnutrition looks the same in Cologne as it does in rural Kenya. Is it time to move beyond the model of the universal patient?

For decades, pediatricians relied on growth charts for infants and young toddlers which were wildly and obviously flawed. The W.H.O. had endorsed standards developed by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics based on data from a single American community—Yellow Springs, Ohio. There were questions about their relevance for children elsewhere in the country, let alone the world. But when the W.H.O. released new child-growth standards, in 2006, it appeared that we at last had a truly global benchmark, drawn from studies of children across five continents.

The coördinating team recruited participants from six far-flung locations: Oslo, Norway; Muscat, Oman; Pelotas, Brazil; New Delhi, India; Accra, Ghana; and, as it happens, the city where I live, Davis, California. The researchers maintained strict inclusion criteria—tracking only breast-fed children born to well-off, nonsmoking mothers. The resulting charts gained remarkable traction. By April, 2011, a hundred and twenty-five countries had adopted them, and the United Nations treated them as the new gold standard. Implementation was costly, often requiring countries to overhaul child-health records, retrain medical personnel, and acquire new measurement equipment.

These standards seemed authoritative in part because of their vaunted universality. As the project coördinators wrote in 2006, the standards could be used “to assess children everywhere, regardless of ethnicity, socioeconomic status and type of feeding.” The coördinators also noted a “striking similarity” in the data collected among the six sites, which, given the “built-in ethnic or genetic variability,” affirmed “the standards’ universal applicability.”

Yet how much variability was there, really? The W.H.O. didn’t publish detailed ethnicity information, but, at the time the data were collected, most residents of Oslo, Pelotas, and Davis were of European ancestry. Africa, with more genetic diversity than any other continent, was characterized by a single site. Pacific Islanders, Indigenous Americans, and, most glaringly, East and Southeast Asians were not represented.

The claim of “striking similarity” was also tenuous. The team based its claim on the fact that, at every age, the average height of children at each site was within half a standard deviation of the over-all average. But by that reasoning, as the Indian pediatrician Harshpal Singh Sachdev recently observed in *The American Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, two sites could differ by as much as a standard deviation and still be considered equivalent. That’s like saying that the mean adult heights in Denmark and Taiwan exhibit “striking similarity” despite differing by more than six centimetres. Among low-income families in urban India, Sachdev noted, ambitious interventions targeting health, sanitation, nutrition, and psychosocial support have failed to increase stature by half a standard deviation,

suggesting that differences among sites may reflect disparate physiological baselines.

Beyond height, no cross-site comparisons have ever been published for other measurements, including weight-for-height and weight-for-age metrics and head circumference. Nevertheless, these metrics are regularly used for clinical and cross-national purposes, and treated as if they were universally applicable. When the W.H.O. reports that nearly one in six African children is underweight—or when the Global Nutrition Report states that 45.4 million children under the age of five are wasted—public-health policies are guided by untested assumptions.

My wife and I didn't know any of this when our daughter was first flagged for being underweight. But we had suspicions that her size might not have been as atypical as the charts implied. My wife's family, like mine, emigrated from India. Asking around, we learned that many parents of South Asian ancestry had exceptionally small children. On Reddit forums such as r/india and r/ABCDesis, we discovered parents worrying about the same issue. Two of my wife's cousins had been born smaller than our daughter.

It turned out that credible research corroborated our suspicions. A series of Stanford-led studies had analyzed millions of births in the U.S. and documented a “dual paradox”: U.S.-born women of Mexican parentage, despite having higher risk profiles than U.S.-born women of Indian ancestry, are less likely to have babies with low birth weights. That's one of many inconsistencies pertaining to size and nutrition. Take the so-called South Asian Enigma: India, Bangladesh, and Nepal exceed most sub-Saharan African countries on key health and development indicators, but their populations still fail to measure up (literally) to those in sub-Saharan Africa or the African diaspora. For instance, Haiti's infant-mortality rate is almost twice that of India's, and its per-capita G.D.P. is thirty per cent lower, yet only six per cent of Haitian children are assessed as severely stunted, compared with fourteen per cent of Indian children. You find similar disparities between affluent nations in East Asia and those in northern Europe. Japan and the Netherlands are among the wealthiest countries in the world, with first-rate health care and low disease burdens,

but some seven per cent of Japanese children qualify as stunted, compared with only about one per cent in the Netherlands.

The obvious takeaway is that factors aside from living standards—including biological inheritance—are the reason that Dutch and Haitian kids tower over their Japanese and Nepali peers. Yet many researchers have been wary of considering the possibility. In their efforts to resolve the South Asian Enigma, for example, they have busily investigated the effects of open-air defecation, maternal nutrition, and a preference for firstborn sons on the subcontinent. A team of economists examined whether the number of low-weight infants in sub-Saharan Africa who die skews height statistics.

According to Daniel Hruschka, an anthropologist at Arizona State University, none of these theories explain away the discrepancies. Hruschka has long had a personal interest in body measurements. “I consider myself pretty healthy, but if you use B.M.I. guidelines I am obese, and I’ve always wondered, What does that mean for my health?” he told me. The question inspired him to spend more than a decade dissecting anthropometric data, resulting in a slew of revealing findings. In research published in the twenty-tens, he confirmed that a single B.M.I. cutoff for distinguishing normal from obese body weight overestimates obesity, as defined by body fat, in populations with stockier bodies (Pacific Islanders, say) and underestimates it in leaner peoples (South Asians). What’s more, patterns in slenderness, such as similarities between closely related groups and between children and adults in the same group, strongly suggest that genetics plays a major role. In 2016, Hruschka and the anthropologist Craig Hadley, at Emory University, estimated that the standard B.M.I. cutoff misses roughly half a billion overweight people, including some two hundred and fifty million in South Asia alone.

After studying obesity, Hruschka turned his attention to height. In one of his most ambitious projects, published in 2020, he and his former student Joseph Hackman, now at the University of Utah, analyzed measurements from 1.5 million children across seventy countries. Using data on wealth, hygiene, nutrition, and infectious-disease exposure, they calculated each country’s “basal” height-for-age index—the starting height of children living under comparable environmental conditions. If the W.H.O. had been

right to assume that children's potential height is the same everywhere, basal height-for-age measurements should be consistent across populations.



*"Hey, I can't murder people to jazz triplets."*

Cartoon by Will McPhail

They weren't. For instance, the basal heights of children in India differed by more than a standard deviation from those of children in Haiti. Even when reared in identical environments, an Indian two-year-old would be expected to be three centimetres shorter than a Haitian two-year-old. When Hruschka and Hackman recalculated rates of severe stunting based on these findings, the estimated prevalence in Haiti more than tripled, from six per cent to twenty per cent. Similarly dramatic increases were observed in West and Central Africa. The reliance on growth charts, it seems, has hidden millions of severe stunting cases in parts of Africa.

These calculations raise another troubling possibility: estimates of stunting in other regions might be exaggerated, leading to ill-advised nutritional interventions. A 2021 study by Sachdev found that more than half of Indian children aged five to nineteen classified as "malnourished" by W.H.O. standards actually show biomarkers of obesity. "Metabolically, they are even overnourished," Sachdev told me. Where pediatricians would normally recommend cutting back on high-calorie food for such children, "here we are pushing it," he said.

This blindness to human variation affects children in wealthy countries, too. Though the W.H.O. charts are meant to spot "abnormal growth," they regularly miss growth disorders in European children. It can't help that the charts for five- to nineteen-year-olds still draw on decades-old data from the

United States. In the Netherlands and Sweden, the W.H.O. charts catch only about seventy per cent of children over the age of five with growth-hormone deficiency; country-specific charts spot around ninety-five per cent. In a 2016 study of nine European nations, the W.H.O. standards consistently failed to outperform local references—except in France, which hadn’t updated its growth charts since 1979.

So charts meant to protect children’s health may be failing them across the globe, missing growth disorders in tall populations while pathologizing normal development in shorter ones. Parents in Mumbai, Manila, and Minneapolis alike must navigate a medical system built on standards that don’t reflect their children’s physiological realities. Some children who need care may be overlooked; others are subjected to unnecessary and potentially harmful interventions.

“Our differences are obvious, even on the surface,” Pontzer observes in “*Adaptable*.” “Why should our insides be any less diverse?” It’s a reasonable question. We regularly confront the fact that different environments have the power to change us. We know that people who train at high altitudes develop greater aerobic capacity and that populations long exposed to more UV radiation develop darker skin. Pontzer catalogues a great many such examples, from East African hunter-gatherers whose life styles shield them from cardiovascular disease to Southeast Asian sea nomads with genetic adaptations that let them spend hours a day underwater. Yet international organizations continue to operate on the assumption of a universal human physiology—one that, in practice, corresponds strikingly with a Euro-American model.

Take anemia, a condition in which the blood’s ability to carry oxygen is diminished. The W.H.O. first proposed diagnostic cutoffs in a 1959 report. These measures of hemoglobin concentration, a subsequent scientific group admitted, “were chosen arbitrarily,” so new thresholds were introduced after the group reviewed five studies—on American infants, pregnant Canadian women, Norwegian adolescent males, British adults in a mining valley, and, apparently, Swedes. (There’s some uncertainty because the final set of observations was not released.) The revised cutoffs, presented in 1968, were still “somewhat arbitrary,” the authors conceded, but lines had to be drawn.

More than fifty years later, these remain the W.H.O.’s guidelines, with only slight modifications for children and pregnant women. A 2023 paper in *The Lancet Haematology* that announced that nearly two billion people were anemic relied on versions of the 1968 cutoffs.

Untold other benchmarks have similar stories. Criteria for zinc deficiency, as defined by the International Zinc Nutrition Consultative Group, are based on data collected in the United States between 1976 and 1980. Bear that in mind when you hear claims that more than a billion people are zinc-deficient. The threshold for Vitamin D deficiency is also based mostly on research involving Europeans and North Americans, leading to the claim that ninety per cent of Indians lack sufficient Vitamin D, despite the subcontinent’s abundant sunlight.

Why insist on a universal standard? In part, it has been a matter of practicality. For decades, establishing population-specific benchmarks required extensive data collection, statistical modelling, and clinical validation—efforts too costly for most countries to undertake. International organizations like the W.H.O. provided usable, if imperfect, alternatives. But these constraints are disappearing. With vast survey data sets and advanced analytical tools, studies such as those by Hruschka and Hackman reveal population-level patterns that can inform more tailored benchmarks. Meanwhile, scientists in low- and middle-income countries are testing whether inherited global cutoffs line up with local realities. As the barriers to measuring human variation fall, so does the rationale for a one-size-fits-all model.

Even with these advances, Pontzer suspects another reason for the reluctance to discuss biological variation: “Differences are dangerous.” Throughout history, claims of inherent disparities have fuelled oppression, from the justification of slavery to the forced sterilization of the poor. Well-intentioned efforts to account for variation have sometimes harmed marginalized groups. Beginning in 1999, a standard equation for measuring kidney function included a “race coefficient,” which systematically overestimated kidney health in Black patients. As a result, many Black people were referred to specialists belatedly or deemed ineligible for treatments like kidney transplants. In 2021, when the National Kidney

Foundation and the American Society of Nephrology recommended removing race from these calculations, more than a million Black Americans were immediately reclassified into more severe stages of kidney disease.

The failures of race-based medicine aren't an argument for ignoring physiological diversity. Pretending that differences don't exist doesn't make them disappear; it only drives practitioners to rely on flawed intuitions. Familiar racial categories do a poor job of tracking ancestry and genetic variation. Yoruba people, in Nigeria, and Bench people, in Ethiopia, both qualify as Black, yet genetically they are further apart than an English person is from a Tamil. Instead of clinging to dubious classifications that obscure variation, we would be better served by developing methods that account for people's distinctive ancestry and lived environment.

In January, we celebrated our daughter's first birthday. For reasons of happenstance, we were seeing a new pediatrician for her twelve-month visit. We felt confident. We had ramped up feeding efforts, watching with satisfaction as our daughter's thighs plumped and her round belly spilled over the waistband of her diaper. Admittedly, every previous visit to the pediatrician's office had begun with the same sense of achievement—only to be deflated by troubling percentiles. But this time she looked particularly pudgy.

"Seventeen," my wife whispered, stealing my guess.

"Sixteen pounds, seven ounces," the nurse read, squinting at the scale. *Not bad*, I thought.

When the pediatrician entered, he handed us printouts of familiar curves, each marked with a dot representing our daughter: sixth percentile for both weight-for-age and weight-for-height. He asked how these numbers compared with her previous measurements. As we answered him, he stared at the charts, seemingly wrestling with the severity of the situation. Then he said that he was referring us to a dietitian.

Despite ordering a weight check in six weeks and several blood tests, though, he didn't appear to be visibly troubled. It was as if he, like us, saw

two versions of our daughter—the one sitting before him, gleeful and energetic, and the other on the chart, abstractly a cause for concern. Not knowing which to trust, he deferred the verdict to someone else.

Such uncertainty is inherent to medical inference. A heavy baby might just be big-boned; a small one, slim but robust. Yet the reliance on universal benchmarks has widened the disconnect between bodies and their measurements. Resistant to acknowledging population differences, these standards often flag healthy bodies as worrisome and look past malnourished ones. As a result, hundreds of millions of people—often in the poorest countries—are mislabelled, while tools like the W.H.O.’s growth standards, stretched to fit all of humanity, prove less effective than local alternatives. Paradoxically, these efforts sometimes undermine their own goals, concealing, and at times exacerbating, the afflictions of the most vulnerable.

In mid-February, we met virtually with the dietitian. She asked about our feeding routine—which foods, when, how much breast-feeding—and watched as our daughter clambered from my wife’s lap onto the table, reaching for the computer. The dietitian didn’t refer us to another specialist or dwell on percentiles. Instead, she assured us that our daughter was O.K. Petite, yes, but “holding her own.” Besides, she confirmed, many Indian children tend to be smaller. Still, she advised us to keep feeding her well and often, to add butter and the like whenever we could, to stay vigilant.

Maybe in a decade, the one-size-fits-all curves will give way to standards that recognize the different shapes of different populations, and the advice will shift to match. But, for now, we live in the space between two realities—the numbers on a spreadsheet and the child in our arms. ♦

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[A Reporter at Large](#)

# How Police Let One of America's Most Prolific Predators Get Away

When a prosecutor began chasing an accused serial rapist, she lost her job but unravelled a scandal. Why were the police refusing to investigate Sean Williams?

By [Ronan Farrow](#)

March 24, 2025



*MiKayla Evans fell five stories from a window in Sean Williams's apartment. Williams is now accused of sex crimes against more than sixty people. Photographs by Philip Montgomery for The New Yorker*

In the middle of November, 2020, Kat Dahl, a federal prosecutor in Johnson City, Tennessee, received an unusual assignment. Dahl had been appointed

by the Department of Justice to work with the Johnson City police. Almost all her cases involved “run-of-the-mill” federal charges related to the possession of drugs or firearms, Dahl told me. She had little experience with the detectives in the Criminal Investigations Division who usually handled state charges related to crimes like robbery and assault.

That day, Investigator Toma Sparks summoned her into the four-desk bullpen of C.I.D. Sparks and another officer, David Hilton, told Dahl that they wanted her to look into the case of a local businessman named Sean Williams. Williams, who was forty-nine, owned Glass & Concrete Contracting, which specialized in restoring historical buildings; he and his workers rappelled down their façades, limiting the need for scaffolding and earning him the nickname Spider-Man. Williams was well known in Johnson City, a community of some seventy-five thousand people in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. On a busy street downtown, he had a glass-fronted garage that housed a red Ultima GTR sports car and a rope swing. On one wall was a neon-hued mural showing Williams surrounded by gigantic cartoon breasts. Johnson City is a college town, home to East Tennessee State University, and many locals told me that they knew Williams as the host of wild parties at his fifth-story, three-thousand-square-foot condo, a block from the garage. After nearby bars closed, people would head to Williams’s apartment, where he kept such curiosities as drones and exotic reptiles, as well as a seemingly endless supply of alcohol and cocaine, which he served from a large pepper grinder.

The detectives told Dahl about an incident that had taken place at the apartment two months earlier. That night, a thirty-two-year-old woman named MiKayla Evans had gone with a friend of hers to Williams’s garage, where Williams was drinking with several people, including his best friend and occasional roommate, Alvaro Diaz. At one point, Williams began pushing Evans on the swing. She later told me that, although she’d had only a few beers and a single shot earlier in the evening, she began to feel woozy, and her memories of the night abruptly ended. “I don’t remember walking back down the street,” she said. “I don’t remember going up the elevator, or being in his apartment.” In the end, Evans fell five stories from Williams’s window. The impact was so loud that people in a restaurant around the corner thought it was a gunshot. Evans’s next memory was of

waking up from a coma in a hospital bed more than a week later. She had fractured more than a dozen bones, including in her skull and back, and had dislocated her elbow. Hours after the fall, police officers had searched Williams's apartment and seized more than two hundred rounds of ammunition. Williams had a felony conviction from the nineteen-nineties, for growing marijuana, and it was illegal for him to possess firearms or ammunition.

Dahl, who was twenty-nine and a Special Assistant U.S. Attorney, had been in her job for just over a year. She had found that federal authorities typically showed little interest in ammunition cases in which the suspect lacked a significant criminal record and no firearm was recovered. So she was surprised when the officers asked her to pursue an indictment. When she asked for more information, Sparks said, of Williams, "We think he's a rapist." During the search, officers had photographed a long strip of paper with a handwritten list: twenty-two first names, one of which was accompanied by the word "baby," along with an entry that read "no name girl." At the top of the list was an underlined word: "Raped." In a safe, according to photos the police took of its contents, they found a baby doll that appeared to have been turned into a makeshift sex toy. Sparks also told Dahl about two previous police reports filed by women who said that Williams had sexually assaulted them. The reports, he said, accorded with a reputation Williams had in Johnson City as a predatory "dirtbag."



*"Hello? Customer service? No, I don't need anything—I just called to say hi."*  
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn

Dahl was “gobsmacked,” she told me. “I just immediately had this gut feeling that this was big.” Yet the officers didn’t seem inclined to pursue the rape allegations. “I remember asking things like ‘Have you made contact with any other victims? Have you identified any of the women on the list?’ ” Dahl said. “There just seemed to be zero interest in that. They would answer no, and hem and haw when I suggested possible tactics.” Nor did the officers exhibit much sympathy for the women involved. Hilton described the black tube dress Evans had been wearing when she fell from Williams’s window, saying, “She’s dressed like a real—well, I won’t say it.” (A lawyer for Sparks declined to comment, citing ongoing litigation. Hilton did not respond to repeated inquiries.) Dahl told the officers that she would look into the case, as long as her investigation was not limited to the ammunition charge.

Dahl, who has platinum hair and large, gentle eyes, often breaks into nervous laughter at her own remarks. But when talking about legal matters

she has a confidence that borders on intensity. By the end of her conversation with the detectives, she told me, the case had become her “top priority.” In the following weeks, she stayed up late in her two-bedroom rental house, twenty minutes’ drive from Johnson City, scrutinizing Williams’s social-media accounts and financial and property records. She combed through the names on the list, and identified several of the women. But when she urged the police to interview them they seemed to resist. “It fell on deaf ears,” she said. “They just ignored me.”

Dahl requested the police reports containing the two sexual-assault allegations against Williams, but received no reply. She asked for the reports three more times before Sparks finally provided them, weeks later. He told her that the allegations had not been followed up on because the women were unwilling to coöperate. When Dahl read the reports, however, she had a different impression.

In November, 2019, Briana Pack, who was twenty-two, was drinking at a bar near Williams’s apartment when she and a friend ran into Diaz, Williams’s close confidant, who brought them back to the apartment. After she accepted a beer from Williams, she began to feel groggy. She tried to leave, but Williams and Diaz blocked her exit. Her last memory was of sitting on a barstool. She told police that she woke up in Williams’s bed the next morning, unsure of how she got there. A friend drove her to an urgent-care clinic to obtain a drug test; it came back positive for benzodiazepines, which she hadn’t knowingly taken. Then she went to a hospital for a rape kit. (Williams has denied giving women date-rape drugs, and says that any encounters with his accusers were consensual. Diaz did not respond to repeated requests for comment and has not been charged with any crimes related to Williams.)

When Pack contacted the Johnson City police, she recalled, an officer told her, “Other women have reported similar things there. We know exactly who this guy is.” A police report filed that day refers to prior calls about Williams and asks that the case be forwarded to C.I.D. Pack said that she was eager to coöperate with an investigation, but the police failed to follow up, or to respond to calls from her, for the next year and a half. After Dahl began investigating Williams, Sparks called Pack to tell her that her rape kit

had tested positive for DNA that was not hers. (Rape-kit results are often subject to extreme delays.) Pack says that Sparks also asked her what she was wearing the night of the alleged assault. She was afraid that Williams might retaliate against her for going to the police, but when she asked if officers could provide her with protection Sparks refused, calling Williams “untouchable.” Pack nevertheless wanted to press charges, but Sparks stopped returning her calls. “I felt like they related more with him than they did with me,” she told me. “I tried to do the right thing. I wanted to protect other girls. They didn’t want to make any effort, in any way, shape, or form.”

The second sexual-assault allegation had been made by another twenty-two-year-old. In June, 2020, she had been out drinking in Johnson City when she encountered Diaz, who was a friend, and went with him to Williams’s apartment. According to the initial police report, at around three-thirty that morning she woke up with Williams on top of her. She jumped up and immediately called 911, screaming for help. When the police arrived, minutes later, she was running from the building, crying. (Williams denies having a sexual encounter with her.) Officers helped her get home and offered her a rape kit, which she declined.

Later that month, she went to the police station and gave a statement. An officer’s summary of the statement said that the incident had merely been an “attempted” rape, and that she was declining to pursue charges because she had “learned her lesson.” When Dahl read the file, she was puzzled by how meagre it was, and by how little detectives had done to investigate the allegations. “A screaming, shoeless woman runs into the arms of a cop,” Dahl said. “They don’t go up and interview Williams. They know it’s him. They never follow up. On what planet does that make any sense?” She called the woman. “I had this increasing suspicion that sexual-assault victims were being either scared off or treated in a way that made it unlikely for them to pursue charges,” Dahl told me. The woman sounded surprised to hear from law enforcement again, but she agreed to give an additional statement about the incident. Dahl accompanied her to her meeting with the police. After hearing the new details, she said, “I just remember being stunned, because the context was more harrowing than the one brief paragraph in the report.”

Dahl was born in Kansas, to an Army-veteran father and a devoutly Catholic homemaker mother, and she told me that her childhood observations of military and Church bureaucracy taught her that “institutional rot can be really toxic.” She studied musical theatre in high school, and felt drawn to stories of rebellion. (“Les Misérables” was a favorite.) In 2016, after attending college and law school in Tennessee, she moved to Washington, D.C., to work as a policy assistant for the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. Her first week on the job, she went for drinks with a friend, and emerged from being blackout drunk to find that he was assaulting her. She went to the police in nearby Arlington, Virginia, to report that she’d been raped. She says that an investigator assigned to her case was dismissive, at one point telling her, “It’s not rape if he’s drunk, too.” The interview was so caustic that a higher-ranking officer who reviewed footage of it invited Dahl back and apologized, telling her that he was “appalled.” Nevertheless, she was so discouraged that she decided not to try to press charges. The experience galvanized her desire to work in criminal justice, and, when she was offered the role in Johnson City, she leaped at it. The Williams case had a personal dimension. “It was so deeply familiar to me, the way these victims were being questioned and dismissed,” she told me. “It brought back everything I went through when I reported my assault, and I couldn’t stand to see it happening again.”

Inaction, incompetence, and bias are hardly novel in such cases. The Department of Justice has conducted several recent investigations into systematic failures in the handling of sex crimes by police departments. In 2023, the D.O.J. published a report indicating that the Louisville Metro Police had neglected to adequately gather evidence in response to claims of sexual assault and often relied on “sex-based assumptions” and “stereotyping.” An investigation into gender bias in the New York Police Department’s approach to sex crimes is ongoing. Criminologists say that police are often skeptical of women who report sexual assault if they were drinking, were at a party, or knew the assailant.

But the Johnson City Police Department’s handling of the Williams case was hard to explain through these elements alone. Dahl was especially perplexed by the response to Evans’s fall. Sparks and an officer named Justin Jenkins, who arrived at Williams’s apartment soon after the incident,

agreed to a demand from Williams that they leave and come back with a warrant, even though there is an exception to warrant requirements when evidence might be tampered with. The officers had photographed security cameras pointing at the window that Evans had fallen from, but did not secure them. They returned to the station with Williams, leaving the scene in the care of Diaz. They saw Williams accessing footage from the cameras on his phone, which they didn't confiscate until he left the station.

The police allowed Williams to return home for several hours unsupervised. During that time, Williams told me, he received a call from an employee with law-enforcement connections, who warned him that the officers were coming back. He and Diaz frantically cleaned up the apartment, hiding cameras in a closet and gathering drugs and firearms in a metal ammunition box that Williams threw out a window.

Sparks, Hilton, and Jenkins spent much of the day at the apartment. They didn't recover the ammo box or its contents. They and their colleagues never attempted to examine the contents of some of the devices they did seize, including computers, memory cards, and phones. When Dahl read the records of the search, she asked Sparks for a warrant to access the remaining devices. Two months later, Sparks submitted a draft warrant that Dahl found so vague and incomplete that she considered it "not even usable"—she believed that either a judge would reject it or any evidence gathered under it could be challenged in court. "It felt like the definition of insanity, trying to get J.C.P.D. to do more on this," she told me. "They didn't want to pursue the rape cases, because a slew of mistakes had already been made. And, if they were to fully dive in and investigate, I think some of those mistakes would have come to light. I think you would have had a whole bunch of people say, 'Well, why wasn't anything done sooner?'"

Other women continued to come forward with allegations against Williams. The month that Dahl took on the case, Kaleigh Murray, at the time a single mother of three, reported Williams to the F.B.I. In October, 2019, she had gone to a Halloween party at Williams's apartment, where she took a drink from him. Shortly afterward, she blacked out. Her next memory was of finding him passed out on top of her, naked. She later told me that the incident contributed to a mental-health crisis during which she surrendered

custody of her children. In early 2020, during what Murray called “the darkest period of my life,” Williams contacted her, and they struck up a friendship. He expressed regret about his life style and told her that he wanted to reform. Their friendship ended that November, when, she says, she snorted a line of cocaine Williams offered her and blacked out. The next thing she remembered was him holding her down and trying to manually penetrate her, first vaginally and then, when she pushed him away, anally. She told me that she waited until she thought Williams had passed out, then fled.

Murray contacted the F.B.I., rather than local police, “because I did not trust the Johnson City Police Department,” she told me. She said that she’d previously experienced sexist treatment from the department, including a frisking that she found humiliating and intrusive. Nevertheless, the F.B.I. referred the matter to a J.C.P.D. officer, who immediately informed Sparks. Though Sparks was off duty at the time, he went to the F.B.I. field office to assume control of the case. Later that day, when Sparks interviewed her, he said, inaccurately, that no other woman had wanted to pursue charges against Williams, because, as she remembered the remark, “everyone else had been too fearful.” Murray, who interpreted the comment as an effort to dissuade her, replied that she wanted to press charges. She didn’t hear from the police again for five months, at which point she went to talk to Sparks. He told her not to expect further follow-up until her rape-kit results were returned. More than four years later, she still has not received the results.

Sparks and the other detectives seemed to have no plan for pursuing Williams. Dahl suggested avenues for investigation, to little avail. “I was going home and researching and combing through social media until, like, one in the morning, and coming back to them, like, ‘I found a possible lead,’ or ‘I think you should check this out.’ I was always given the side-eye and told, ‘Kat, we’re tired of hearing about Williams,’ ” she said. “And meanwhile more victims were coming in.” At least six assaults are now alleged to have taken place between October, 2020, and the following April, as Dahl struggled to advance the case.

Dahl had been investigating for almost a month when she decided that she was at an impasse. In December, she reached out to her supervisor at the

D.O.J., Wayne Taylor, who scheduled a meeting between Dahl and officials with the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation, a state organization that Dahl hoped might provide oversight. When Karl Turner, the chief of the Johnson City Police Department, found out about the meeting, he called Taylor, furious that it had been planned without his consent. The meeting was cancelled, and Turner called Dahl into his office. Dahl recorded their meeting, in which Turner seemed indifferent to the case and rejected her suggestion that they contact women whose names matched those on the list that officers had seen at the apartment. “I don’t know if that’s girls he’s raped or girls he’s had consensual sex with and he calls it whatever he calls it,” Turner said. Instead, he proposed merely that they place cameras outside Williams’s garage. Increasingly distressed, Dahl warned Turner that, based on the baby-doll sex toy, she believed that Williams might be preying on children. (Taylor and Turner, through representatives, declined to comment. Turner has denied any wrongdoing.)

Dahl’s relationship with the police department was deteriorating. Turner contacted Taylor, Dahl’s supervisor, and told him that she had exhibited poor communication skills. In the following months, Turner continued to complain to Taylor about Dahl. Her focus on the Williams case became a running joke in the department. Once, Dahl recalls, a colleague jokingly suggested that she serve as bait, telling her, “If you’re so obsessed with this case, why don’t you go have a drink at Label”—a bar where Williams was rumored to prey upon women—“and let him take you up to his apartment, then give us a call?”

It’s not clear why officers told Dahl about the rape allegations while discouraging her from pursuing them. Dahl believes that they wanted to eliminate the increasingly visible problems Williams was creating while avoiding scrutiny of their errors in policing his more serious crimes. “A simple weapons charge was the way to do that,” she told me. Dahl was reluctant to pursue an indictment only on the ammunition case, which was not a particularly serious offense. “I was very keen to avoid anything that I thought could fail and let him get away,” she said. “But the flip side of the coin is the longer I wait, the more opportunities he has to hurt people.” She finally decided that she could wait no longer. Grand-jury hearings were

limited, owing to *COVID* precautions, but eventually, in April, 2021, she secured an indictment on the ammunition charge.

The arrest warrant was placed under seal, to reduce the risk that Williams might flee. During the next three weeks, Dahl lodged more than thirty requests with Sparks and other Johnson City police officers, asking them to arrest him. She was offered various excuses—the officers were busy, or had conflicting training schedules, or, as one officer, Jeff Legault, told her, Williams simply wasn’t a priority. (Through a lawyer, Legault said that he was aware only of the minor ammunition charge, which was not his primary responsibility.) At one point, an officer told Dahl that they couldn’t execute the warrant because they lacked the code to the front door of Williams’s building. Dahl recalled asking, “Are you law enforcement?”

Finally, in mid-May, an officer was sent to knock on Williams’s door. Williams, who was hosting a party, didn’t answer. “I could see through the peephole. It was one single cop by himself,” Williams later told me. “I called 911. I was, like, ‘What the fuck is this cop outside of my door for?’ ” During the call, an officer at the station disclosed the existence of the warrant. Williams fled the apartment, evading the officer by rappelling out of a window.

After the botched arrest, Turner pressed Dahl to focus on other cases. In a meeting that month which Dahl recorded, Turner referred to Williams as a nuisance who had already been dealt with. “He just needs to calm down,” Turner said. “He’ll get over it.” Captain Kevin Peters, who was also at the meeting, said, “I think we’ve achieved our desired outcome.” (A representative for Peters denied any wrongdoing.) But Dahl was convinced that Williams still posed a danger. “I was obsessed with Williams,” she told me. “I was, like, I don’t care. I am going to work on this as much as I want. What are they going to do? Fire me?”

A month later, Turner told Dahl that her contract would not be renewed, and that her job would be terminated in less than a week. It was an unusually blunt firing for a prosecutor in the midst of several cases, including one, unrelated to Williams, with a trial date two months away. The department later argued that Dahl had brought an insufficient number of indictments before grand juries. But Dahl’s productivity appears to have been roughly

on par with that of her colleagues. From the start of the pandemic until her firing, she secured nineteen indictments; in the same period, five colleagues working in the same courthouse brought between ten and twenty each. Dahl told me that her job performance was being judged by the uniquely harsh standards reserved for institutional whistle-blowers. “Everything that I’ve done within this job is now under a microscope,” she said.

In July, 2021, during her final days at the J.C.P.D., Dahl wrote to me using an encrypted e-mail account and a pseudonym. She told me that she was a federal prosecutor who was desperate to apprehend a serial rapist and encountering obstruction. “Worst case scenario, I believe there is a possibility that this person is being protected by local law enforcement,” she wrote. “All I want is some accountability in this case.”

Even after Dahl was fired, the Williams case dominated her life. Living in a community where she was at odds with the police took a toll. “I had joked with several friends, ‘If I get mugged downtown, congratulations to the mugger, because I’m not calling the cops,’ ” she said. She bought a .22-calibre mini-revolver, “just in case.” She supported herself with freelance legal-drafting work, and continued to investigate. Ultimately, she connected with several of the women on the list from Williams’s apartment, all of whom told her similar stories of being drugged and assaulted; they recalled feeling discouraged when they went to the police.

Even her social life was consumed by the case. Drinks and meals often became opportunities to gather leads. “It was usually met with something along the lines of ‘Oh, are you talking about the drug-dealing rapist?’ ” she said. “It became apparent pretty quickly that this was an open secret.” The day after her firing, she went on a date with a man she had met on Hinge. She mentioned the garage, and the man instantly identified Williams. “‘Oh, yeah, that guy is a creep,’ ” she recalled him saying. “‘There was a girl who got into an accident and died after she left the apartment.’ ”

This was news to Dahl. She found an obituary for Laura Shea Trent, who had died in a car crash in November, 2020. Dahl reached out to Trent’s sister Sarah, who told her that, on the night she died, Trent and her boyfriend, Noah Sedam, who was an acquaintance of Williams’s, had briefly stopped by the garage after drinks at a brewery. After they left,

Sedam realized that his phone was missing and returned to the brewery to look for it. When he came back, five minutes later, he told me, “she was just gone, disappeared, vanished.” The garage was closed. Trent’s car was nearby.

Sedam told me that, when he left Trent, she was drunk but walking and talking competently. But soon afterward she began placing frantic calls to family members, sounding incoherent and inconsolable. “She was just in such distress that she didn’t even know who she had called,” her sister Stacy told me. She drove around looking for Trent while she and Sarah tried to get their sister to describe where she was. Eventually, Trent stopped responding.

Minutes after her last call to her sisters, Trent crashed her car into a concrete traffic island, dying at the scene. Sarah told me that both Diaz and Williams later told her that Trent had gone with them and had more to drink. When I spoke to Williams, he didn’t deny that Trent may have been in his apartment. He asked, “Didn’t they do a toxicology report? Was there any sign of downers?” (Trent’s blood showed a high level of alcohol, but exhaustive testing for date-rape drugs was not carried out.)

Two days after Trent’s death, Sarah called the Johnson City police, telling them that she believed Williams had been with her sister before she died. After she named Williams, an officer told her that Johnson City lacked jurisdiction in this case, and advised her to call law enforcement in nearby Elizabethton, where the crash had happened. Elizabethton sent her back to the Johnson City police, whom she eventually again asked to look into Williams, telling them that she feared Trent had been drugged. She never heard back. But Dahl realized that Sparks had assigned her the Williams case within a day of Sarah’s first phone call. “The fact that they gave me the case a day later, without mentioning any of this—it’s not a coincidence,” Dahl said.

By the time she learned about Laura Trent, Dahl had pieced together much of Williams’s history. “I had a picture in my head of what he was like,” she said. Williams had been brought up in a modest suburban home in Largo, Florida, where a slab of concrete in the back yard still bears his child-size footprints. His sister Auburn Shapiro told me that their mother, who died in

2020, was “a hustler” who “worked her ass off” to support the family, taking jobs as a notary and at the reservations line at Delta, and eventually doing clerical work for Williams’s business. When Williams was nine, his parents divorced. A few years later, his mother remarried and moved with Williams to what he described as “redneck fucking hillbilly-town North Carolina,” where his stepfather owned property. “It was almost doomed from the start,” Shapiro said. “There was no house. We lived in trailers, on welfare.” Williams’s stepfather, a lawyer who was later disbarred for billing clients for work he didn’t perform, was an alcoholic who also struggled with heroin addiction. He was, Shapiro told me, physically and emotionally abusive. “He would make Sean sleep outside on an unheated porch in the cold, or punch him in the stomach,” she said. “Sean doesn’t call what he went through ‘abuse.’ But I think it shaped how he sees boundaries and consent.”

After the move to North Carolina, Williams, still in his early teens, fathered a daughter. When he was fourteen, child-protective services took him into custody. For the rest of his teens, he was sent to a series of foster homes and juvenile-justice programs, often running away soon after he arrived. At one point, he fled a disciplinary camp with several other students he’d persuaded to join him. At one of his placements, a woman whom Williams described as his foster mother began a sexual relationship with him, leading to the end of her marriage.

At eighteen, Williams started a relationship with a thirty-five-year-old woman which lasted seven years. While they lived together, Williams grew marijuana and launched a business, first cleaning high-rise windows and then expanding into waterproofing, pressure washing, and historical-building restoration. The company grew as he netted contracts on large buildings in Greensboro and other cities in the area. In the mid-two-thousands, Williams got a contract to restore a building in Johnson City and began renting the first of several apartments he would ultimately own there, including the condo where much of his alleged criminal activity took place. Those years were also marked by increasingly heavy drug use—eventually, Williams was buying large quantities from out of state. “I was a collector,” he said. “Any kinds of drugs that came in, I would buy it.” Williams told me that he only occasionally sold drugs, preferring to give them to friends

and acquaintances, but several of his associates said that they believed he had ties to traffickers.

While Williams was evading arrest, Dahl tried to track him down herself. She drove past his garage and his apartment, to see if the lights were on. His attempts to stay out of sight were halfhearted. He continued to post on social media, sometimes revealing his location. Dahl followed information in one post to a construction site operated by his company in Asheville, North Carolina. At a nearby hotel, she spoke to a manager who told her that Williams had recently been kicked out for being too rowdy and for keeping drugs in his room. The manager also feared for the safety of a young woman Williams had with him. Dahl repeatedly called the U.S. Marshals with leads about where Williams might be. She told them to search the area surrounding a house she had visited in Cullowhee, North Carolina. His mother had once lived there, and Dahl believed that the location was significant to Williams—and that the surrounding woods might provide a hiding place. An official with the U.S. Marshals said that Dahl's tips were taken seriously. Nevertheless, Dahl told me, for nearly two years, “it just never went anywhere.”

The authorities need not have looked very far. For more than a year after the arrest attempt, Williams spent the majority of his time in Johnson City, often staying with a neighbor in the same building as his condo. He seemed to have little concern about the police. “I mean, they fucking knew where I was,” he later told me. “They didn’t want to find me at all.” He continued to conduct business openly. In April, 2022, Johnson City’s manager, Cathy Ball, who is responsible for overseeing the police department, even entered into a contract to buy his apartment. According to text messages later disclosed during a lawsuit, Ball’s real-estate agent, Shannon Castillo, spoke with Williams on the phone, and at one point left documents at his condo for his signature. Ball told Castillo that she had chosen to withhold information about Williams from a home inspector, writing, “I did not tell him the story behind Sean.” Williams said that Ball was aware of his fugitive status: “Everyone knew.” (Before the texts were disclosed, Ball said that Williams’s name “did not mean anything” to her, and Castillo, according to a person familiar with her thinking, claimed that she was never involved in the matter. Both declined requests for comment after the texts

surfaced. A spokesperson for Johnson City said that Ball “did not know Sean Williams, she never paid Sean Williams any money, and she did not purchase any property from Sean Williams.”) Williams eventually pulled out of the deal and sold the apartment to a company owned by a local businessman.

But Williams didn’t think that his impunity could last. “So I took off,” he said. He stayed away from Johnson City, occasionally sleeping in his car, for nearly a year. At around 2 A.M. on April 29, 2023, a security guard for Western Carolina University, in Cullowhee, found Williams in his car. He was carrying twelve ounces of cocaine, fourteen ounces of methamphetamine, a hundred thousand dollars in cash, and a slew of hard drives. The drives contained thousands of videos and images that, federal prosecutors say, depict sex crimes against some sixty-seven victims, many of them drugged and unconscious, including multiple minors. Investigators later also found child pornography and evidence of sex crimes on the devices that the Johnson City police had failed to search. The number of allegations against Williams may make him one of the most prolific serial rapists in American history. Many of the photographs and videos on the drives had file names consistent with the names on the list that Dahl had sought to investigate. (Williams initially claimed that the files were fabricated with artificial intelligence. He recently acknowledged to me that he routinely had sex with women while they were unconscious or asleep, saying that he believed this to be permissible because of prior consensual sexual encounters.) After two years on the run, Williams had been found in the town that Dahl had told the U.S. Marshals to search.

Williams was charged with multiple counts related to child pornography, and with possession and intent to distribute methamphetamine and cocaine. More than twenty charges involving child sexual abuse would eventually follow. Dahl, who was alerted to the news by a text from MiKayla Evans, was taken aback by the scale of his predation. “If he hadn’t been caught at that moment in time, when he had those hard drives on him, I don’t think we would be having this conversation,” she said.

But Williams’s prosecution was soon delayed by improbable difficulties in keeping him confined. In July, 2023, he was accused of attempting to dig

out of his cell in a county jail in Jonesborough, Tennessee, where he was awaiting trial on some of the child-pornography charges. (It was later determined that Williams had been digging a hole to exchange items with a neighboring cell.) That October, while being transferred in a van to a court appearance, Williams lifted a loose portion of the vehicle's wall panelling and snapped off a narrow metal clip underneath. He used the clip to pick the locks on his belly chain and handcuffs, then kicked out a window, which was missing its metal security bars. He squeezed through the window and jumped onto the road, breaking his wrist but successfully escaping.

A camera in the van was out of service. "We had to initially wonder, Did some correctional officer help him, or were they negligent, or was he just really slick and got out without their notice? How did that happen?" David Jolley, a U.S. marshal who worked on the case, asked. (Williams declined to answer my questions about whether he was helped, saying he didn't want to "get anybody else in trouble.")

Local outlets, including the television station WJHL and the *Tennessean*, began covering Williams's case and his Houdini-like escape, intensifying pressure on state and federal authorities. The marshals, working with the F.B.I. and the T.B.I., assigned more than a hundred people to search for him. As helicopters circled overhead and sniffer dogs patrolled, Williams sheltered in an abandoned house just a few blocks from the courthouse where he had been scheduled to appear. He constructed a pulley system to get himself in and out of the house's attic and scavenged for food, including walnuts from a nearby tree. He was able to siphon power from a neighboring house. "I watched old VCR tapes of 'The Fugitive' and 'U.S. Marshals,' " he told me.

In Williams's telling, he survived through an almost unbelievable ingenuity. He claims that he began collecting tools, including a serrated knife and sockets, and used them to work on an abandoned truck he found near the house. "That truck was my ticket out," he told me. Williams said that he found a stash of thirty pounds of marijuana and saw an opportunity to sell it to sustain himself on the run—though a close associate of his cast doubt on that claim, saying that Williams had previously boasted about a buried cache of money.

Williams drove to North Carolina and visited his daughter, Kari Dills, who was in her thirties. Dills described her father as an alternately absent and abusive figure in her life. “I was six when I found out who my dad was,” she told me. “I visited him a few times. I was then sexually abused by him.” (Williams and Dills’s maternal grandmother, who raised her, both denied these allegations, saying that he had no contact with her until her late teens.) When he arrived, wearing a mask, at the discount department store where Dills worked, she didn’t recognize him. “It’s me,” Williams recalled telling her, pulling down the mask. Panicked, Dills told him she would get a pen to write down his phone number, then told her manager, who called the police. “I was crying and didn’t know what to do,” she told me. As he waited for her to return, Williams “felt something wasn’t right,” he said, and left.

Williams followed I-75 to Florida. He says that he sold the marijuana for six hundred dollars in cash, and holed up for several days in Largo. He turned wistful. He knocked on the door of his childhood home, and its owners let him into the back yard, to see the concrete with his footprints in it. On November 20, 2023, Williams’s truck was found by a local police officer. As a manhunt began, Williams hid under a canoe overnight.

The next evening, Williams walked barefoot into a 7-Eleven and bought a hot dog. He asked for ketchup, and to purchase masks. Tasha Bumgarner, a clerk at the store, recognized him from a police photo. “I had goosebumps when I turned and looked at him,” she said. She told a co-worker, “I’m gonna go catch a criminal,” and after Williams departed she called the police. Williams was walking on a trail nearby when a police S.U.V. swerved into his path. As he tried to hide under a tarp, a police dog named Voodoo sank its teeth into his leg, drawing blood, and an officer punched him in the face before subduing him. Williams was taken to Blount County Detention Facility, in Maryville, Tennessee, and prosecutors brought an additional charge against him for escaping federal custody.

As news that Williams had been apprehended spread, Dahl’s phone started vibrating with texts from friends. She still felt confused about how Williams could have spent years evading arrest. As she said to me, “How did this go on for so long?”

After Williams was recaptured, I contacted him in jail. “I’m interested in talking with you,” he wrote, through the detention facility’s messaging system. “There are some facts about my case that are being kept from public ears.” In numerous video calls I had with him, Williams looked thin and older than his years, his curly hair graying, but he still had an agitated, even manic affect. He made a surprising claim: that his criminal activity had been made possible because, for years, he had been paying off Johnson City police officers through Alunda Rutherford, an ex-girlfriend who was involved in his businesses. He also accused the officers of taking hundreds of thousands of dollars from his safe during their searches after Evans’s fall. Many key elements of Williams’s story remain impossible to confirm, but subsequent lawsuits and investigations have lent credence to the idea that one of the most prolific and notorious rapists in American history operated unchecked because of police corruption.



*Recently, Johnson City agreed to a twenty-eight-million-dollar settlement with victims of sexual violence.*

The J.C.P.D. and Rutherford both deny any wrongdoing, and Rutherford has not been charged with a crime. In a statement, a city spokesperson said, “To claim that the Johnson City Police Department was complicit in any sex-trafficking venture or that its officers benefitted financially from such abhorrent activity is specious.” Rutherford told me that the allegations about her were “completely fabricated” and that there were “never any payments made.” She also said that she had had minimal contact with Williams in recent years, and few financial interactions with his company, though these claims were contradicted by multiple people who knew them, as well as by financial records reviewed by *The New Yorker*. She initially told me she had never had any contact with police, but subsequently claimed that she had been told of Williams’s flight by them, and had later contacted them to offer to entrap him.

One thing that is certain is that Williams dated Rutherford, who is thirty-nine, for the better part of a decade. During that time, he says, he granted her one-per-cent ownership in his construction company. “She was the smoother-over—a problem solver,” he told me. “She’d smooth over I.R.S. problems and insurance audits and things like that.”

People who knew Williams and Rutherford during their relationship claim that both of them were selling cocaine. According to Williams, about eight years ago, as Rutherford was turning in to her driveway, a Johnson City officer pulled up behind her. The officer said that he knew she was carrying drugs and cash. He made her hand over five thousand dollars and the cocaine, and then left. (Williams says that Rutherford told him about the incident at the time, and that he saw security-camera footage of it.) “No charges, no paperwork,” Williams said. “That was the beginning. After that, they knew they had her. They were holding charges over her head. They were extorting her.” He says that Rutherford, at his direction and using money she was provided by his company, began periodically giving officers large sums of cash, starting at two thousand dollars and eventually climbing to as high as eight thousand dollars—though Williams claims he did not keep close track of the amounts or frequency. He said that he was making five hundred thousand dollars a year and considered it a modest business cost. “This went on for years,” he told me. “It wasn’t just once or twice.”

In 2021, the police apprehended a ring of more than twenty-one local drug traffickers. According to Williams, Rutherford had been telling him that officers were threatening action against him. Now Rutherford warned him that officers were closing in on him. Allegations of assault against Williams were multiplying. “She gave me the impression that they had a bunch of dirt on me,” Williams recalled. “She indicated that she was holding them at bay for my benefit.” For a while, he believed the scheme to be successful. “I felt protected,” he told me. “I figured it was because of the payments.”

Williams says that he kept five hundred thousand dollars in his home safe, and that Rutherford was aware of this money. Johnson City police “wanted my safe, because they knew about the cash in it,” he told me. After Evans’s fall, the police took the safe. When they eventually returned it, Williams alleges, only eighty-one thousand dollars remained, and the other four hundred and nineteen thousand dollars had been stolen. He said that the police department’s apparent reluctance to pursue a full investigation stemmed from the theft. He also said that police had planted evidence, including the baby-doll sex toy photographed among the safe’s contents. (Rutherford said, “There wasn’t cash.” Other eyewitnesses told me that Williams’s safe typically held stacks of hundred-dollar bills—potentially in line with an amount of hundreds of thousands of dollars.) Williams claims that the scheme involved several Johnson City police officers, including Sparks. “Alunda and Sparks were, like, buddy-buddy,” he told me. “They teamed up to extort me.” But several people close to Williams said that they believed he was trying to deflect focus from his role in any corruption. (Johnson City said in its statement, “The city did not seize any money from Sean Williams.”)

Rutherford denied selling drugs, and told me that she did not believe officers were protecting Williams. “I don’t think that they were being too serious about things,” she said. “But, no, I don’t believe anyone was paid off.” She said, of the alleged encounter in her driveway and the ongoing bribery scheme, “None of that is true.” She also denied making withdrawals from Williams’s company accounts while he was on the run, though numerous bank statements seem to contradict this claim. Rutherford, whose name appeared on the list from Williams’s apartment, said that she had been part of his pattern of assault, but she declined to provide details. Williams’s

allegations about her, she said, were a continuation of his abuse. “I am a victim of his,” she said.

A civil lawsuit was initially brought against the police department by a group of nine plaintiffs with accusations about Williams, and it eventually grew into a proposed class-action suit encompassing all of his accusers. The suit, which raised similar claims about police corruption, and forced Johnson City officers to produce private financial records, contended that the records show Jenkins and Sparks had access to funds that didn’t accord with their incomes. The picture they present is not conclusive, however. Between 2018 and 2022—a period in which Rutherford was seemingly making regular withdrawals—the two officers’ bank accounts show a pattern of cash deposits; in Jenkins’s case, they were generally in increments of between a thousand and five thousand dollars. During that time, he paid off a portfolio of auto, construction, and home loans totalling more than four hundred thousand dollars, significantly more than his total police-department income. In a filing submitted as part of the lawsuit, though, Jenkins’s attorney said that the deposits and loans highlighted in the suit came from vehicle trade-ins, refinancing, the sale of vehicles and property, and other innocuous sources, and provided a detailed accounting.

The suit also alleged that, early last year, a necklace that Williams claims was stolen from his safe was consigned by Rutherford, in what it described as a form of payment by Sparks to insure her silence as investigations mounted. Rutherford said that Williams gave her the necklace. In an early filing in the case, Sparks broadly denied any allegations.

When Williams fled Johnson City, in 2022, he took seven boxes of financial records with him. He hoped that they might serve as an insurance policy, should he ever need to prove that the police were being paid off. He later gave the records to a friend, Shelby Moody, asking her to keep them safe. Moody, who was set up on a blind date with Williams in 2018, told me that they never became romantically involved but that she came to consider him a close friend.

Soon after she accepted the files, Moody was contacted by officials at the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation. She defended Williams against allegations of rape, she said, explaining that “there were definitely girls that

went up there to get fucked up, and, you know, shit happens when you're fucked up." They interrupted her. "They were, like, 'Well, do you wanna see your pictures?'" she told me. The investigators then showed her photos and videos of Williams raping her while she was incapacitated. She had no memory of the incident. In one file, she said, "he was holding my eyes open, like I'm a dead body." Williams had arranged the files on his hard drives systematically, with folders named for individual women, often bearing head shots that he had taken from their social-media accounts. "This was somebody I considered my friend," Moody said. "And I was somebody he raped and then pretended like it didn't happen."

Moody ultimately turned over the boxes of financial records to state authorities, but she now regrets her decision, because she believes that there has been little effort to pursue the corruption allegations. She was one of several people close to Williams who recalled seeing officers visit him without any official or social explanation. "Sean is telling the truth about the police-accountability part, and how there is multilevel corruption," she told me. "The police absolutely did allow him to continue what he was doing." She was one of several people who said that they had witnessed a rapport between Williams and Johnson City officers, which they believe may suggest that he was giving information to the police about drug activity.

In the nineteen-twenties, the era of Prohibition, locals started to refer to Johnson City as Little Chicago, owing to a thriving criminal underworld in the city and in a surrounding swath of Appalachia. Moody was one of numerous residents who said that they believed the Williams case was part of a wider phenomenon in which the police in the region turn a blind eye to, and at times protect, drug and human trafficking. "This is like a spider web," she told me. The area is connected to multiple major highways, making for easy transportation, and its rugged, mountainous terrain has historically made law enforcement challenging and allowed criminal groups to flourish. In 1969, in nearby Cocke County, a series of news reports prompted the arrest of numerous law-enforcement officials on charges including extortion and bribery. Further probes in the following decades uncovered the involvement of law-enforcement officers in drug-related crimes, including cocaine distribution and smuggling drug money.

After Kat Dahl was fired, the Johnson City police officers David Hilton and Jeff Legault were both promoted from sergeant to lieutenant. Keith Sexton, who served the search warrant after Evans's fall, is now the county sheriff. Captain Kevin Peters and Police Chief Karl Turner have both retired. Toma Sparks and Justin Jenkins are still employed by the Johnson City Police Department.

In June, 2022, while Williams was on the run, Dahl sued Turner and the Johnson City Police Department for retaliation and wrongful termination, alleging that she was punished because she reported their handling of sexual-assault cases and raised allegations of corruption, including to the F.B.I. Although friends and family had urged her to move on rather than endure a bruising legal battle, she told me she wanted to hold accountable a police department that she believed was endangering the community. "To go through the rest of my life and be questioning, Well, should I have done something? Are more people being hurt because I didn't say something? I couldn't live with that," she told me. Though a trial date has not been set, the suit has already had significant repercussions. Soon after it was filed, Johnson City hired a law firm to investigate the police department's approach to sexual crimes. The resulting report identified systematic deficiencies, including "practices that discourage female victims of sexual assault from collaborating with law enforcement," such as conducting interviews in a manner "more appropriate for an interrogation of a suspect." Of a hundred and five recent reports of rape with an identified suspect, police had interviewed the suspect in only thirty-six cases. The department commonly closed sexual-violence cases quickly, sometimes because a victim expressed reservations about pressing charges; officers often cited uncoöperative victims as a reason for closing cases, even when they had in fact been unable to make contact with the victims.

The report raised other questions about Johnson City officers' handling of cases involving Williams. It made pointed reference to "police corruption" allegations, though the subject was beyond its formal purview. The report stated that "the Department should have moved forward with an internal investigation to address the misconduct allegations."

In June, 2023, the group of Williams's accusers, inspired by Dahl's case, filed its federal suit. Among the accusers, who were labelled Jane Does in legal filings but who gave me permission to use their names, were Pack, Murray, and Laura Trent's parents. The suit says that Johnson City officers, including Sparks, took money from Rutherford and from the safe, "with either the implied or explicit understanding that, in exchange, they would shield Williams." It argues that Williams—who had allegedly given money, drugs, and housing to Diaz and Rutherford, in exchange for their recruitment of women he raped—had been involved in sex trafficking, and that his payments to officers made them parties to a trafficking conspiracy. (Rutherford told me that she had not helped Williams recruit other women.)

Last month, Johnson City agreed to a twenty-eight-million-dollar settlement with victims of sexual violence, an enormous sum for a small city. "The amount will likely prompt skepticism about their denials," Kelly Puente, who has written about the case for the *Tennessean*, told me. A lawyer connected to the case told me that the sum "is far more than the cost of defense—perhaps this victims' settlement will finally get the agencies' attention." The confidential settlement, a version of which was obtained by *The New Yorker*, includes strict provisions that the victim should "not discuss this settlement or disparage the JCPD, its officers, or any investigation of her sexual assault." A statement from the plaintiffs' lawyers, released at the city's behest, cited a "substantial risk of not meeting the applicable burdens of proof" in their decision to dismiss their claims and settle. In response to questions about the allegations, a city spokesperson referred to the statement. People involved in the case told me they stood by its strength and feared that the city had paid its way out of accountability. One plaintiff told me, "Unanswered questions remain, and the circumstances uncovered during discovery deserve to be acknowledged rather than buried."

If a deeper investigation is ever undertaken, Williams said, "there's a big, wide trail of money that's gonna be easy to find." But federal and state officials have mostly refused to say whether the corruption allegations are still being pursued. The F.B.I. and the T.B.I. initiated investigations, but an official involved in the Williams case told me that he was aware of no ongoing inquiries by either agency. Dahl believes that a culture of mutual

protection and deference among law-enforcement agencies may have contributed to the apparently limited efforts. “The fact that the Johnson City community is no closer to transparency about what happened and who enabled Williams to operate as long as he did is a disgrace,” she said. Vanessa Baehr-Jones, an attorney for Williams’s accusers, told me that the F.B.I. interviews with officers accused of corruption were “in some cases only three minutes long, and consisted of the F.B.I. and T.B.I. agents asking the officers whether or not they stole money. When the answer was no, they closed up the file and went on home. None of the officers were confronted with evidence, which suggests that the F.B.I. never bothered to subpoena important documents like bank records.” A T.B.I. spokesperson said, “As with every case, T.B.I. agents investigated this one fully and to the best of our ability.” The F.B.I. declined to comment. The Department of Justice’s Public Integrity Section, the office responsible for investigating police-corruption allegations like the ones in the Williams case, is being reduced by the Trump Administration to just a handful of employees.

On the morning of February 24th, Williams walked into a hearing room in a courthouse in Greeneville, Tennessee, with his hands cuffed and chained at his waist, to be sentenced for production of child pornography and for his escape. He wore a baggy brown T-shirt, and had a beard and wild hair. As he was transferred to court that morning, U.S. marshals had discovered him hiding razor blades in his shoe. A jury had found him guilty of escaping from the van, a conviction with a potential five-year sentence. In that case, after volatile relationships with four different attorneys, he had defended himself. At the sentencing, he was represented by his fifth lawyer, a court-appointed attorney named Mark Brown.

Dahl’s warnings that Williams might be a pedophile had proved prescient. Two weeks after she brought the sex doll to Turner’s attention, Williams had victimized a boy of less than a year old. At the hearing, Meghan Gomez, a prosecutor, described reams of evidence gathered from Williams’s devices that showed he had assaulted mothers and gained access to their children, whom he then recorded in pornographic photos and videos. Among the victims were the infant boy, a four-year-old, and a seven-year-old girl. In court, the mother of the infant boy, Alexa Anderson, sat a few feet from Williams and quietly wept through the proceedings. “I just needed

to see him walk out of the room for the last time, and know he wouldn’t come back,” she told me. In 2020, Anderson, at the time a twenty-one-year-old new mother working at a restaurant and financially struggling, met Williams through a friend who knew Diaz. Williams struck her as charismatic and flashy, and at one point she saw the stacks of hundred-dollar bills that filled his safe. He told her that, because of his connections with law enforcement, “the police aren’t going to come up here.” He offered her a job as his housekeeper, but within weeks he told her she was “too pretty to clean,” and asked her to be his informal personal assistant. She rebuffed frequent sexual advances. A few months after she started working for him, she looked at his phone and saw sexual images of children. She threw the phone down and fled, returning only to collect her belongings.

In July, 2022, during Williams’s initial time on the run, Anderson told the Johnson City police about the images of children. She said that the detective she spoke to, Brady Higgins, adopted an accusing tone, asking about her history of substance abuse “like he was speaking to a criminal, not a victim.” (Higgins disputes using an accusatory tone.) In his report, Higgins did not make clear that the images of children were pornographic. Last year, federal and state officials showed Anderson images of Williams assaulting her, along with sexually explicit photographs of her then nine-month-old son. “He was a baby,” she told me. “It’s devastating. It’s enough to kill somebody.” (Williams said that the relationship with Anderson was consensual and denied the allegations about her son. “I’m not into boys,” he said.) Anderson, who was among the plaintiffs in the civil suit, was one of several women who told me they felt that police made an effort to intimidate them during proceedings. When Higgins was deposed, she said, a group of police officers lined up opposite her. “He had all of his police friends on the back wall of the room,” she said. “They didn’t break eye contact with me the whole time.”

J. Ronnie Greer, the judge in the child-pornography case, called Williams a “psychopath” and a “dangerous predator.” Williams seemed to thumb his nose at the proceedings. He laughed, shook his head, and snorted derisively. When Greer said, of Williams’s crimes, that “with the exception possibly of a serial killer, these offenses are among the most serious offenses that can

be committed,” Williams blurted out that it was “shocking” that “taking a picture of a young girl would be compared to murder.” Greer alluded to Williams’s history of abuse during his childhood. “What abuse?” Williams interjected, though his own attorney, seeking leniency, had cited research indicating that victims of abuse are predisposed to become abusers themselves. In our interviews, Williams at times seemed to have a distorted understanding of what constitutes abuse. “I was fucking my foster mom. I woke up with this guy, a babysitter, touching me. That’s not a big deal. Who gives a shit?” he said. “Maybe I’m just a monster.” Greer sentenced Williams to ninety-five years in prison, the maximum allowable sentence. The judge appeared to refer to the unresolved questions of police corruption, saying, “I do not know with any certainty how Mr. Williams was able, for nearly two decades, maybe more than that, to engage in the conduct he has engaged in without detection, without prosecution, but that’s an issue for a different forum, a different day.”

Williams has appealed, and has pleaded not guilty to the additional charges he faces related to child pornography and drugs. Steve Finney, a Tennessee district attorney, said that he plans to bring more charges related to Williams’s alleged assaults. A further civil suit has been filed by Evans against Johnson City police. “They cared more about money than the people they were supposed to serve and protect,” she told me on her way out of the sentencing hearing. Williams claims that he fears for his safety, because he represents a loose end in the corruption case. “I’ve been a liability ever since MiKayla’s fall,” he told me. “It’s starting to look like a possible Epstein ending.”

Dahl was also at the sentencing, wearing a neat black suit that she’d purchased at Macy’s. After her firing, she told me, she spent time “grieving over the job that I thought would have maybe been my dream job.” In early 2022, amid mounting financial strain, she had moved in with her parents in Alabama. Later, she moved to Atlanta, for better career prospects. She felt “hollow” after seeing Williams’s sentencing, she said, despite her indispensable role in the case. “I’m not done, and this story’s not done,” she added. “Way back in 2021, I told some of the victims I was going to try and find them answers and find them accountability for what happened. I still intend to keep that promise.” ♦



*Ronan Farrow*, a contributing writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2018 Pulitzer Prize for public service. His 2025 podcast “[Not a Very Good Murderer](#)” explores his fact-checking process with a volatile source.

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**Personal History**

# The Deaths—and Lives—of Two Sons

The truth is that however I choose to express myself will not live up to the weight of these facts: Vincent died, and then James died.

By [Yiyun Li](#)

March 23, 2025



*Everywhere in the house there are objects: their meanings reside in the memories connected to them; the memories limn the voids, which cannot be filled by the objects. Illustration by Dadu Shin*

“There is no good way to say this”—when the police arrive, they inevitably preface the bad news with that sentence, as though their presence is not ominous enough. The first time I heard the line, I already knew what was about to be conveyed. Nevertheless, I paid attention to how the news was delivered: the detective insisted that I take a seat first. I sat down at the dinner table, and he moved another chair to an appropriate distance and sat down himself. No doubt he was following protocol, and yet the sentence—“there is no good way to say this”—struck me as both accurate and

effective. It must be a sentence that, though nearly a cliché, is not often used in daily conversation.

The second time, having guessed the news about to be delivered, I did not give the sentence a moment's thought. I did not wait for the detective to ask me to sit down, either. I indicated a chair in the living room where my husband should sit and took the other chair. My heart began to feel that sensation for which there is no name. Call it aching, call it wrenching, call it shattering, but they are all wrong words, useless in their familiarity. This time, the four policemen stood.

There is no good way to state these facts, which must be acknowledged before I go on. My husband and I had two children and lost them both: Vincent in 2017, at sixteen, James in 2024, at nineteen. Both chose suicide, and both died not far from home; Vincent near Princeton Junction, James near Princeton Station.

The detectives in charge of the two cases belonged to two agencies—one associated with Amtrak and the other with New Jersey Transit. These facts would explain the confusion of the New Jersey Transit detective when he told me, on his second visit last year, that he couldn't locate Vincent's record in the files. He had an uneasy demeanor, perhaps feeling defeated by his inability to find the file or feeling the discomfort of having to face us again. On his first visit, he did all he could to avoid any reference to suicide, repeating the words "we can't say more at the moment" and "active investigation" and "the crime scene." Despite his fumbling, I knew that James had died by suicide. I was the one to tell him that James's brother had died of suicide near Princeton Junction a little over six years ago.

My friend Elizabeth, who had arrived from Austin, Texas, just in time to be with us for the New Jersey Transit detective's scheduled visit, shook her head afterward. I then told her about the earlier detective, who, on his second visit, had said that he had worked for Amtrak for more than twenty years, and every time he visited a family after a case of suicide he would go home and hug his two children, even after they had outgrown the age to be hugged. It's an awkward truth that I cannot help observing and noticing things even in the most terrible moments.

It was the seventh day after James's death, and the New Jersey Transit detective was visiting to return James's backpack, just as the Amtrak detective had come back to return Vincent's phone. A case involving life and death never miraculously closes itself at the time of the pronounced death.

Objects don't die. Their journeys in this physical world, up to a certain point, are parallel to the trajectories of the humans to whom they belong. Then comes the moment when the separation happens. Vincent's phone became a phone; James's backpack, a backpack. They became objective objects, left behind in strangers' hands.

Few objects speak. The phone and the backpack were reticent, so they could do little to illuminate the last moments of my children's lives.

Many objects outlive people, this thought has often occurred to me—when I see in a museum an eighteenth-century pianoforte or a twelfth-century sword or a bowl from 500 B.C.E. All of Vincent's belongings and all of James's belongings have outlived them; not a single item has left our care. There are Vincent's many paintings hung around the house. There is James's collection of pocket watches on a shelf. Everywhere I turn in the house, there are objects: their meanings reside in the memories connected to them; the memories limn the voids, which cannot be filled by the objects.

Vincent's copy of "Les Misérables," with a bust of Victor Hugo placed on top of it; a circle of blue-and-white farm animals from Delft next to a cluster of origami animals that James folded; a giant stuffed lamb bought on a drive through west Ireland—which James named Marmalade and called his emotional-support animal during that prolonged trip (he often felt anxious when he had to leave home); a doorstop in the shape of a quietly amused elephant, bought in Kilkenny, which has been sitting next to his computer for years; another doorstop, an owl with a startled expression, which Vincent picked up in an Edinburgh shop for James; forty-seven stuffed penguins of all shapes and colors, from different cities and countries, sitting in the middle of which is a crystal penguin brought by one of Vincent's childhood friends to his memorial service.

To think our former state a happy dream:  
From which awaked, the truth of what we are  
Shows us but this: I am sworn brother, sweet,  
To grim Necessity.

Sometimes, walking around the house, surrounded by the objects I study closely or only glance at, I recite Richard II's woeful words to myself. And yet I am not that dethroned king, our house is not a museum or a shrine, and our past is not merely a happy dream. I am not awakened, since I have stayed awake; I have been attentive and alert throughout all those years as the mother of my children. The necessity I face has no need of that adjective, "grim." Necessity—my necessity—is an extremity: any adjective is an irrelevance when it comes to extremity.

After the New Jersey Transit detective expressed his surprise at not being able to find Vincent's record, I only nodded, as though to say such things were expected: life is a muddle, bureaucratically, factually, metaphorically. I was eager for him to leave so that my husband and I could have the backpack to ourselves.

But sometimes—just sometimes—things make a little more sense upon revisiting. I wouldn't have solved that small mystery about the police agencies had I not started writing this for James. "The book for James"—for months I have been talking about it with my friends Brigid and Elizabeth, calling it "the book for James," just as once I was writing "the book for Vincent."

That earlier book arrived without any conscious planning. One night, I was reading an Ivy Compton-Burnett novel in which a character addresses her mother as "Mother dear." Mother dear—a phrase sounding archaic and yet ever lively and present—Vincent used to jokingly call me that when he wanted my attention. So the book arrived, opening with that phrase.

Vincent died at the end of September; by the end of November, the book was finished. Those who knew Vincent all said that he would have loved the book. He would have been proud and amused; he would have found fault with some of the sentences; he would have added a few adjectives and adverbs where I'd insisted on keeping sentences unadorned. The book, in

which a mother and a dead child continue their conversation across the border of life and death, was as much written by Vincent as it was written for Vincent.

But in life James resisted metaphor and evaded attention. If Hamlet and Bartleby could merge into a single being, James might have occupied that space with some comfort. (“ ‘Seems,’ madam? Nay, it is; I know not ‘seems’ ” and “I would prefer not to.”)

Brigid, quoting the opening line of a novel I had written some years ago —“Posterity, take notice!”—explained to me my difficulty. James, Brigid said, was the antithesis of attention. It would be nearly impossible to write for James, she said; it feels as though you have to learn a new alphabet before you can write anything this time.

Learning a new alphabet—for weeks and months I’ve held on to that notion. James was a different child than Vincent, and James’s death left us in a different place than Vincent’s had. And yet a new alphabet can only be symbolic, as I have but this old language to work with.

There is no good way to say this: words fall short.

Still, these two clichés speak an irrefutable truth. Anything I write for James is bound to be a partial failure. Sooner or later, there will come the moment when my understanding parts ways with his essence.

There is no good way to say this. Facts are the harshest and the hardest part of life, and yet facts, unalterable, bring with them some order and logic.

Fiction, as I’ve learned from writing it and reading it, tends to be about the inexplicable and the illogical. Sometimes my students complain about what they read in fiction—“I don’t believe this would happen in life” or “I don’t believe any parent would do that to their children.” What can I say to a young person who has strong convictions but a lack of imagination? Not much, really. The world, it seems to me, is governed by strong conviction, paltry imagination, and meagre understanding.

In eighth grade, Vincent quoted C. S. Lewis in his application to a highly selective prep school in California—"I fancy that most of those who think at all have done a great deal of their thinking in the first fourteen years"—and went on to catalogue the thinking he had done. Sometimes I give the Lewis quote to my undergraduates, and more than half of them express disbelief. When are you going to start thinking?—I try very hard not to ask the students, whose faces are cloudlessly young.

I have no doubt that Vincent and James both did their share of thinking, which will remain a solace for me. And, yet, no one undertakes suicide unthinkingly.

A few weeks before Vincent's death, we decided to purchase a house we all liked (we had just relocated that summer, from California to New Jersey). Vincent pointed out what would be his "suite"—a spacious bedroom, a bathroom, and a small study with a dormer window overlooking a tree, which appeared nondescript in the fall but would be blooming when spring came again: a dogwood tree.



*"How relaxing a vacation can it be if we have to spend all our time pretending we're not Americans?"*

*Cartoon by William Haefeli*

The suite could be separated, by shutting a door, from "the parents' living quarters," Vincent noted, a perfect setting for him. He also envisioned baking in the kitchen and helping me improve the garden, which did not look impressive: the couple who'd occupied the house before us, both

economists, were not keen gardeners. Vincent died on the day we put down the deposit for the house. Deposit, death, in that order, four hours apart.

In this life of mine, which makes some fiction feel pale and feeble, there are other facts that I need to establish.

Vincent and James were born three years, four months, and six days apart. The gap between their deaths: six years, four months, and nineteen days. These numbers and dates are carved into my mind more deeply than they could be into stone, but they convey very little.

To travel from Princeton to New York City by train, we have the choice of departing from either Princeton Station or Princeton Junction. This is an astonishing fact, though minor in the scale of things. I don't think that I've developed a preference between the two. I leave from one station or the other, depending on my schedule and also on how finicky the train service is on that day. My husband has a more consistent way of dealing with this small decision. So, at least in one specific aspect of life, he has certainty.

My feeling, not only about the departure stations but about almost everything in my life, is something else altogether. Call it a combination of keen attention and "a profound indifference" (borrowing Camus's words), or a combination of intense emotion and an equally intense apathy. The fact is, there is no word for this state I've found myself in, in which lucidity and opacity are one and the same.

The day after James's death, I said to Brigid, "One has to muddle through this life."

That statement was not accurate. There was something stark and piercing in me that was much closer to clarity than to muddle, but calling it a muddle took less effort. It was as though I were averting my eyes from a mirror, which reflected my mind to me in such an unrelenting and sharp manner that I was startled by myself, frightened, even. By looking away, one could imagine a muddled image, vaguer, softer, less unsettling.

"But you're not muddled," Brigid said. For more than twenty years, she's been the first reader of my writing, and she never lets a wrong word or a

weak sentence slip past. “You’re the least muddled person at this moment.”

True, my mind was not—and is not—muddled. Only, language is limited. So here’s Exhibit A: a new alphabet and a new vocabulary cannot be found to describe how I feel.

Though I wouldn’t call myself a sworn sibling to grim necessity, necessity has nevertheless been in everything I do since James’s death. Gone are the days when I could afford some degree of automatic living in everyday life: shoes slipped on thoughtlessly (the pair of sneakers that used to be next to my shoes are in a different place now); a local detour taken without conscious thought (this road would lead to the corner where I last said goodbye to James); a quick stop at the university cafeteria (where my colleague and friend Ed and I both hid our faces when James, who was a freshman at Princeton, walked past one day; he didn’t notice us).

Necessity dictates that attention should be given to all details in this after-time: everything is relevant, everything has weight, and everything leads to a moment in the past, which becomes a memory, which in turn becomes a narrative. When a line of coral-colored hyacinths called Gipsy Queen bloomed next to the garden fence in March, I reminded myself, every time I walked past, to slow down and study them. James was the one who loved this particular hyacinth; I used to prefer Delft Blue.

Necessity also dictates that all the details should be noticed and filed away without any excessive feeling. After Vincent died, I read and reread “Grief Lessons,” a collection of Euripides’ plays translated by Anne Carson, and Constance’s monologue in Shakespeare’s “King John” after she loses young Arthur, who was robbed of his throne and then his life. Those ancient Greeks sing their grief at the highest pitch, which, as Carson points out, is rage. Their grief and their rage are nearly untranslatable, as though feelings in extremity can only be physical sensations—the language assails one with a blind and blunt force. Constance, when chastised by Cardinal Pandulph for her lack of composure (“Lady, you utter madness and not sorrow”), retorts:

I am not mad: this hair I tear is mine;  
My name is Constance: I was Geoffrey’s wife:

Young Arthur is my son, and he is lost.  
I am not mad; I would to heaven I were,  
For then, 'tis like I should forget myself.  
O, if I could, what grief should I forget!  
Preach some philosophy to make me mad,  
And thou shalt be canonized, cardinal.  
For, being not mad but sensible of grief,  
My reasonable part produces reason  
How I may be delivered of these woes,  
And teaches me to kill or hang myself.  
If I were mad, I should forget my son,  
Or madly think a babe of clouts were he.  
I am not mad. Too well, too well I feel  
The different plague of each calamity.

The ancient Greeks and Constance might have said something I could not find words for after Vincent died, and yet this statement is not entirely accurate. Those mothers in the Greek and Shakespearean tragedies voiced their sorrows at a higher pitch than mine. I did not lose my words, and I was not at a loss for words when Vincent died. I wrote a book for him.

I also, on one occasion, wept. A few weeks after Vincent's death, Brigid and I went to see a production of "King Lear" in New York. By the time Lear finished his howling monologue, I was weeping; I went on weeping after we left the theatre, sitting on the edge of a stone planter, in the center of which a small tree was shedding its last leaves. When I stopped crying, I said to Brigid, "There's no surprise left for me. No one will ever be able to surprise me after Vincent."

How one misspeaks, and how one misspeaks in extremity. James surprised me more than Vincent did, but this time I know not to make any statement of finality.

This time, rereading Euripides and Shakespeare, I have a different reaction: make Constance's words a hundred times shriller, make those Greek mothers' cries a hundred times more piercing, and then I would say, This is close to how I could express myself, too; only, I would prefer not to.

The truth is that however I choose to express myself will not live up to the weight of these facts: Vincent died, and then James died; through writing, I was able to conjure up a Vincent in the book written for him, but I will not be able to do this for James—I cannot conjure him up in any manner.

When Vincent was alive, we talked and we argued (sometimes affectionately and sometimes contentiously). It was only natural that our endless talking in life would extend itself to where reasons end, where across the border of life and death words retain their vivacity. The book for Vincent was published as fiction because it could be called only that: no dead child has ever come back to have an argument with his mother.

Two years after Vincent died, his friend Joy visited us and told me that she had read the book. “It’s so uncanny,” she said. “All those things he said in the book were just the things he would’ve said. When I was reading it, I thought, Vincent is back!” She laughed and then burst into tears.

Vincent had many good friends, and many, when he died, said things along the lines that they would always remember him. Joy, however, uncannily prescient at sixteen, expressed her fear that, as years went by, she would not be able to remember Vincent as clearly as she wanted.

At least I’d given Joy a book to go by, I thought then.

I once edited a few adjectives out of Vincent’s writing when he was in sixth grade, which led him to protest: “Adjectives and adverbs are my guilty pleasure!”

James loved languages, though he was not a verbal child. He had been uncharacteristically talkative with Vincent, but with the rest of the world he had preferred silence. That silence became more pronounced after Vincent died.

The summer before James went to college, he confessed that he had done little in his senior year of high school besides reading five major works of Wittgenstein. I started to read “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus” on James’s recommendation. A few weeks later, I told him that I had difficulty grasping what I was reading.

“Oh,” he replied. A single word that could mean, Not surprising, or, How could you not understand Wittgenstein, or, I don’t know what I can do to help you, or, simply, Read on. This morning, I reread the preface to “Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus,” which opens with this paragraph: “This book will perhaps only be understood by those who have themselves already thought the thoughts which are expressed in it—or similar thoughts. It is therefore not a text-book. Its object would be attained if there were one person who read it with understanding and to whom it afforded pleasure.”

It’s a solace to know that James found philosophical pleasure in language, different from the pleasure Vincent got from language—which was poetic, musical, and sensual.

It’s an impossible task to write for James. It will have to be done through thinking, rather than through feeling; that is how I will reach for an approximation of understanding him. Or of not understanding him—just as I might spend my days reading Wittgenstein, not knowing whether I’ve got anything right.

A few months before James’s death, he told me that he had been rereading “Caligula,” a play by Camus, “a bit obsessively.” He had watched several productions of the play on the internet, including two in English, one in Japanese, and one in Spanish.

I had not read the play. I asked him whether I should, knowing already that I would. He said yes. The next time I saw him—he was living in the dorms at Princeton then, and would sometimes visit on Saturdays for his favorite meal, my husband’s steak dinner—I told him that I was affected by a line in it: “Men die; and they are not happy.”

James, in his usual understated manner, nodded with a gentle smile. (That smile, along with his quiet demeanor, was what his friends, classmates, and professors would remember in their letters to us and would mention to the reporters at one of the student newspapers who put together a stunningly beautiful tribute to him.)

“How does one ever recover from that line?” I asked James. “I haven’t stopped thinking about it for days.”

“It’s quite compelling,” he said.

*Men die; and they are not happy.* Half of the line is a fact; the other half, a conjecture. There is no cause-and-effect emphasized: Do men die because they are not happy, or are they not happy because they have to die someday? The two statements, existing together, are like two hands kept close, barely touching or with their fingers intertwined.

After James’s death, I found a picture I had taken when he was in kindergarten. One day, when I went to pick him up, he was wearing a sign that he had written out in large print, no doubt exasperated by grownups asking him why he wasn’t talking or telling him that he must talk:

IM NOT TaLKING Becuase I DON’t WaNT TO!

My husband, referring to the picture recently, commented that, as a family, what the four of us shared was our belief in, and our respect for, free will.

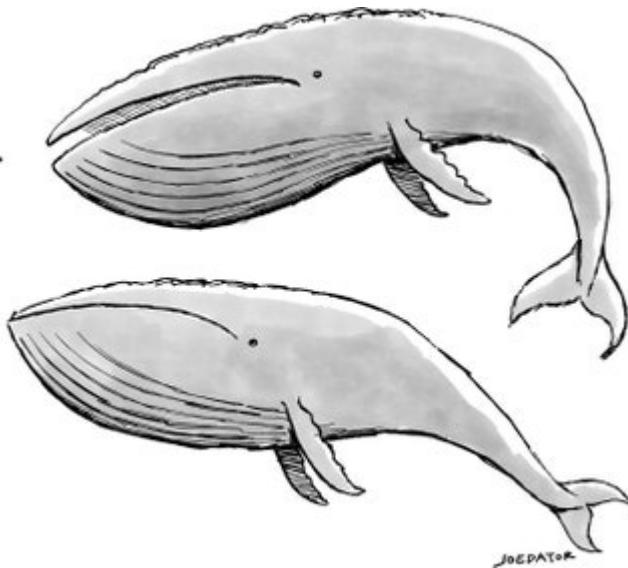
I thought for a moment and replied that, despite our not knowing enough of James’s thinking, what we could be certain of was this: he knew that we would respect his decision to take his own life, and he trusted that we would endure his death, for we had endured his brother’s death.

“Believe me when I say that I shall be all right. In the same strictly truthful sense that it’s true that the two angles at the base of an isosceles triangle are equal. No fancy, no frill. Not symbolically, not mystically. Just all right.” Richard Quin, from Rebecca West’s “The Saga of the Century Trilogy,” says this to his family before going to France during the Great War, to be instantly killed, still a teen-ager.

“Just all right”—these words have been on my mind the past few months. Richard Quin shall be all right because he is crossing the English Channel to meet death, which requires nothing more of him than simply his being—being gone from this physical world, being remembered, being all right.

And yet, for those who go on living, few can afford simply to be, and very few can be all right. The border between “all right” and “all wrong,” like the border between life and death, is not solid. In recent months, I have

replied to friends' queries with this line: "Our life is never going to be all right again, but we are doing all right."



*"Do you want the last piece of plankton? I'm stuffed."*  
Cartoon by Joe Dator

Perhaps I should revise that statement about our belief in and our respect for free will. In the realm of being, yes, we have little regret about respecting our children's free will. But raising children is more than offering them the space to be; the world seems to care more about children's *doings* than about their *beings*. When Vincent was five, I thought of signing him up for a soccer club, and he informed me, with utter seriousness, that I would be doing that not for his happiness but because I wanted him to be just like the other children. I instantly gave up the idea. And yet how many parents can say with confidence, when it comes to their children's upbringing, that they have achieved a real understanding between being and doing?

There was a moment that we used to talk about with laughter. In seventh grade, when we were living in Oakland, Vincent decided one morning that he would go to school in a dress, and went to our bedroom to look for the perfect outfit. (I do not use the word "perfect" lightly: perfectionism was part of Vincent's essence.)

My husband, with a worried look, kept offering him dark-colored dresses: This blue one? How about this black dress? This green one would look good on you.

Vincent, in his usual flamboyant manner, picked up a pink dress. “What’s the point of going to school in a dress if not a pink one?” he asked.

I explained to him that, as parents, it was natural for us to worry that a pink dress might lead to bullying by his schoolmates. Vincent laughed off my concern and said that, if there were idiots who dared tease him, that was all the more reason to wear pink. “Just so I can be in their face,” he said.

I was full of admiration for Vincent. I felt unease, too. We parents could only do so much for our children, to raise them to be bold and free, but the world outside this bubble we called our family was often not a kind place.

Around the same time, Vincent decided to walk home from school by himself. It was a two-mile walk to our house, up on the hill. Half of it was along a woodsy road just off the highway, with no sidewalks or houses on either side, and it was not the safest part of Oakland. I expressed my reservations, but Vincent was a stubborn child. He promised that he would stay alert; he would run fast, he said, if needed.

Vincent was proud of his androgynous looks: his long, shining black hair and his slender, cranelike physique. For two years, I lived in dread of that woodsy road, where cars drove without observing the speed limit. But a greater fear, which I never voiced to him, was that he might be abducted along that road: he might be mistaken for a pretty young girl, or there might be no mistake at all—he was a beautiful young boy.

Every semester, then and later, I would teach Grace Paley’s story “Friends,” and every time I would point out a particular passage to my students, though I doubt that many of them truly understood its weight. An older woman, reminiscing about her daughter’s death, says to her friends, “You know the night Abby died, when the police called me and told me? That was my first night’s sleep in two years. *I knew where she was.*”

For two years, Vincent walked with a tube of pepper spray clasped in his hand—which once led to James’s report that a classmate, having been told about Vincent’s pepper spray, thought that it was a condiment. That pepper spray is among the objects that have outlived Vincent. Sometimes I go into his room and look at it.

What can parents do but give their children the space to be, and allow them to do what they need so that they can become more fully themselves?

And yet, despite the parents' efforts, and despite all the beings and doings that occur as the children grow, some among them die before their time.

Children die, and they are not happy.

And their parents can never know whether those children died because they were not happy, or whether they were not happy because they sensed, too early, that they must face their own deaths.

For six years before Vincent's death, I had lived with a dread that one day he might choose not to live. There were days of concern and nights of anxiety, and there were occasions for despair, but these feelings, I believed, were best kept under a calm surface. The prospect of a fire does not mean that one has to carry an extinguisher on one's back around the clock.

A few times, though, I did slip into Vincent's bedroom in the middle of the night, checking that he was still there. Seeing is believing, though only to a limited extent. For six years, I believed and disbelieved what I could not see at the time—but surely I was not alone in that? The ability to believe and disbelieve simultaneously seems a prerequisite for any parent. Is that rash a minor skin irritation or the first symptom of a deadly illness? Is a child's preference for playing alone a developmental stage or a sign of serious trouble? There are many ways for things to go wrong, and yet one's hope, always, is that somehow they will turn out all right in the end. "Just all right," we say to ourselves, out of blind courage, out of wishful thinking, both indispensable for a parent.

Should a mother rely on her intuition? What's the use of intuition in matters of life and death? A mother cannot sit in front of her child's bedroom all night long, a mother cannot follow a child's every step in life, just so that she can make sure that he remains alive. A mind too reliant on intuition might easily leave reality behind. What would happen then? One mother feeds a lethal concoction of drugs to her own child to protect him from life's threats. Another mother, plagued by postpartum depression, leaps out of the building with her infant. These stories in the news tend to be called

tragedies, or even *senseless* tragedies, but only a careless writer would use those words so unthinkingly. Senseless? There is always some sense in a parent's intuitions. The real tragedy is not just death itself but also a mother's difficulty in knowing when to trust her intuition and when to let it go.

My most humiliating writing experience took place in fourth grade. For a school contest, instead of turning in a patriotic essay praising the glory and beauty of our mother China, I wrote a piece decrying the hypocrisy of such contests, and elaborating on the ugliness of life a child experienced while being forced to lie about it—"ugliness" was the word I used, more than once, in that essay.

The acts of writing the essay and of entering it in the contest were not done out of courage. I wasn't brave; rather, I was ten, and I was feeling suicidal despair.

I recognized Vincent's despair when he was in fourth grade; so did his teacher, who wrote me about the poems he turned in for schoolwork, which were astonishingly painful yet beautiful contemplations of life and death.

My entry in the writing contest caused a scandal among the schoolteachers. I was called to a conference room to be greeted by six or seven teachers jeering and laughing at me. An older woman, a friend of my mother's (my mother was also a teacher at the school), walked over and pinched my cheeks, first one and then the other, as an adult might do to an infant. She said, "You're a good student. You're not too ugly. You look like a child with some potential, but who would've thought that you could be so stupid as to write such nonsense?"

The only good thing that came out of this episode: I learned not to take reviews and criticism of my future work to heart. I should add that my mother was in the conference room that day and laughed and jeered along with her colleagues. But her wrath, when I got home from school that evening, was a story that I prefer not to remember.

When Vincent was around the same age, he asked, pointedly, "You understand suffering, and you write about suffering so well. Why did you

give birth to us?” A question for which I never had a good answer.

All those books teaching parents how to take care of their children—the first year, the first eighteen months, the first five or ten years—none of them addresses this difficulty: for parents and for children, the border between reality and unreality is not always clearly marked.

What can a mother do, facing reality, facing unreality, but rely on her intuition while at the same time keeping her intuition at bay?

Intuitions are narratives. I have an intrinsic distrust of narratives, which are among the most misleading things in life. I have seen lives saved by narratives and lives derailed by narratives. That I’ve chosen to write narratives is an incongruity one has to acknowledge.

But intuitions are a tricky subset of narratives: incomplete, un-completable. I avoid putting my intuitions into words, which would be pinning a butterfly on a specimen board in order to claim the certainty of possession.

However, I did voice an intuition once. After Vincent died, Brigid reminded me that in a phone call, a few years earlier, I’d confessed to her that I would regard it as a triumph if I could see Vincent graduate high school. In the days immediately after his death, I had forgotten that conversation. When Brigid told me, I remembered that afternoon, making the call in my bedroom, hiding from the children because I was weeping.

Vincent had seen me cry no more than two or three times in his life; James, precisely once, a few months after Vincent died. These are facts.

Vincent did not live long enough to graduate high school. James did. These, too, are facts.

But intuitions are not facts. Intuitions, with shape-shifting qualities akin to those of paranoias or fantasies, are not always defensible, rarely unassailable.

Three days after James’s birth, while we waited for the elevator on the way out of the hospital, my husband placed the carrier on the floor and knelt

down beside it, listening closely to detect the newborn's breathing. Two older women walked past and admired the sight. "Now that's a first-time dad," said one to the other. We were not first-time parents. Only, like many young parents, we were beset by fears. Babies breathe on their own, but sometimes they stop breathing on their own, too.

After Vincent's death, all those hows and whys and wherefores and what ifs, which I went through in my therapist's office and in my own head, often returned me to that phone call Brigid had reminded me of. "You knew it back then," she said.

And I was not the only one to have known it. My husband must have, too. And Vincent's therapist in California, who explained that Vincent was not a child who would take a few pills and call all his friends to announce that he was planning to kill himself. "You must be prepared," the therapist said on the phone. "If Vincent decided to do it, it would be so sudden that no one would expect it and no one could stop it."

I was not surprised when the therapist said that, just as I was not surprised when Vincent's fourth-grade teacher wrote to me about his poems. Vincent was my child; I knew—no, I felt—his despair and agitation.

I had parked the car by the roadside to pick up the therapist's call—he was returning a message I had left on his voice mail, not an emergency, not because of a crisis, but to talk about an ongoing dread. After the call, I went to pick James up from school, and later Vincent from track-and-field practice. Knowing that something may or may not happen does not exempt one from the tasks of living.

Intuitions are narratives about potentials, possibilities, alternatives. In that sense, intuitions are fiction, unless and until, confirmed by life, they become facts.

Those moments when intuitions remain unspoken and unspeakable are only part of life. There are other parts to be lived. A mother's job is to provide a framework for living: things to do, places to go, days that never fail to break, and nights that always fall.

When we were living in California, every few months we would drive to a Berkeley music shop to choose a new batch of reeds for Vincent's oboe. The shop was called Forrests, and the first time James heard that we were going to Forrests, his five-year-old face looked anxious. "What if we got lost in the forests?" he asked, and it took Vincent and me a few seconds to understand his fear. Then we all laughed because life was good at that moment, and we were not going to be lost in the forests. (And yet who among us is ever safe? "Midway upon the journey of our life / I found myself within a forest dark, / For the straightforward pathway had been lost"—even Dante did not pay attention to children's despair.)

I once found a series of numbers in the Notes app on my phone and remembered that Vincent had been deep in a knitting project, calling out numbers for me to write down. What are these numbers, and in what format do I record them, I asked, and he told me just to write them down, as he would need me to read them back to him later. To this day, I do not know what they were for, but the numbers seem reasonable, saved in perpetuity on my phone.

For some years, there were three different meals to be cooked for every dinner: one for Vincent, one for James, and one for my husband and me. A mother of a classmate of James's told me that I must be crazy to go to those lengths, but I was not crazy—I simply understood the necessity of this task.

There were apples to be cored and then cut into geometrically and aesthetically pleasing slices. At a memorial service held by Vincent's old schoolmates in California, his friends brought slices of apples to share and reminisced about the apple slices in his lunchbox, cut with absolute symmetry. That fact, in the days after Vincent's death, seemed to have vanished from my memory, and I was glad it was saved from oblivion by his friends.

That apples must be sliced perfectly was an aesthetic need of Vincent's that I grasped and agreed with, just as, when I made pancakes for James, I would be sure to make each piece different, forming it like a letter not found in the English alphabet. One must strive to live beyond the letter "Z," and one must strive to go beyond one language. James would teach himself several: Welsh, German, Romanian, and Russian, on top of Spanish, Italian,

and Japanese—the languages he took at school. His phone, I once found out by accident, was set to Lithuanian.

It seemed to me that to honor the sensitivity and peculiarity of my children—so that each could have as much space as possible to grow into his individual self—was the best I could do as a mother. Yes, I loved them, and I still love them, but more important than loving is understanding and respecting them, and this includes, more than anything else, understanding and respecting their choices to end their lives.



*"He says he never texted you back because he had a lot going on."*

Cartoon by Suerynn Lee

Things to do, places to go, a framework for living is a framework for memory.

James was given his first Gmail address at the age of three. After a quarrel with Vincent, he asked for my help in creating an e-mail account for himself. “Dear Vincent: You are a mini,” James wrote, mistyping “meanie” as “mini,” though observing the etiquette of proper correspondence. In those days, whenever I was out of town I would write a stack of cards ahead of time so that my husband could include a card on each day of my absence in James’s lunchbox. All those cards were signed “Love, Mommy.” Moments after Vincent received the e-mail, they reconciled, as Vincent was amused that James’s “hate e-mail” ended with “Love, James.”

My friend Edmund read me a poem he'd written recently, about three moments of happiness in his life. He said that somewhere he'd read that each person has only three real happy memories. Could that be true? Afterward, I started to record in my notebooks the moments I'd been happy with Vincent and James, and I quickly got past three.

If I train my mind on the happy moments, the framework for living seems sturdy enough. And yet it is not an indestructible shelter from catastrophes. A mother dedicating herself to the framework for living is like a shipbuilder building a vessel, not asking whether the voyage is to be through calm seas or tempests, not pondering whether there will be a tomorrow or not.

Seeing is believing, but a mother must restrain herself from *foreseeing*. To foresee is to give too much weight to intuition; foreseeing might be waving a white flag prematurely.

Vincent's death did not come as a complete surprise, but it was a never-healing wound. It was not, however, a wound inflicted by him or his decision. Once, at an event for a mental-health institute in Los Angeles, a psychiatrist interviewing me pressed, asking whether I felt any anger toward Vincent. He said he could detect no anger in the book I had written for Vincent. He told me that earlier in his career he'd lost a teen-age patient to suicide, and he could still feel lingering anger years later.

He is not the only person who has asked me about anger: the question must be relevant and legitimate, but anger is not a major or even a minor emotion in my life.

I did not feel any anger when Vincent died—not at him, and not at life, either. But I did feel baffled and wounded by life. That a mother could do all things humanly possible and sensible for a child but still not keep him alive—this was the fact that I would have to live with, I thought, every single day, for the rest of my life. It was Vincent's death that made me begin to use that phrase, “every single day, for the rest of my life.”

After Vincent's death, there were excruciating days, days of numbness, days of contentment and days of melancholy, days of reading and writing and days of not being able to read or write, days of holding on upside down

(like the bat in Marianne Moore's poem) and days of holding on right side up. But in all those days, where one is obliged to live ("Where can we live but days?" in Philip Larkin's words), there remained that thought: every single day, for the rest of my life, I will be thinking of Vincent.

I had not lived with the same dread for James when he was alive. My parental anxiety about him was largely about his future. Then, one day, he walked out of the world in the same way that Vincent did.

"There is no good way to say this. We're very sorry for your loss." The police came and then left swiftly, as though they were actors coming onstage to deliver their lines and, having done so, exiting right away.

I texted Brigid and then texted my therapist, telling them that James had died by suicide. Later, they both told me their initial reactions, which were similar.

"I knew every one of those words in the message, but I didn't understand what the words meant, put together," Brigid said. Half an hour before I sent that text to her, I had been on the phone with her, and James had been mentioned in our lighthearted conversation.

My therapist said that when he read the message his first thought was that "it made no sense, it made no sense at all."

James died on a Friday, and the Saturday before that was the last time Brigid had seen him (the last time for us, too). He was home from college for a meal on New Year's Day of the lunar calendar, and Brigid noticed his good spirits and his composure. A week or two before his death, my therapist had asked me (not for the first time) whether I worried about James feeling suicidal, and I had enough confidence to say that, even though one could never say no to that possibility with certainty, I didn't really think that he was suicidal.

So much for a mother's intuition.

And yet one wonders, in retrospect, what prompted the conversation about the probability or improbability of James feeling suicidal, which had been a

recurring topic in the therapist's office. Was it intuition or paranoia that led to the discussion shortly before James died—a premonition I couldn't explain? It doesn't matter, as the facts remain irrefutable: I did not anticipate that James would choose suicide; I did not detect any sign. For six years before Vincent's death, I lived in dread that he would. For the six years between the two boys' deaths, James, too, was pondering suicide—Vincent's, and then, at some point, his own. I did not know when that shift happened; I did not even think that shift would happen, as I worried only about James's life, not about his death.

Two months after Vincent died, James asked for my copy of "Anna Karenina." I hesitated, although I had never worried about what my children were reading. They were both precocious readers, and I let them explore all the literature available to them. I asked James, who was then in seventh grade, whether he knew that at the end of "Anna Karenina" Anna committed suicide. He said yes. I then asked him whether he wanted to read the novel because of that, and he only smiled his gentle smile.

I gave the book to him, and it became one of the books we talked about on and off for the next few years. Tolstoy's characters are easily vexed, or maybe Russians are easily vexed, he told me a few days into his reading. That the words "vex" and "vexation" appear often in the text is an observation I will always remember and treasure. James saw himself in Levin, as I had expected, but I did point out that Levin was often vexed though he—James—was rarely vexed. He adored Kitty; he was fond of Anna's brother, Stiva (because he was immoral *and* genuine); and he found Vronsky the most complex character in the novel. What about Anna, I said, and James thought for a while, then said that Anna brought tragedies onto herself *and then* complained about them. I now wish that I had asked him which he had found more troubling: that she brought tragedies onto herself or that she complained. We did not discuss her suicide.

I reread "Anna Karenina" recently. I had forgotten that, before Anna's suicide, there is Vronsky's attempt. He shoots himself, impulsively and perhaps not entirely wholeheartedly, out of desperate love for Anna. Overshadowed by Anna's death, this episode had somehow retreated from my memory. I wish I had discussed this with James. A few weeks before his

death, he told me that he was reading “The Myth of Sisyphus,” by Camus, and I said that I’d read the book, too, when I was in college. After that conversation, I turned to its opening pages: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”

Did I have a fleeting thought that I should have checked in with James to see if he felt suicidal? I can’t answer that question now, because on this side of death no answer can be trusted.

When we dropped James off at his dorm after that last dinner with us, I asked him what he was reading, and he replied that he was rereading “The Myth of Sisyphus.” Then he stepped out of the car and raised a hand. James was a person of few words and even fewer gestures. That raised hand, like that versatile single word “oh” in his conversation, could mean many things: hello, or goodbye, or leave me alone, or thank you, or simply a reply to the words I said when he stepped out of the car, “I love you, James.”

Through their entire lives, at every school drop-off, every time they were leaving for a party or a playdate, every time I was leaving for a trip, and with each exchange of text, the last thing I said to Vincent and James was inevitably “I love you.”

No matter how long we get to parent our children, there are only limited numbers of “I love you’s we can say to them. That, too, is a fact. ♦

*This is drawn from “[Things in Nature Merely Grow.](#)”*

*[Yiyun Li](#) has been contributing to *The New Yorker* since 2003. Her books include the story collection “[Wednesday’s Child](#),” which was a finalist for the 2024 Pulitzer Prize, and the memoir “[Things in Nature Merely Grow.](#)”*

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# Takes

- **[Richard Brody on Pauline Kael’s “Notes on Heart and Mind”](#)**

By Richard Brody | The movie critic's informal manifesto reflects both her brilliance and her blind spots during a revolutionary period in Hollywood.

[Takes](#)

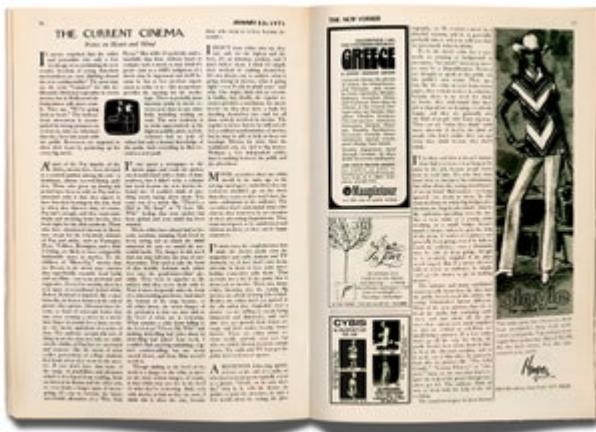
# Richard Brody on Pauline Kael's “Notes on Heart and Mind”

*The movie critic’s informal manifesto reflects both her brilliance and her blind spots during a revolutionary period in Hollywood.*



By [Richard Brody](#)

March 23, 2025



January 23, 1971

[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.](#)

When Pauline Kael joined *The New Yorker*'s staff as a movie critic, in January, 1968, the world of cinema was undergoing drastic change. The previous year, much of the film establishment had reacted with bewilderment—and even condemnation—to "Bonnie and Clyde," which mirrored sixties politics with its story of heedless youth caught in America's web of violence. In Kael's famous [New Yorker review](#) (which she'd written as a freelancer), she had hailed it as a sign of Hollywood's rejuvenation. But, three years into the job, she felt that the industry was backsliding. In January, 1971, after a week in which she deemed no new releases worth reviewing, she channelled her discontent into a startling article, "[Notes on Heart and Mind](#)," which, true to its title, is a batch of journal-style riffs rather than a conventional essay. Together, the notes form something of a manifesto and reveal why, despite Kael's status as the foremost critic of her era, she was also sharply at odds with it.

Kael charged that studios were clamping down on "the new creative freedom of young American moviemakers" and, instead, injecting their films with what she called "the new sentimentality," a regression to obsolete commercial traditions. She claimed that "the back-to-heart movement is accompanied by strong pressures on reviewers"—both from editors and from the studios themselves. Increasingly, she believed, studios kept her out of press screenings in order to prevent her reviews from appearing before movies opened. Her response is the philosophical and polemical core of "Notes," and the ideas she expresses there would remain central to her long career at *The New Yorker*, from which she retired as a regular reviewer in 1991.

"Movie executives," she writes, "often say critics should be the same age as the average moviegoer; sometimes they say reviewers shouldn't go on for more than three years or they won't have the same enthusiasm as the audience." Kael, by then a staff critic for exactly that duration, took such attacks personally, because she was hired at *The New Yorker* at age forty-eight—at a time when, she acknowledged, the target audience was much

younger. While calling out the industry's open ageism, she also spotlights a different generation gap: one that, to all appearances, troubled her far more. In "Notes," she heroically casts her lot with movies by young filmmakers, declaring, "If a few critics don't go all the way for them, the public doesn't hear about them in time to keep the directors working and to keep the art of film alive." Yet she inveighs against what she deemed the generation's "Pop" sensibility, which, she contended, led young people to abandon literature, drama, and other "traditional art forms," and to take—or, rather, to mistake—the mass medium of cinema for their equal.

Kael asserted that her age and long experience protected her from this trendy error, and she challenged the movie-loving young by playing the age card: "I remember seeing 'To Have and Have Not' the night it opened, in 1944, and I remember how everyone loved it," she writes. "But if anyone I knew had said that it was a masterpiece comparable to the greatest works of literature or drama, he would have been laughed at as a fool who obviously didn't know literature or drama." Kael was passionate about movies—at least according to the pop-culture norms and aesthetic judgments of her own youth—and so she had a firm prejudice about their limitations. "Movies are good at action; they're not good at reflective thought or conceptual thinking," she writes.

Yet, in the sixties and beyond, many directors advanced the art of movies precisely through unprecedented achievements in intellectual filmmaking. What's more, many of the young creators of this emerging cinema, including Martin Scorsese, Brian De Palma, and Peter Bogdanovich, exalted movies by such Hollywood filmmakers as Howard Hawks (the director of "To Have and Have Not") and Alfred Hitchcock as art of the first order—and resisted the commercial constraints that such elders endured. That's why, even as movies began to change rapidly again, in 1971, with the rise of the New Hollywood era that Kael would celebrate as a golden age, she was hostile to many of its masterworks—and why her mighty œuvre is both illuminated by her brilliant insights and darkened by her blind spots. ♦

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[\*\*Read the original story.\*\*](#)



## Notes on Heart and Mind

*Sixties Hollywood ushered in a tidal wave of commercial romantic slop, and now bad movies are more popular than good books. Can independent criticism save the day?*



[Richard Brody](#), a film critic, began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1999. He is the author of [“Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard.”](#)

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<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/takes/richard-brody-on-pauline-kaels-notes-on-heart-and-mind>

# Shouts & Murmurs

- **[The Elements of Style, 2025](#)**

By Eli Grober | Updating Strunk and White. Link two thoughts with a semicolon, as in: He's not even the real President; the other, even weirder billionaire seems to be in charge.

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## [Shouts & Murmurs](#)

# The Elements of Style, 2025

By [Eli Grober](#)

March 24, 2025



*Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez*

Reliable news coverage has never been more important than it is now. Journalists must remain vigilant and rigorous in the face of a second Trump Administration. To help them do so, we are releasing an updated version of Strunk and White’s “Elements of Style.” Please refer to the following examples when writing and reporting, for as long as that’s still allowed.

### **Use the serial comma.**

In a series of three or more terms, add a comma after each term except the last. For instance:

*He held office from 2017 to 2021, from 2025 to 2029, and then as a reanimated, disembodied head from 2029 to 2061.*

### **Put statements in positive form.**

Use the word “not” as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion. This sentence:

*He did not think that elections were necessary.*

would be better stated as:

*He thought that elections were unnecessary.*

### **Link two thoughts with a semicolon.**

In other words, use a semicolon to join independent clauses. For example:

*He's not even the real President; the other, even weirder billionaire seems to be in charge.*

### **Use commas to explain or clarify a sentence.**

Enclose parenthetic expressions between commas, like this:

*The best person to have access to all our money, if we never want to see any of it again, is the world's biggest hoarder.*

### **Eliminate unnecessarily convoluted clauses.**

Note the following report:

*One of the reasons he implemented tariffs and deportations was, supposedly, to strengthen the economy. Also, he claims, another reason was to stop crime.*

This would be better stated as:

*He decided to make the economy worse. Also, he's a racist!*

### **The difference between “less” and “fewer.”**

Incorrect: *The Democrats had fewer support than in the last election.*

Correct: *He won a huge mandate in an absolute landslide with less than half the votes.*

### **“Allusion” versus “illusion.”**

Incorrect: *His speech was an illusion to a darker time.*

Correct: *He made an allusion to the claims of his supporters that he's already made things better, which is an illusion.*

### **“It’s” versus “its.”**

Incorrect: *Its the people's house.*

Correct: *It's the lobbyists' house.*

## **Commas and conjunctions.**

Use a comma before a conjunction if it's introducing an independent clause, like so:

*Trump's Cabinet members may be the richest people in the country, but they understand the main priority of average Americans: how to protect their vast, unending wealth.*

## **Proper use of em dashes.**

Dashes may be used to set off an interruption, as illustrated here:

*His first thought upon returning to the Oval Office—if he had any thought at all—was to move the whole place to Florida.*

## **Omit needless words.**

Remember that a sentence should contain no unnecessary words or letters.

Something long and meandering like this:

*For the next four years, the United States will be an unpredictable, unsteady global superpower run by a fascist oligarchy, in which the people's representatives cater to a madman's whim.*

can simply be written as:

*F— him. ♦*

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*Eli Grober has contributed to The New Yorker since 2016. He is the author of the satirical essay collection “[This Won’t Help](#),” and he writes the humor newsletter “[Here’s Something](#).”*

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# Fiction

- **[“Hatagaya Lore”](#)**

By Bryan Washington | The bar was mostly empty, but Aaliyah was playing, so I passed the bartender some yen, and after he mixed my drink he lingered in front of me.

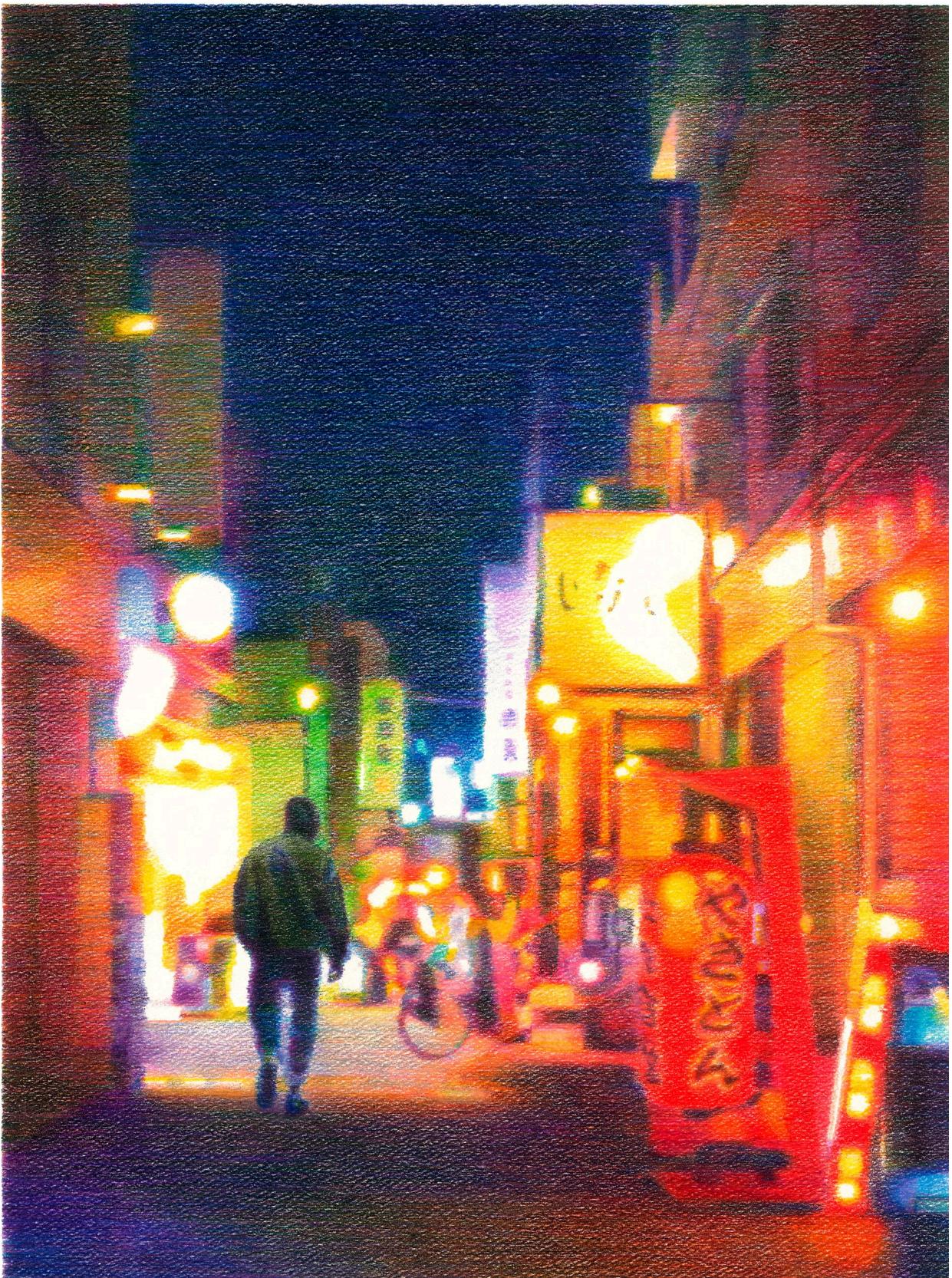
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[Fiction](#)

# Hatagaya Lore

By [Bryan Washington](#)

March 23, 2025



*Illustration by Kotori Mamata*

We moved to Tokyo from Dallas because of my husband's job, an unexplainable tech gig. When Craig told me about the promotion, he swore it would change his life. I didn't want anything to do with it—I had no interest in Japan. Couldn't find the country on a map, couldn't speak a lick of Japanese.

But I loved him.

Basically.

And he fielded most of our expenses.

It'll be an adventure, Craig said.

Most travellers don't survive their journeys, I said.

Always a well of optimism, Craig said, laughing.

I worked at a tutoring center, ghostwriting college-admissions essays for rich kids. Craig had his computer thing. Every few weeks, he murmured something about more cash, and half a year later we landed at Haneda.

•

Our apartment was a tiny little thing in Hatagaya. Deeply residential, a few stops away from Shinjuku. And a long fucking walk from the city proper. When I asked why Craig's company couldn't put him up somewhere flashier, or at least closer to a train station, and what was the point of slaving for Not Google if they couldn't even accomplish that, he said our situation was temporary. If everything worked out, we'd end up in a skyscraper.

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

After the first week, Craig was gone most of the day. The size of our home became less of an issue. I couldn't legally work, so I spent most afternoons willing acquaintances to text me back. Took long walks around the neighborhood, with its sloping side streets and telephone wires and tiny patio gardens. People either stared nakedly or ignored me entirely. Once, a lady

riding a bike with her kid ran right into me—before I could even help her up or anything, she was back on the pedals, turning the corner.

•

Craig liked to fuck the second he got home, jumping out of his shoes and immediately getting inside me. One night, a few months in, sweating and pumping on the futon, he asked how I was adjusting.

**Podcast: The Writer's Voice**

[Listen to Bryan Washington read "Hatagaya Lore."](#)

Could be better, I said.

Have you even tried? he asked.

This infuriated me. But I'd got better at masking my emotions. I smiled a little, in a way that I hoped demonstrated compliance.

Craig didn't catch it. He finally came, then immediately yawned, plopping a forearm across my belly. He'd stayed the same size since the move, but I felt like I'd only got chubbier.

Maybe go out into the world, then, he said.

You can't be serious, I said.

Just a thought, Craig said.

Consider keeping it to yourself next time.

You never even leave the *neighborhood*.

Where the fuck would I go?

I don't know, Craig said. Somewhere. How would you even know if you like Tokyo?

I can't fucking *communicate* with anyone.

Weren't you a teacher? Craig said. Surely you can teach yourself.

He was snoring not five minutes later. I stared at the ceiling. The train rattled a few blocks away, and laughter leaked from the tiny izakaya below us, whenever anyone stepped outside to smoke.

•

A few nights later, I made my way to Hatagaya Station, then swayed for two stops on the Keiō New Line until I got to Shinjuku.

Craig was working late again. I had Googled “gay tokyo bar dick japan,” and now bumbled toward the queer dives stacked in buildings across Ni-chōme. I didn’t really drink, and I didn’t care for faggy spaces in Texas, but I slipped through a door with English words scribbled in bright-red marker.

The bar was mostly empty. A damp dive with sofas. Crappy Christmas lights blinked overhead, and a tiny pug wheezed on a rug by the register. But Aaliyah was playing, so I passed the bartender some yen, and after he mixed my drink he lingered in front of me.

He asked me something in Japanese. I shook my head.

Oh, he said, in English. You’re a tourist.

Indefinitely, I said.

American?

Regrettably.

The bartender smiled, wiping down a glass. He was bearish, with a graying mustache, and introduced himself as Juro. His spot wasn’t on the TikTok circuit, so he was surprised I’d come in.

A few other guys in the room looked my way. They folded paper pamphlets, nodding along with “Rock the Boat.”

Juro said that they volunteered in H.I.V. awareness. A few days every month, they passed out infographics to bargoers around the gayborhood.

We're always looking for volunteers, Juro said, and I shook my head.

I'm illiterate, I said.

No problem, Juro said. Fags only care about looks.

No one would call me Adonis.

You'd be surprised, Juro said, setting a box of pamphlets beside my beer.

I folded paper for hours. The other volunteers introduced themselves: two locals (Fumi and Dai), a dude from Taipei (Zhao), and another queer from Hokkaido (Ren). We worked mostly silently, occasionally turning to the TV. Whenever the door opened, we'd look over before returning to the task at hand. Someone would offer the visitor a pamphlet. Most men waved us off, but a few sat down to read. Once, a tattooed whiteboy stepped inside, and the group looked to me to make the first move. When I offered him a pamphlet, the dude smiled and nodded.

Around two in the morning, me and the volunteers walked downstairs while Juro locked up. Stepped down the main drag until we finally split off, waving. The trains had long stopped running, and the walk to Hatagaya took me away from Shinjuku's department stores and neon lights and cabs, until the buildings thinned out and I walked up the apartment steps to find my dude tapping at his phone on the sofa.

Jesus, he said, I thought something happened.

Nothing ever happens, I said. I was out.

Out?

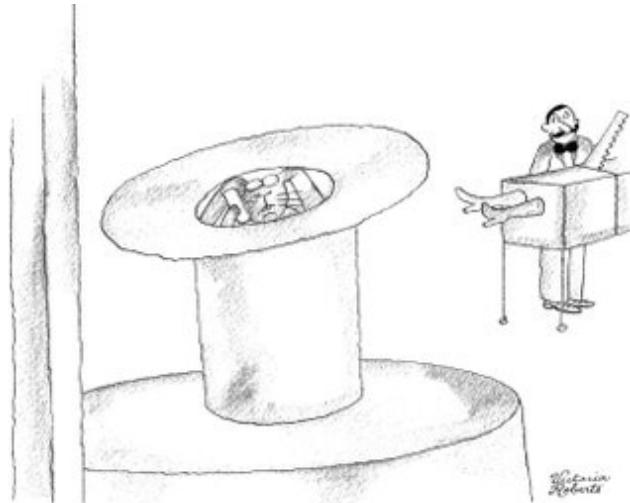
Volunteering.

There was a question on Craig's face, but he didn't ask it.

You could've texted, he said.

Sorry.

But I'm glad you found something. I was worried there.



*"I'm not sure when I'll be home—he's barely just sawing someone in half."*

*Cartoon by Victoria Roberts*

Right, I said, nodding, and set my phone on the counter between us, on my way to the shower.

•

I kept volunteering. Every other evening found me in the gayborhood. The guys at Juro's bar began opening up to me. Ren was in the middle of divorcing an Australian dude. Zhao had just come out to his family in Taiwan, and had started dating a bank teller in Ueno. Fumi and Dai lived in Mitaka, and managed a coffee shop in Kichijōji.

Whenever I arrived, it was just assumed that I'd get to work—and I did. Folding pamphlets. Passing them out. The other volunteers coached me on simple Japanese phrases. If someone spoke English, I'd chat them up.

One day, Juro told me I was improving.

Just a little bit, he said. No longer the idiot foreigner.

Bullshit, I said. I'll be useless forever.

Nothing is anything forever, Juro said. Not even nature.

•

One night, Craig asked if he could tag along.

He'd got off work early. I'd noticed that the gig was taking a different kind of toll on him than it had at first. He didn't talk about it at home anymore. Didn't unload office drama during our afterglow. This was a chance for me to tangibly brighten his day, beyond cooking and cleaning and letting him fuck my face, so I said, Why not?

When we stepped into Juro's bar, the usual crowd was there. Juro beamed. Ren and Fumi nodded along to everything Craig said. Dai bought us drinks. Zhao babbled about the differences between the tech industries in Taiwan and Japan, plying Craig with question after question.

But my guy wasn't into it. None of it. Seemed closed off in a way I hadn't seen before. Didn't say much on the train home, or on our short walk through Hatagaya, and even asked if he could just go straight to sleep.

This was unacceptable. I grabbed at his dick. He gave me a long look as I pressed against him, because I hardly ever initiated our fucks, but then he proceeded to kneel, sucking me off for the first time in months. When I came in his mouth, I held his head against me, and I thought he'd be upset, but he just grunted and eased himself up from the wood floor.

Before he showered, Craig said, Glad you're finally home.

I thought, *That's ridiculous.*

But I didn't know what to say.

•

Eventually, Juro asked why I didn't just get a work visa and teach in Japan.

This was nine or ten months in. Craig was nearing the end of his contract. Hadn't decided whether to renew it. When I asked, he just floated vague responses, and I could tell he was exhausted, but I wasn't sure exactly why.

One night, I told him that he needed to make a decision, because his shit affected me, too, and it turned into the first shouting match of our entire relationship. The only way to proceed was to fuck it out, which we did, and when I motioned to top him he made a face I'd never seen before.

Afterward, he said, You've changed.

You mean I'm vers now, I said.

No.

I was still thinking about this when he started snoring beside me. I couldn't sleep. So I ended up at Juro's place.

A few moments after I grabbed a seat at the bar, Juro began stirring a cocktail across from me.

If teaching doesn't fit you, he said, then just work here.

No thanks, I said. I lack your patience.

You'd be surprised, Zhao said. People like you.

They just don't want to seem racist, I said.

Stop that, Juro said. Didn't you work with kids?

That's different from dealing with homosexual drunks.

Not really, Fumi said.

No offense, I said, but doesn't working in this country actually suck?

Sometimes, Dai said. Especially for women. But not always. I know an immigration lawyer and she'd square you away.

I didn't know what to say to that. So I started folding pamphlets. My phone vibrated, and I reached for it—but Juro set a hand on my palm. He looked the most sober I'd ever seen him.

The time passes anyway, he said, you know? Sitting water rots.

That reminded me of something my mom used to say. So I nodded, and when my phone vibrated again I just kept folding.

•

The living room was silent when I got home.

I found Craig on the sofa, scrolling on his phone. When I sat beside him, he grinned. Set his hand on top of mine and rubbed my knuckles. Then he said that he didn't think he wanted to stay in Japan.

The company offered me a promotion back in Texas, he said. They'll pay for the move. After a few years, something might open up in the Seattle office. Maybe L.A.

A few years, I said.

Maybe less, Craig said. Maybe more.

I felt our chests rise and fall. For the first time, I noticed that the rhythm was off.

I said, I think I'd like to stay.

Craig didn't turn to me immediately. We both breathed into the quiet. Music leaked from the izakaya below us, someone strumming a guitar to a gentle chorus of voices.

I knew it, he said.

What, I said.

Never mind, Craig said. You know, you didn't even want to come here to begin with. It doesn't make any sense.

But it does to me, I said. This is the clearest I've felt about anything in a long time. I'll stay another year, and then, you know, we'll see.

My guy gave me a long look. As if he'd realized something. An answer to a question that he hadn't thought to ask.

Then he relaxed into the sofa. Made yet another new face. Something warm.

His palm still covered my knuckles, and he pressed his fingers in between mine.

Another year, he said.

Another year, I said, leaning into him until our shoulders touched.

You'll have to take photos, he said.

I will, I said.

Yoshi was visiting Tokyo, and it was his first trip to the city, so I bought drinks for the entire bar to celebrate.

We were at Juro's. I was off duty from volunteering. Or I'd clocked out. Which is to say, I'd already started drinking, a habit I'd acquired in the years since I began teaching in Tokyo.

So where did you say you were from again? I asked.

Fukuoka, Yoshi said, like I told you.

Like you told me.

You're drunk.

I'm drunk. And now you're in the big city.

Hakata's large enough, Yoshi said. And cleaner. Shinjuku stinks.

Generous of you, I said, leaning into his ear.

When Yoshi flashed his engagement ring, I bought him another round. Juro slid two shots our way, giving me a look. This was a scene he'd watched countless times: me and some wasted salaryman or bored househusband or rich tourist or day-tripper. Then they'd feel obligated or I'd get bored or circumstance would curdle whatever we'd thought was brewing.

So you're not out, I said.

What do you think? Yoshi said.

Thinking gives me migraines.

I'm here with you right now.

Yoshi lifted a hand for more shots. Juro shook his head in disapproval. But he poured two more, adjusting the volume on the karaoke machine for Zhao and Dai, then flashed another look until I finally blushed.

You should leave soon, Yoshi said. The trains will stop.

We, I said.

You.

Us.

Will you pay for a cab?

No, I said. Enjoy your walk home alone.

Juro smirked. Yoshi chuckled. But I stood beside him as he reached for his coat.

•

Yoshi's hotel was a few blocks from Ni-chōme. No one with eyes would have called it a splurge. And our sex was average, but his movements were

soft. I'd fucked a good share of men after Craig, and most simply swam through the motions of intimacy.

A suck. A squeeze. It was rare for us both to finish.

But Yoshi was a little more patient. He certainly wasn't inexperienced. Didn't demand, but didn't exactly acquiesce, either, and we came beside each other, jerking ourselves off.

Afterward, I laid my head on his pillow while he hummed.

Sounds like Mariah Carey, I said.

You're drunk, Yoshi said.

He kept humming, twirling one hand on his stomach and the other on my head.

An hour later, I jolted awake. Yoshi sat across from me, sipping coffee from a mug.

*Fuck*, I said. Sorry.

People sleep. It happens.

Not to me.

Don't worry about it. I made you coffee.

I gave him a long look. I don't usually take drinks from hookups, but declining this seemed beyond the boundaries of rudeness. I took a sip from the mug he passed me, and then another. It was sensational.

How did you do this, I asked.

My fiancée brews a cup every time we finish, Yoshi said. She says it settles the body. So I started bringing a French press when I travel.

Mm. Do you spoil all of your lays?

Ha, Yoshi said. Not too many of those.

He grinned, taking another sip, but I couldn't tell if he was lying or what.

•

I saw Yoshi pretty often that month. During the day, we'd work our respective gigs. At night, we'd drink at Juro's until the trains stopped running, then stroll through Shinjuku until we ended up in his hotel room. Sometimes Yoshi went home with me, to a tiny place in Hatagaya I'd started renting after Craig's lease ran out.

When it came to fucking, once we'd found our rhythm, we had the sort of sex I hadn't experienced since I was younger. He'd been with only a few other guys in Fukuoka, all of them closeted, but they must've shown him the ropes. Yoshi always made coffee afterward. Regardless of where we ended up, I'd fall asleep first, and he'd still be there when I woke up, humming softly.

One night, after I finished riding him, Yoshi told me his parents were paying for the hotel. He worked for the family business, something to do with food packaging.

The reveal, I said. And here I thought I'd won the lottery.

Aren't you allergic to assumptions? Yoshi said.

I made an exception for you.

Huh, Yoshi said, propping himself on an elbow.

My family knows I'm gay, he added. They've always known. But they just, you know, don't want to accept it. I thought they could, for a while.

But they tricked you.



*"Silicon Valley guy bought it for his cat."*  
Cartoon by Harry Bliss

Ha. No. They decided they wanted a grandchild.

A beat passed. Yoshi scrunched his nose.

You don't have to give them one, I said.

You sound very confident, Yoshi said. Is it the American in you?

O.K., O.K., I said. Americans are shitheads. I hate us. You're right. But no one *has* to do anything.

Yes, Yoshi said. Well. *I* do, if I'd like to remain an heir. So they asked me to get *this* out of my system before the wedding. Hence the business trip to Tokyo.

I opened my mouth, and then I closed it. I don't think it works that way, I said.

Obviously, Yoshi said.

He sipped his coffee. Then his body relaxed, just a bit.

My fiancée says it's up to me, Yoshi said. She knows. But I don't want to hurt her.

I didn't know what to say to this. So I rubbed Yoshi's arm and put my ear against it. I wasn't into actual intimacy, usually, but this felt natural. And Yoshi put his arm around my shoulder, sinking a little further into the mattress, humming just under his breath.

•

The next week, Yoshi bought a ticket back to Fukuoka.

He asked me to go with him.

Just for the weekend, he said. You can see where I'm from. Before things are set in stone.

We were lounging on his bed, half dressed. He picked at his thumb, and I set my hand on top of it.

What about your family?

They'll be in Kagoshima.

And your fiancée?

I understand if you can't, Yoshi said, smiling.

The long weekend ended with a holiday, so I didn't even need to take time off. Met Yoshi at his hotel with my lone suitcase. I don't know what we looked like as we trekked through Tokyo Station, settling beside each other on the Shinkansen: two friends; a pair of businessmen; a tour guide and his charge. Neither of us really spoke. Yoshi watched YouTube videos of pandas on his phone, occasionally blinking out the window.

Five hours later, we stepped off at Hakata Station. When we arrived at his family's place, I actually gasped. Their house—their *property*—sat on a lot covered with foliage and flowers and stone. Inside, as Yoshi walked me from

room to room, I couldn't help but imagine him stumbling down the hallway as a child.

You're an archduke, I said.

It's very regular, Yoshi said.

Yoshi. This transcends wealth.

He gave me a knowing look, smirking.

That night, we walked to dinner alongside the river, ending up at a tiny curry restaurant a few blocks away. It was run by two women, both of whom looked impossibly old. The younger lady took one look at Yoshi before yelling that she'd known he'd be back. How long had it been? A decade? And he'd brought a *friend*? I tried following the conversation, but their accents went over my head.

Twenty years, the other woman said, from the kitchen.

They turned from me to Yoshi, smiling. I nodded, and Yoshi blushed. After handing us two plates of curry, an omelette, and a tiny platter of pickles, they switched on the television above us, which was playing a variety show, and sang along. Yoshi hummed, bobbing his head.

For all of the space in Yoshi's home, we ended up pushing two futons together in the living room.

Imagine if your parents walked in on us, I said.

Let's not, Yoshi said.

What would you do?

Yoshi turned to me, grinning. He crooked his leg into mine, and I squeezed.

Thank you for coming here, he said.

It's O.K., I said.

No, Yoshi said. It's a big deal. I couldn't ask anyone else. I'm getting married soon, and nobody really knows me. And that makes me pretty fucking sad.

I didn't know what to say. He'd never sworn in front of me before. I rolled a little closer to him, and our chests touched.

I'm supposed to be the man of the family, Yoshi said, and I don't feel that way at all, you know? It feels wrong. Like it doesn't fit.

A beat passed between us. A shade of understanding.

As a man, I asked.

Yoshi was silent. But he nodded.

I'm not a woman, he said. Or I don't think I am. I'm fine, you know, with people referring to me as a man. But I just don't know. And now, marriage.

It's O.K. not to know, I said.

It's not O.K., Yoshi said.

It's O.K.

It's going to be hard.

Probably, I said. But it'll be O.K.

That's fucking presumptuous, Yoshi said.

He started breathing heavily, and I hugged him tight. Eventually, I couldn't separate his breaths from my own.

We fell asleep like that. When I woke up, my head was under a pillow. Yoshi was stroking my ear. I heard humming, but I kept my eyes closed and fell back asleep.

•

My train ticket was for the next afternoon.

I told Yoshi that he didn't have to walk me to the station, but he insisted. He was snoring when I woke up, the first time he'd fallen asleep beside me. I watched him, trying to fix the memory in place.

I'll visit, I said.

You don't have to do that, Yoshi said.

Then you'll forget about me.

Stop. Just text.

We'll see, I said, and Yoshi smiled and blushed.

He rolled my suitcase along the sidewalk. It was late enough that the streets weren't clogged, but there was steadily growing foot traffic. And then, as we turned toward the station, we saw it: a moving crowd, bunched up in parts and patchy in others. But they moved in a straight line, holding rainbow flags above their shoulders.

I felt Yoshi tense up. And then he stepped toward the crowd. He glanced, briefly, at me, and I shrugged.

I saw him moving in and out of the crowd. I'd thought I'd lost him, but then he turned and waved.

He was an old man I ran into every couple of weeks at the gay sauna. Always fucking someone's brains out. Our first interaction was when, as I stepped out of the shared bath, dripping across the tile, he grabbed my ass.

Firm, he said, in English.

Rude, I said, in Japanese.

He smiled, nodding, as I dried off and walked away.

A few hours later, after a bear visiting from Malaysia had edged me within an inch of my life, I was back in the water. The baths had mostly cleared out.

Steam rose toward the ceiling. That's when this old fucking man joined me, again, grinning and slipping into the water beside me.

What's your type, he asked.

Don't have one, I said.

That can't be true, he said. Everyone's got something.

So you've met everyone?

His name was Tatsuki. He lived in Ueno now, but for years he'd worked between Fukushima and Kentucky, in a job in the auto industry. As he spoke, I looked at a passing guy's ass, and Tatsuki lit up.

Your type, he smiled, nodding.

When I started to stand, he put a hand on my hip. Direct, but gentle. Then he asked me to have a beer with him.

You look like a drinker, he said.

Still rude, I said.

Who's rude? It's how you look.

Yeah, I said. Well. I've stopped.

Why?

No good came from it.

Tatsuki looked like he had more questions, but he smiled instead.

Then a bottle of water, he offered.

Next time, I said, standing, and he grinned again, saluting me and splashing us both.

•

It was a few weeks before I went back to that sauna. It was out of the way for me, given my gig tutoring kiddos in Setagaya. But, on a nothing evening, I was plodding through the halls again when I saw Tatsuki. He'd seduced some beautiful guy, and I watched them go to town for a few minutes before Tatsuki looked up, squinting through the dimness. I thought he'd ignore me, but instead he smiled and waved me over. I nodded, and turned back down the hallway.

And this is how my next few months at this sauna went. I'd stop in on a weekday, and Tatsuki was always there, always inside some gorgeous dude. He ended up with all kinds of guys: Japanese, Chinese, Nepalese, Nigerian, Indian, Brazilian, chubby, twink. And he was this fucking old man. But Tatsuki moved deftly, expertly, so that a crowd couldn't help but grow around him.

Somehow, in spite of this, he'd always catch my eye. Grinning.

The men who'd gathered to watch would turn to me, with a question on their faces. All I could do was blush.

•

One week, heading to Juro's bar, I nodded off on the Marunouchi Line. I'd been living in Tokyo for nearly six years by then, and that had never happened before. I ended up missing my stop at Shinjuku-sanchōme Station, blinking as we cruised into Yotsuya. I'd been dreaming about Craig and Yoshi. We were sharing a picnic on a blanket in the park. They looked at me expectantly, because I'd forgotten something essential, but I couldn't remember what.

When I woke up the second time, the train had settled at Ikebukuro, and I was leaning on someone's shoulder.

Of course it was Tatsuki's.

You drool, he said, chuckling.

I was mortified when he passed me a handkerchief. Our car was totally empty. He said he'd seen me on the train and sat down next to me while I slept.

Dangerous out here, Tatsuki said.

My savior, I said.

You're young, Tatsuki said, waving his hand. You never know. But here, he said. Make it up to me?

I don't want to fuck you, I said.

O.K., Tatsuki said. Then let's have a beer. I know this area.

I feel like you'd say that about anywhere we ended up.

You already know me too well!

We got off, bobbing and weaving through the station. Walked through one alley, and then another, until we ducked into an izakaya crowded with salarymen. Tatsuki ordered skewer after skewer for the two of us, and water for me.

Because you don't drink, he said.

He'd been married for decades, he told me. His wife had passed away. He would always love her, he said, more than anything or anyone, but now he could explore this other thing.

Nearly seventy years old, Tatsuki said, and I feel like a child again.

A horny delinquent, I said.

Well, Tatsuki said, laughing.

After we finished our first round, I told him an orange juice was fine. And he smiled even wider. He asked if we could take a photo, and I nodded, gesturing toward his phone. But then he reached for mine.



*"Why, of course you were a good book—it's not your fault if nobody read you."*  
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

So you don't forget me, he said.

You've made that extremely difficult, I said.

I'm serious, Tatsuki said. This is a good night. You have to appreciate those. You might think they're infinite now, but they aren't.

He really did look like a young man. I could feel myself blushing. So I tried to compose myself, and Tatsuki threw a peace sign over my head as he snapped six photos.

•

I saw him a few more times at the sauna in the next months. Always fucking or flirting. But he'd still spot me, and grin, and I'd linger a little longer. Then I caught a nasty cold. Sinusitis like I'd never had in my life. Didn't want much to do with anyone, or anything, and I certainly wasn't looking to fuck. I spent the evenings at my apartment, or at the ramen shop up the road. Zhao and Dai and Fumi dropped by my place with cup ramen, cheesing behind

their masks. Crammed into my studio, we looked like Russian dolls in a cupboard.

I was back at work, a few weeks later, once the infection had settled into a sniffle, when I saw a photo of Tatsuki in the paper on another tutor's desk. The funeral was that weekend. Heart attack. Tatsuki looked stern in the picture, the most serious I'd seen him. I thought, for a moment, that whoever had chosen it hadn't really known him.

It took some work, but I found out where the wake was being held. The building was understated but sprawling, tucked away in Meguro. There were a lot of people, and, of course, I was the only non-Japanese, but no one stopped me or asked what I was doing. I recognized one guy from the sauna, a short dude in glasses. All we did was nod.

Tatsuki could've been sleeping. Even in death, he didn't look serious. As if we'd all fallen for some big joke. When I left, I walked back to the station, and then past it, until I found a bar, where I sat down and ordered a beer.

I've never had much luck with the apps, but a guy hit me up over the holidays. Tokyo all but shuts down between Christmas and the New Year. People escape to their childhood homes outside the city, and what's left are the ones who don't want to and the ones who can't and the tourists and stragglers.

On those days, I'd pass by the bakery and the wine shop and the convenience store, stepping inside to wave. I'd sit at the laundromat. I'd wander through Shibuya, just to be around people, though even the crowds there were thinner. I'd cast a net over the apps to see what came back. Usually, nothing.

But this guy pinged me. All he said was hello. I asked if he was looking to fuck, and he said, yes, with an ellipsis, and this was enough for me—I ended up at a leaning building beside Ōkubo Station which could've sold SIM cards or soju or pills.

A Turkish guy smoking by the mailboxes gave me a look. He turned away when I hit the buzzer. Then Hoon clattered down a staircase, pushing the

door open in sweatpants and a too tight black tank top.

Your hair, he said.

What, I said.

It's different. From the app.

Should we make a list?

You're funnier in person, Hoon said. That's good.

He wore comically large glasses. Looked chubbier than in his photo, but so did I. He led me up to his room, which had barely enough space for the two of us: an open suitcase occupied one end, while at the other a laptop and bundled cords sat on piles of clothes. I looked at Hoon, and Hoon looked back, and since neither one of us made any moves I sat down on the mattress beside him.

•

We started groping each other, briefly, before Hoon apologized and said it wouldn't happen: he'd just come ten minutes before. He pantomimed a jerking-off motion.

You can't be serious, I said.

Too excited, he said.

Incredible, I said. Even though you knew I was coming over.

It's a compliment, Hoon said. We could take a walk instead?

He was already fumbling through the suitcase. I gave him a long look before I told him it was fine.

Stepping through the same streets with someone else was an entirely different experience. It'd been a while for me. We walked down Shin-Ōkubo's main road, past the samosa venders and milk-tea shops and Korean-

barbecue joints and cellphone-repair stands, then Hoon asked if I wanted to get lunch, because he was starving.

You say that like we've actually *done* anything, I said.

The restaurant we picked sold Thai food. I was worried, all of a sudden, that we wouldn't have anything to talk about. But, once Hoon got started, he didn't stop. He'd flown to Itami from Incheon in order to fuck a man in Kyoto. The guy had nailed Hoon at his apartment and then promptly kicked him out. Turns out, he had a boyfriend. And they weren't open. Hoon scraped up some cash, but it was too expensive to change his return ticket. And, also, he'd already taken off work.

He'd never been to Tokyo, though, so he took the train from Kansai. He had found a tiny rental in Shin-Ōkubo, but he'd have to be out that night.

Stressful holiday, I said.

It's fine, Hoon said. Better than spending it at home. Ever been to Korea?

Only on a layover. But I'd like to visit Seoul one d—

Don't, Hoon said. The only good thing is the food.

He gasped all of this between mouthfuls of rice noodles. When it was time to pay the bill, he paused for just long enough that I pulled out three bills and passed them to the waiter.

Thanks, Hoon said. I'll pay you back?

Sure, I said.

I'm serious!

Mm.

We stepped outside, and the temperature had fallen. You could see your breath. A Singaporean tour group walked slowly in front of us, and we trailed them for a few blocks until one side street slipped into another.

When we made it back to his room, Hoon turned to me. He asked if I was spending the holiday alone.

Maybe I could stay with you, he said.

You can't be fucking serious, I said.

I *am* fucking serious, Hoon said. We still haven't had sex yet.

You really are out of your m—

And you're in the city by yourself, right? Me too! It's not good to be alone for the holidays!

Hoon held out his hands, breathing into them, and told me to do the same. It's different when it's your own body's heat, he said, taking hold of my palms.

•

Hoon spent the next few nights at my place.

Mostly, we lounged. Or went for walks around the neighborhood. Every routine thing for me was some big fucking thing for him. He marvelled at the little bakery beside my apartment. At the gyoza shop. At the little dog that patrolled the grocery store. We walked through Yoyogi Park, and he slowed to a near-standstill.

On New Year's Eve, we ended up at Juro's bar. Hoon drank one oolong-hai, and then another, before inhaling three more.

You made a new friend, Juro said.

We aren't friends, I said.

Exactly, Hoon said. He's my *lover*.

Whatever, Juro said. Happy New Year.

Zhao passed us drinks, squeezing my shoulder on his way to another corner. Ren told us about a nightmare hookup, where this guy had an allergic reaction to the lube and ended up in the hospital. Hoon couldn't help but laugh, yelling about a nut allergy, absolutely mortifying me, but then Fumi chuckled, too, and also Dai and Ren and Juro, until all of us giggled into one another's shoulders.

Whitney Houston danced onscreen. We cheered, clapping shoulders. Hoon started yawning, once and then again, before Juro nudged me and pointed.

Escort your charge home, he said.

It's still early, I said. He's fine.

Right, Hoon said. I'm *fine*.

Go home, Juro said. And visit a shrine on your way. You'll need the luck this year, clearly.

Hoon gave me a long, sleepy look. We waved to the others, and ducked out of the bar.

We made the drunken walk from the bars to my apartment, bumping into each other from time to time. We heard the aftermath of year-end variety shows from open windows.

There are so many people here, Hoon said, but I still feel so *lonely*.

That's what living in a city is, I said.

Really, Hoon said. I can't even talk to my *family*. They wanted me to take over the restaurant, but then I came out, and it was, like, *poof*, Hoon doesn't exist anymore? I didn't matter. Now they don't even know where I am.

That's too heavy for me, I said.

Hoon turned gravely serious, grabbing my shoulder.

I'm a heavy guy, he said.

Then Hoon stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, turned, and kissed me on the mouth.

We lingered. Then he kept walking, giggling, hunched over. I could see his breath above him.

•

When I woke up the next morning, I couldn't have been sicker. Hoon laughed, and slipped on a face mask.

We'd tried fucking, in a clumsy way, the night before. But nothing came out right. He pulled my dick too hard. I grazed him with my teeth. Neither of us could orchestrate a proper sixty-nine. In the end, we curled up naked against each other, mostly erect, pressed against the wall.

And now, illness.

Serves you right, Hoon said. Out kissing strange boys.

I could hardly open my eyes. Hoon swept my apartment. Bought groceries. Hauled bags of vegetables and fish into the kitchen. Knelt over my lone pot, actually scowling at my cutlery, before he made a stew of kimchi and seafood and instant noodles. Little dishes surrounded our bowls. I watched all of this from the bed as he wandered around in boxers and an old T-shirt, until he'd finally finished cooking, and set a bowl of stew alongside banchan on my shitty coffee table.

I took one sip, and then a second, before realizing that I would never taste anything so delicious in my apartment again.

Hoon only frowned.

Your knives suck, he said. And your stove is defective.

I don't really cook.

Clearly. This isn't my best work either.

It's perfect, I said. This is incredible.

Sure. But it could be better.

After we'd eaten, Hoon ran a bath, and I settled into it. A few minutes later, the door slid open, and Hoon stood naked except for his mask. He eased himself in, and his knees enveloped mine. Nearly sitting in my lap, he smiled with his eyes.

Wait, I said. Fuck. I'm going to get you sick.

Now you're considerate, Hoon said. Your dick won't do it. I think I'll be fine.

He took hold of my hands, rubbing them between his. Moved closer until our thighs were entwined.

*Stop* that, I said.

O.K., Hoon said.

I'm serious.

I am, too, Hoon said. Didn't I say that I'd pay you back?

About a year later, I was walking through Hatagaya when I saw a Black woman biking. Just out of the corner of my eye. Before I had time to process, she nearly collided with me.

The only reason I didn't bust my ass was that I jumped into the road. I was fucking pissed. But the lady looked unbothered.

Close one for you, she said.

I didn't even know what to say.

I feel bad, though, she said. Would you like some cake?

What?

Cake. And tea.

Lady, I said, you almost fucking ended me.

I'm Sherry, she said. And you're dramatic. But it's cute, and I live nearby. Swing by one day.

Then she pedalled back onto the road and turned the corner.

•

I'd been living on the block for years now. The grocers knew me. The pharmacists, too. I'd seen vintage stores and yakitori stalls and flower shops come and go. I could recognize the tint of dawn on the road. Had seen the neighbors' kids take their first steps, and then later walk themselves to school. Knew that I probably would never feel completely a part of it. But I also knew that this was a lot to ask for: to feel even this connected somewhere, for a moment, was a gift.

I'd never seen that lady, though.

I thought about Sherry as I passed the waving kebab vender, and the dry cleaner, and the ramen window, and the konbini. Thought about her while I descended the steps to the Keiō New Line, and promptly forgot about her when I stepped into the traffic outside Shinjuku Station.

•

A week later, walking on the same Hatagaya thoroughfare, I saw the same bike. This time, a Black girl was walking it down the road. A little like she was waiting for me. We held eye contact, and then I followed her through the neighborhood, weaving among locals and Chinese and French tourists and a marathon unspooling beside us. Eventually, she turned down one street, and then another, until the cheers quieted and the air turned heavy.

The home she pulled into had a tidy doorway, with laundry strung across a balcony above. Two cats sprawled underneath the clothes, cleaning themselves.

## MEET THE BROCCOLI BROTHERS!



*Cartoon by Roz Chast*

And a woman sat on the porch, with her arms folded.

Finally came through, Sherry said.

Just passing by, I said. There's a bakery I like in the area.

Right, Sherry said. You have time for tea?

I did not. But I told her that was fine, kicked my shoes off at the door, and stepped into a pair of slippers.

The layout was a typical Japanese home. Ceramics of Black people in repose lined the window and the table. Plants covered the floor and the counters, but everything looked comfortable. The girl from earlier nose-dived onto the sofa, extracting a Nintendo Switch from the crevices. A teen sat at the kitchen table, tapping at her phone. She gave me a glance, and then a harder stare, before proceeding to ignore me entirely.

You have an accent, Sherry said. You're West Indian?

Oh, I said. Just my parents. I grew up in America.

We never really leave the islands. Only trade them. Looks like you did, too.

I've never been to Jamaica.

Different ways of being, my dear.

I took a seat at the table. When she set down a slice of pound cake, beside a fork and glass of water, I wasn't sure whether to take it. But she watched until I took a bite.

Are you a baker? I asked.

*Used* to be, Sherry said. Other things now. I had a shop, because Japanese love sweets. Couldn't get enough of mine. Made enough to settle for a bit.

I chewed the cake while Sherry sipped tea across from me. Eventually, the girl wandered into the kitchen and nuzzled against her mother's armpit.

When Sherry asked how long I'd been in the neighborhood, I froze.

Nine years now, I said.

You sound surprised, she said.

Haven't really thought about it.

The time passes anyways, Sherry said. I've lived here for, what, thirty years? *Thirty* bloodclaat years? Days just zooming by. Kyoto first. Sendai. Nara and Nagasaki. Tokyo, then Osaka, and Tokyo again. Two children, Kerry here, Nessy in the front room. It used to be you never saw any foreigners, you know? I was an alien.

That had to have been hard, I said.

It wasn't. Fear is hard. Rocks are hard. Now everyone's here.

Sherry laughed at this, nearly doubling over. I took another sip of my tea. Kerry looked up at her mother, smirking. When she turned to me, I couldn't read her face.

Take another slice, Sherry said. *Can't* finish it ourselves. Come back whenever you want another, you hear?

•

Something always got in the way.

My tutoring picked up. I fell for one guy, and another, and then a third, who nearly got me to move to Nagoya. There were little flings and hookups and attachments amid all of this, and the fibre of daily living, and the constants in my life which served as the filling in between.

But I still thought of Sherry and her bike. Riding around the city. Swore I saw her here and there, but of course it was never her.

Once, I was daydreaming about her at Juro's bar when he snapped his fingers in front of me.

Our volunteer group had grown a little larger. Zhao had a new boyfriend. Fumi and Dai had opened a second coffee shop. Ren had moved to Yokohama with some man, but he dropped in from time to time. A few younger guys and an older one had joined us, too.

We lost you for a bit, Juro said.

Just thinking, I said.

Don't strain too hard, Juro said. The living need you.

Then he handed me another box of pamphlets, and I blushed, beginning to fold.

•

About a year later, I was rushing through Shibuya Station when I saw the woman's older daughter.

Our eyes connected. I thought she might ignore me. But she held the gaze. She was with a Japanese guy, tall and aggressively handsome, and she set a hand on his elbow before stepping toward me.

It's you, she said.

It's me, I said. Nessy, right?

Vanessa.

Vanessa. How's your mother?

Oh, she said, she left last year.

What?

Back to Mandeville. She never left there, really.

I felt something run through the back of my head, like clear water.

•

It happens, Vanessa said. Ma always thought, you know, that people return to where they need to be. Or they end up where they need to be. One or the other.

You didn't go with her, I asked.

Why would I do that? I live here.

She gave me a long look. It wasn't an insult.

Her dude shuffled his feet by the vending machine. The look that had clouded her face disappeared. I asked where she lived, and she said Asagaya.

Maybe I'll see you around, she said. She smiled at me, widely.

I'll see you, I said.

Then Vanessa laughed, as if she knew it was improbable.

But I believed it could happen.

And I still do.

At this point, absolutely anything seems possible to me.

A few moments later, I realized that I was still staring, and at nothing now—she was long gone. Then I turned, a little late for the bar, already coming up with an excuse. ♦

*Bryan Washington has contributed fiction, in addition to essays on food, queer life, and Texas, to The New Yorker since 2018. His books include the novels “[Palaver](#)” (November, 2025) and “[Family Meal](#),” which received a 2024 Lambda Literary Award.*

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[\*\*A Critic at Large\*\*](#)

# We're Still Not Done with Jesus

Scholars debate whether the Gospel stories preserve ancient memories or are just Greek literature in disguise. But there's a reason they won't stay dead and buried.

By [Adam Gopnik](#)

March 24, 2025



*In “Miracles and Wonder,” Elaine Pagels concludes that the most improbable Gospel stories enlist tropes and myths to smooth over inconsistencies and inconvenient circumstances. Illustration by Cecilia Carlstedt*

One subject that never dies, and, more significantly, never bores, is the life and times of the first-century Jewish rabbi and martyr Jesus, whose followers founded a religion in his name, or, rather, in honor of his title, Christ, meaning “the anointed one,” or Messiah. (Not necessarily a divine

title, it had previously been associated with military and religious leaders, often indicating something closer to “the great” than “the godlike.”) Along with Buddha and Muhammad, he is one of three nameable figures credited with founding religions that have continued to grow over thousands of years.

The Princeton professor emeritus Elaine Pagels, who has written many imposing and engrossing books on early Christianity, is back with a kind of culminating work, “[Miracles and Wonder](#)” (Doubleday), the title slyly looking at both St. Paul and Paul Simon. Though her purposes are manifold, she begins by ably navigating through the shoals of the essential but surprisingly unsettled sources that seem to relate the events of Jesus’ life and death. There are, first, the Epistles of St. Paul, the late convert who brought the Jewish heresy to the Gentiles, releasing it from Torah observance and law, and making it a universal faith. The seven undisputed Pauline letters were written in and around the fifties, about fifteen to twenty years after the Passion; six others are regarded as later, polemical forgeries, correcting Paul’s egalitarianism with more gender-bound rules. Then, there are the “letters” (Hebrews and Jude and so on) of uncertain early date and more uncertain authorship.

Most important, there are the four Gospels, written in Greek some forty to sixty years after the Crucifixion is thought to have happened. These were composed somewhere far from Jerusalem, in a language that Jesus and his disciples would not have known, by writers who could not have been eyewitnesses. The books are attributed, in probable order of composition, to Mark, Matthew, Luke, and John, with the attribution provided by the Greek formula of “according to,” unique to these texts. The suggestion is that these are not accounts “by” So-and-So but “the story as told to” So-and-So.

## **What We’re Reading**

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Though fugitive and fragmentary, the events in the Gospels take place on a fixed historical time line. Judea, the remaining Jewish kingdom—conquered throughout the centuries by Assyrians, Persians, and Greeks—was annexed by the Roman Empire around 6 C.E. The story of Jesus' life, if accurately reported, occurred in the brief window between the annexation and the Jewish revolt of the sixties and seventies. That fanatic rebellion, mournfully chronicled by the great Jewish historian Josephus, ended in a catastrophe rivalled in the history of Jews only by the Holocaust; it involved the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem, the enslavement and exile of thousands, and the loss of sovereignty over Jewish holy sites. From this desolation arose the Messianic faith of Christianity, which, after the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312, eventually became the Roman Empire's sole state religion.

How Jesus' story fits into this framework is very much Pagels's question. She's working within a tradition of historical-Jesus studies that took shape in earnest more than two centuries ago, and for her the Gospels are palimpsests of lore, legend, and propaganda, beneath which a core of oral transmission and shared recollection remains detectable. The shifting Nativity narratives, for instance, suggest that rumors about Jesus' parentage existed from the beginning. Pagels notes that the miraculous-birth stories appear relatively late. Paul—who never met Jesus, though he might have met his brother—mentions nothing about a virgin birth. Neither does Mark, who makes Jesus' adoption by God as his son the true beginning of the story, tied to Jesus' baptism by John. In various texts, including Apocryphal works that date to around the same time as the Gospels proper, Joseph appears to suspect Mary of infidelity. Meanwhile, an early Jewish polemic claimed that Jesus was the illegitimate son of a Roman soldier nicknamed

Panther—perhaps employing a tasteless but pointed pun on the Greek word *parthenos* (virgin).

The story of the virgin birth, Pagels argues, was introduced by Matthew and, in another version, by Luke in order to address such lingering doubts. The consoling notion of divine impregnation was commonplace in the Hellenistic world, with countless tales of gods foisting demigods on virgins. Plutarch, for instance, described Rome's founder Romulus as born to a divinely impregnated vestal virgin. As Catherine Nixey, a writer for *The Economist*, shows in "[Heretic: Jesus Christ and the Others Sons of God](#)" (Mariner), an irreverent reassessment of the Jesus stories in light of similar myths, early Christians didn't merely acknowledge these parallels but actively traded on them, as precedents for their own claims. The second-century apologist Justin Martyr argued that Christianity's central tenets were no different in kind from the divine births of Zeus' many sons—though, of course, he insisted that *his* divine-birth story happened to be true. The only real originality in the accounts of Jesus' virgin birth is their distinctly Jewish and prudish tone, with the impregnation dignified and at arm's length rather than represented, as in the Hellenistic myths, as a shower of gold or the lovemaking of an amorous swan.

Pagels's larger point is that the most improbable Gospel tales serve to patch a fractured narrative—using familiar tropes and myths to smooth over inconsistencies that believers struggled with from the beginning. We repair the rips in memory's fabric with the filler of fable. (And so, within a decade of George Washington's death, his undocumented childhood produced the enduring myth of the chopped-down cherry tree.) She concludes with a delicate rereading of the Magnificat, suggesting that Mary's gratitude is not for the child himself but for the miracle that transforms an illegitimate birth into a blessing—an occasion of shame recast as a song of salvation. Not, perhaps, an orthodox reading, but one that is persuasive on its own terms.

Similarly, the variations in the Nativity stories—Matthew features Persian Magi, while Luke omits them in favor of local shepherds—are not merely discrepancies of partial memory. Rather, they are instances of purposeful mimesis, shaped by the needs of their authors. For Matthew, a Torah-observant "Jewish Christian," the image of Persian Magi bowing before the

newborn Jewish Messiah is appealing, reinforcing his vision of Jesus as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy. Luke, by contrast, is intent on reconciling Christianity with Roman rule—or, at least, demonstrating that this nascent sect poses no threat to the Empire. For him, shepherds and stables provide a nicely reassuring pastoral setting, but Persian Magi are an unwelcome detail—too foreign, too unruly.

Attentive to the mythological roots of these stories, Pagels negotiates between rationalist skepticism and a more romantic appreciation of their moral force. She notes that miraculous cures were common in the ancient world. Those attributed to Jesus—described in language nearly identical to accounts of the Greek mystic and holy man Apollonius of Tyana, say—are neither more nor less convincing than others. But she adds a deeper insight: the outlook of Jesus' world made it particularly receptive to psychosomatic illness and its cures. Certainly, this offers powerful support to the scholar John Dominic Crossan's claim that Jesus' originality lay in his "commensality"—his willingness to touch lepers he could not heal and to dine with prostitutes he neither patronized nor liberated. His miracles were ecumenical, often involving the untouchable. He may not have cured those he healed, but the act of trying to heal anyone who asked was in itself a kind of miracle.

The Passion and the Resurrection are, of course, at the heart of the Jesus story. Matthew's account of the empty tomb, followed by ever more elaborate resurrection narratives, serves, Pagels suggests, both to address the practical difficulties of reclaiming the bodies of the executed and to counter skeptical claims that Jesus' corpse had simply been stolen. Stories of resurrection and rebirth, after all, recur throughout history. Bereavement hallucinations—intensely vivid encounters with the deceased—are reported by as many as half of all grieving people. Elvis, for one, was seen by many in the years following his death, with a newspaper report of a sighting in Kalamazoo at least as reliable as the spotty accounts shared by fervent believers two millennia ago. And Paul depicts his own explicitly visionary encounters with a long-dead Jesus as equivalent to the earlier encounters reported by the apostles.

Pagels, rightly but audaciously, likens the evolving belief in Jesus' Resurrection to that of the followers of the Lubavitcher Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson in our own time. During his life, many devotees of the Brooklyn rebbe believed he was the Messiah, a conviction that he encouraged without ever explicitly confirming—much like the Jesus of the Gospels. After Schneerson's death, in 1994, only a small portion of believers insisted that he remained physically alive, but others continued to experience him as an enduring presence, a guide still available for inner light and intercession, as Jesus was for Paul.

In times of catastrophe, such beliefs tend to harden into certainty. If the Lubavitcher community had been struck by something on the scale of the Judeans' loss of the Temple and their enslavement, what are now marginal, hallucinatory visions of the rebbe would almost certainly take on a more declarative, redemptive form. "Long live the Rebbe, King Moshiach forever!"—the Lubavitcher slogan seen on New York street corners—is, in essence, no different from "Christ is risen." Both trace the same arc from comforting spiritual presence to asserted physical reality.

The interpretive approach that Pagels represents is skeptical—nothing happened quite as related—but inclined to accept that *something* happened, in something like the sequence suggested. A scholarly paradigm that has shone in recent years shifts the focus: the Gospels are now seen as literary constructions from the start. There were no rips in the fabric of memory, in this view, because there were no memories to mend—no foundational oral tradition beneath the narratives, only a lattice of tropes. The Gospel authors, far from being community leaders preserving oral sayings for largely illiterate followers, were highly literate members of a small, erudite upper crust, distant in experience, attitude, and geography from any Galilean peasant preachers. Their writings bear all the marks of that sharp-elbowed circle and none of the gentle gatherings of group memory.

Indeed, the Gospels don't even present themselves as history, the way other chronicles of the time did. "Whether one considers the collection of early Christian gospels, the various apostolic *acta*, the assortment of apocalypses, or the burgeoning stock of *hagiographa*," Richard C. Miller argues in his 2015 study, "[Resurrection and Reception in Early Christianity](#)," the reader

finds “nothing deserving of the genus ‘historiography.’ ” The early Christian gospels show “no visible weighing of sources, no apology for the all-too-common occurrence of the supernatural, no endeavor to distinguish such accounts and conventions from analogous fictive narratives in classical literature.” From this perspective, the familiar elements of the Nativity—the stable, the shepherds, the Magi—were not meant to paper over the embarrassment at Jesus’ illegitimacy. Rather, they were simply the stories you told because that’s what the birth narratives of demigods were *like*. The tomb was not found empty because of local confusion or an effort to suppress the fate of a corpse; it was empty because an empty tomb was a standard signifier of divinity. Miller catalogues many comparable instances. The Gospel portrayals of Jesus, he concludes, offer nothing that couldn’t be found within the well-worn conventions of the Mediterranean demigod tradition.

Just as nineteenth-century criticism shaped the older paradigm, the new one is deeply informed by postmodern theory—Miller, for instance, approvingly cites [Derrida](#)—with its skepticism toward “foundationalist” thought. That is, the new paradigm rejects the idea that there is a base layer of historical fact that writing partially conceals, in a kind of dance of the seven literary veils. All there is beneath those literary veils is more dancing.



“Be honest. Does my butt look like a bird holding a bunch of arrows?”  
Cartoon by John McNamee

The most accessible statement of this new paradigm may come from Robyn Faith Walsh, a professor at the University of Miami. A pugnacious writer and a charismatic public speaker, Walsh argues in her 2021 book, “[The Origins of Early Christian Literature](#),” that the Gospels, whatever else they may be, are, first and foremost, Greek literature. Their closest affinities, she

contends, are not with Jewish folklore or communal memory but with the miraculous novels and excitable *bioi*, or lives, that filled the Hellenistic world—stories often centered on wonder-workers from a humble social caste.

These *bioi*—picaresque tales of magi, sages, and tricksters—are filled with miracles, dramatic confrontations, and recurring resurrection motifs. “Some *bioi*, for example, highlight the virtues of their subjects,” Walsh writes. “Others endow their subjects with extraordinary abilities of a different kind—‘superpowers,’ if you will—that involve what one might term ‘magic’ or other sorts of wonder-working.” Many of these protagonists also possess a keen wit, outfoxing their opponents with “clever ripostes and wise sayings, sometimes in the form of parables,” she notes. “Odd as it may seem to subsume the *Alexander Romance*, the *Life of Aesop*, and the gospels under the same genre, the narratives of Jesus’ deeds and sayings can be seen as pertaining to the same biographical tradition. Like Socrates or Aesop, Jesus is at the margins of society, a Judean peasant powerless in relation to the state. In his encounters with Pharisees or other interlocutors, he wins his victories by means of his wits and his ability to turn the words of his opponents against them.”

The habit of taking the Gospels as repositories of a community’s oral tradition, Walsh suggests, is an unexamined inheritance from nineteenth-century German Romanticism. Deeply invested in *völkisch* memory, German scholars envisioned the Gospel writers as culling and refining oral tradition, much like the Brothers Grimm, who collected and transcribed folktales. Just as the Grimms turned scattered oral traditions into polished literary narratives, so, the theory went, did the Gospel authors. But Walsh argues that no direct evidence supports the idea that the Gospels emerged from such a process. Instead, the Gospels seem to have more in common with the self-consciously crafted storytelling of Hans Christian Andersen—imaginative narratives shaped by skilled authors to fit a particular vision.

At the extreme edge of this revisionism is the work of Richard Carrier, whose book “[On the Historicity of Jesus](#)” (2014) forcefully presents the “mythicist” view—the argument that no historical Jesus ever existed. Carrier contends that early Christianity began as a purely visionary

movement worshipping a celestial figure, an angelic being who took on human flesh to be crucified by Satan, buried, and reborn in the sky. Only later, he thinks, did a competing sect within the movement historicize this figure, placing him on earth.

Carrier, an independent scholar with a Columbia Ph.D., is a fascinating public figure—a YouTube intellectual (a term offered without snobbery) who is a regular presence in the energetic ecosystem of the platform’s myriad channels, mostly hosted by amateurs and improbably devoted to early-Christian history, including Gnostic Informant, Godless Engineer, MythVision, and History Valley. His polemical style, often sarcastic and combative, has made him a divisive figure, but his arguments in print are much more measured than his online persona might suggest. He’s cogent, for instance, about the so-called Testimonium Flavianum, the interpolated passage in Josephus’ history which seems to discuss, and extravagantly praise, Jesus. Though it is universally recognized to be at least in part Christian embroidery, Carrier offers convincing arguments for joining those who think that it is a forgery in its entirety. Unfortunately, he is one of those figures who, thinking for themselves, also think by themselves, and so he cannot always tell his strongest ideas from his weaker ones, defending both with sometimes undue aggression inside that ecosystem of videoed disputes. It is moving, in a way, that texts so ancient and arguments so obscure can continue to flame in an age where textuality and argument seem so remote.

Neither Miller nor Walsh would describe themselves as mythicists; indeed, both keep a wary if friendly distance from Carrier. (Neither mentions him in their bibliographies, but both have made peaceable references to him in interviews.) They could instead be described as postmodernists—Walsh regularly cites Bourdieu, as Miller cites Derrida—who think that asking “Did Jesus exist?” is naïve and off target, more a question for the History Channel than a question to be channelled through history. Jesus, whether a historical figure or not, exists for us only as a literary character in a series of polemical exchanges. Even if he existed, his actual purposes, whatever they might have been, are marginal to the development of Christianity as a religion.

Yet even after absorbing the suspicions of the new scholars—accepting the empty tomb as a set-piece story, the Nativity as a shifting proscenium narrative—one returns to a basic truth: fables can be entirely fictional and still contain implicit facts; extravagant narratives often have an empirical core. We make our way back to Pagels's reasonable middle ground, one that acknowledges both the constructed nature of the texts and the oddities and frictions that point the way out of pure textuality.

[Spike Lee](#)'s 1992 bio-pic, "Malcolm X," is also a collection of tropes, figures, and familiar cinematic devices, stuffed with quotations, conscious and unconscious, from earlier movies—with direct visual borrowings from [Billy Wilder](#)'s "Ace in the Hole" and a long climactic section quoting [Stanley Kubrick](#)'s "Spartacus." That does not mean that there isn't [a very real figure](#) being portrayed behind, and through, these devices. Indeed, the movie is separated from the life of its subject by about the same number of years that separate the Gospels from Jesus' life, and, in the same way, it refashions Malcolm's life and death to suit the political needs of its day. Lee emerges as Malcolm's Mark, intent on diminishing the eccentricity of Malcolm's religious beliefs—no flying saucers or human-making magicians—and, in a similarly prudent revisionist spirit, on diverting blame for [his assassination](#) from the Nation of Islam (eliminating Louis Farrakhan's probable role in the murder) and instead affixing it to, so to speak, the Romans—the F.B.I. and the New York police. The film reshapes meanings, filters facts, and crafts a narrative around cinematic conventions, but it does not erase the essential outline of Malcolm's life. It isn't *just* a movie. The Gospels are certainly Greek literature. Yet they may well be Greek literature inspired by an actual Jewish life.

Pagels, rehabilitating aspects of Christianity on terms that a secular scholar can respect, revels in the contradictions and the inconsistencies not as flaws to be explained away but as signs of the faith's capaciousness. The miracles are miracles simply because they are a source of wonder. Christianity is not one thing or one faith but countless variants, traditionally at war with one another but capable of reconciliation or at least coexistence. Its essential reversal of worldly expectations—captured in Paul's defiant words "For Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong"—

introduced a way of thinking about power and suffering with little precedent in the ancient world.

This paradox—strength emerging from weakness, ultimate truth found in apparent irrationality—echoes the dictum credo quia absurdum: “I believe it because it is absurd.” This sentiment finds its deepest modern expression in Kierkegaard’s view that faith requires a leap beyond reason. Yet it also edges uncomfortably close to George Costanza’s line that something isn’t a lie if you believe it. And a starkly apocalyptic interpretation of the New Testament is always near at hand. The Epistle to the Hebrews, for instance, makes Christianity’s blood logic unsettlingly plain: with animal sacrifices at the Temple ended, only a greater sacrifice—God’s son—can suffice. This doctrine is embedded in the Catholic Mass, where the Lamb of God represents not gentleness but a creature slaughtered for the good of the world. This concept horrified critics like William Empson, who saw it as depicting a cosmos ruled by an irrational deity whose rage toward humanity can be placated only by his son’s torture and death. That logic, however buried beneath more palatable readings, runs like a dark current through the text.

Liberals reading the Bill of Rights look past the slaveholding hands that wrote it, passionate Marxists regard the Gulag as a deviation rather than a destination, and Christians—including the secularized kind—look past the demands of blood sacrifice and the spectre of eternal punishment to focus on the extraordinary power of the common table, the promise that the last shall be first, and the idea that the rejected may yet be made royal. Kenneth Clark, in his still potent “[Civilisation](#),” rightly singled out the Giotto frescoes in Padua—telling the Christ story from birth to murder to light restored—and Handel’s “Messiah” as high points of what we mean by civilized life. It is difficult to take in such works without feeling that they express something close to divine inspiration.

That Christianity spread across the world is an extraordinary fact of history. But we should resist the idea that it did so because of some inherent theological inevitability. The consequence of Constantine’s adoption of the faith was less a grand design than a lucky break; Roman emperors mostly had the life spans of gnats, and Constantine happened to avoid

assassination. Christianity's rise should be no more astonishing than that of Mormonism, a Christian heresy with obviously fabricated origins. People seek faith, and faith, by its nature, demands the embrace of what reason resists.

And the placid and ecumenical urge, so appealing in more serene moments, can land differently in our own. Christianity, Catherine Nixey insists, largely invented religious intolerance and the persecution of dissenters. Hellenistic culture was imperfectly tolerant; the Christian one perfectly intolerant. Constantine, adopting the faith as an expansive gesture, was shocked by the vengeful fervor of his new adherents. Nor was Christian intolerance simply a response to persecution, the Notre Dame professor Candida Moss contends in "[The Myth of Persecution: How Early Christians Invented a Story of Martyrdom](#)" (2013). Her book, as the title suggests, attempts to dismantle the idea of Christianity as a faith forged in suffering. She argues, instead, that it constructed a cult of victimhood while stamping out dissent and violently opposing any pluralism of thought. Christianity, often so powerful in causes of human equality—[Martin Luther King, Jr.](#), after all, led the Southern Christian Leadership Conference until the day he died—has a bad record when it comes to authoritarianism, too often *being* it. (Even now, we see among conservative intellectuals how once well-meaning Catholic communalism can collapse into Trumpite acquiescence.)

What is missing from the discussion today, perhaps, are the pagan opponents of early Christianity. From Celsus to the Emperor Julian, they responded at length to Christian claims, yet their works are now almost entirely lost, known to us only in the fragments that their adversaries saw fit to preserve for the purpose of refutation. It would be as if all that remained of [Daniel Dennett](#)'s work were one of those "Ben Shapiro Pwns Atheist!" videos. As Stephen Greenblatt reminded readers in his Lucretian adventure, "[The Swerve](#)," some of these largely vanished thinkers, especially those at the Epicurean edge, seem to have already grasped what remains a core truth: the world is material and values are made by us, often shaped through poetic myths and transcendent metaphors. The humanism they championed was always plural—there are many plausible ways to live. But, in its refusal of certainty, their humanism also produced enormous anxiety, and anxiety is always drawn toward the reassurance of authority.

The authority always fails. The anxiety reasserts itself. A new, amended authority emerges. In the interstices of such authority, the atoms we are made of will, by chance or by purpose, form and fix into new patterns—some of them beautiful, some not, with the shapes of faith both grotesque to our cooler judgments and inspiring to our warmest imaginations. We who are made of matter must somehow find a way both to recognize this mystery and not to mind it, too much. ♦



*[Adam Gopnik](#), a staff writer, has been contributing to The New Yorker since 1986. His books include “[The Real Work: On the Mystery of Mastery](#).”*

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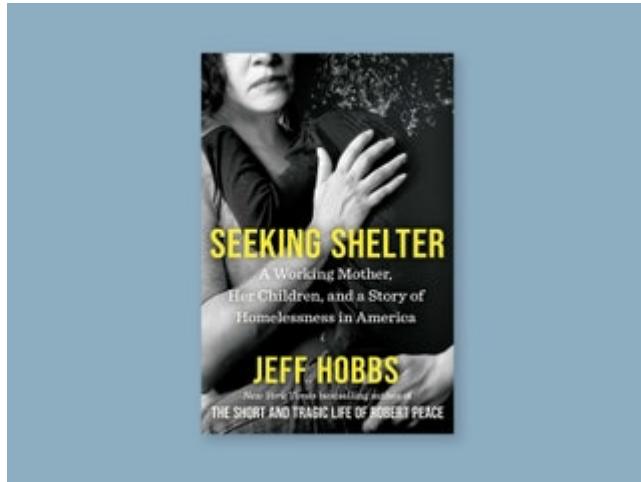
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**Books**

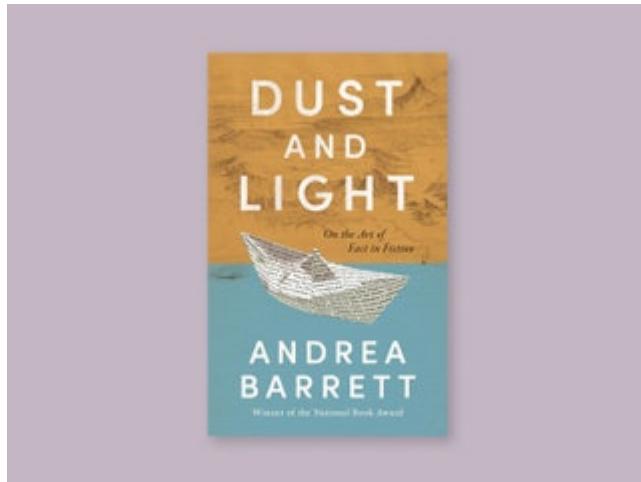
# Briefly Noted

“*Seeking Shelter*,” “*Dust and Light*,” “*What You Make of Me*,” and “*Casualties of Truth*.”

March 24, 2025



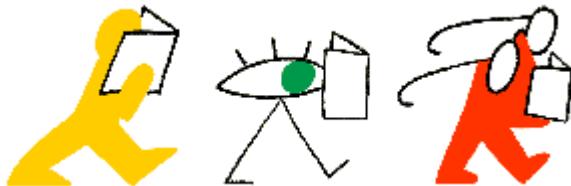
**Seeking Shelter**, by Jeff Hobbs (Scribner). This moving real-life saga opens with a family—Evelyn and her five, soon to be six, children—living in a small city in California. They move to Los Angeles in search of better schools, but a single mishap leaves them mostly unhoused for the next five years. Hobbs reconstructs Evelyn’s story using interviews conducted after the family’s situation stabilized, but the narrative unfolds with gripping immediacy. Evelyn’s war is waged on the streets, on automated government-aid hotlines, in schools, in hospitals, in low-wage jobs. Most important, it’s also waged in her psyche, which Hobbs wisely foregrounds. Though Evelyn is undeniably a victim of corrupt systems, she possesses a resilience that makes her story nothing short of heroic.



**Dust and Light**, by *Andrea Barrett* (Norton). In these collected essays, Barrett, an acclaimed novelist, explores the relationship between fiction and nonfiction. For her, research creates “the bones” of a story, and imagination provides “the breath and the blood.” By way of example, she recounts how the experiences of American soldiers stationed in Russia during the early twentieth century influenced her story collection “Archangel.” She also highlights how history informed the work of her literary influences, like Hilary Mantel. The late author’s “Wolf Hall” trilogy, Barrett writes, uses details from Thomas Cromwell’s life as “nucleation sites around which emotion engages and metaphors are richly made.” Barrett’s book is an ode to fiction’s unique ability to illuminate history—not as fact but as felt experience.

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## **What We're Reading**



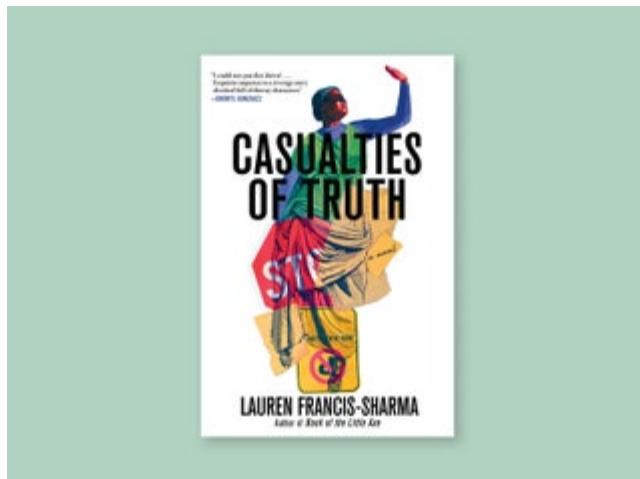
*Illustration by Ben Hickey*

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**What You Make of Me**, by Sophie Madeline Dess (Penguin Press). Ava, the protagonist of this unconventional début novel, contemplates her relationship to Demetri, her older brother, as he lies dying of brain cancer, at thirty-one. The siblings became inseparable in their youth, after their mother, an actress who “started off in Shakespeare and ended up in commercials,” killed herself. Demetri grew up to be a documentarian, and Ava a painter—the sort who makes pieces while having sex in an attempt to share “the colors of the experience.” But an attraction to the same woman tested their bond. In the face of tragedy, Dess’s narrator memorably dramatizes the anxiety-inducing exigencies of the creative arts, and the need of artists to remain focussed on their craft.



**Casualties of Truth**, by Lauren Francis-Sharma (Atlantic Monthly). “Memories were dangerous things, grenades with shaky pins,” Prudence—a wealthy housewife, and the central character of this pointed novel—reflects,

after a man from her past reappears and forces her to relive long-suppressed experiences. Twenty-two years earlier, Prudence spent time in South Africa, observing Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. The horrors she was made to confront, however, transcended the courtroom in which the sessions were held. The story, alternating between two time lines, tests the limits of forgiveness and explores the boundary between resistance and revenge. “Violence? What is violence?” Prudence once asked her therapist. Now, faced with an impossible decision, she learns how “very violent a person might become to maintain their hold on life.”

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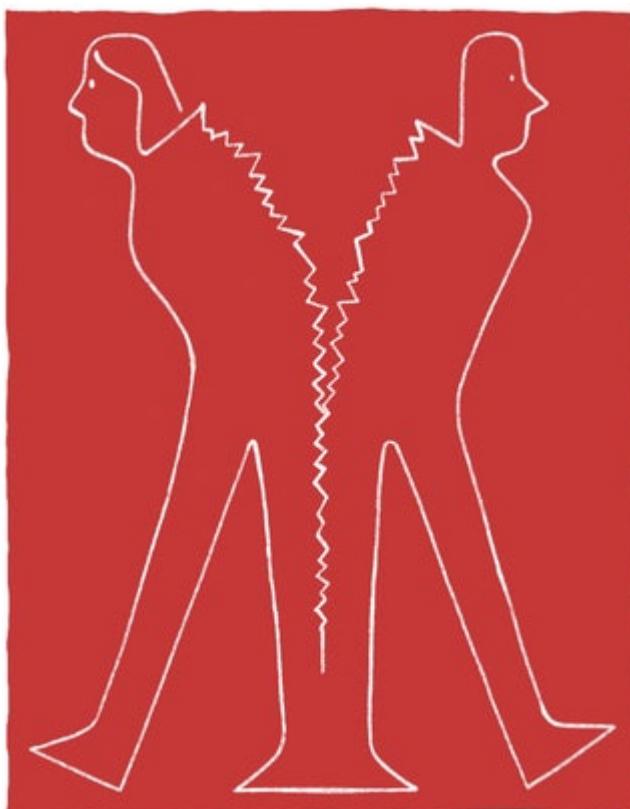
**[Books](#)**

# Who Gets to Define Divorce

The battle for custody of a contested institution.

By [Molly Fischer](#)

March 24, 2025



*Haley Mlotek's "No Fault" joins a number of recent books by women that take up the dissatisfactions of heterosexual matrimony. Illustration by Lourenço Providência*

Last summer, a poll by the Survey Center on American Life produced a striking statistic. Breaking down the electorate by marital status and then by gender, the survey found that, in an already polarized Presidential race, one divide stretched wider than the others: divorced men were fourteen percentage points more likely than divorced women to say that they supported [Donald Trump](#). (Indeed, in this breakdown, divorced men were more likely than any other segment of the population to support Trump.)

The finding resonated with Gallup research showing that the partisan divide between divorced men and divorced women was higher in recent years than it had been in two decades, with men skewing Republican. Marriage is well established as a predictor of political behavior—divorce, these figures suggested, could be a similarly profound and potentially radicalizing event, one with the power to alter its participants' lives and their fundamental understanding of the world.

Haley Mlotek, a Canadian writer, ended a marriage in her late twenties. In her new book, "[No Fault: A Memoir of Romance and Divorce](#)," Mlotek writes that her experience "hadn't defined my feelings, but it had changed the shape of them in a way I couldn't have predicted and probably would never recover from." As that language indicates, her treatment of divorce is measured, a bit opaque, and resolutely abstract—far afield from the battle of the sexes that characterized last year's election. Mlotek, now in her late thirties, came of age in an era of widely available and culturally normalized divorce. Her mother worked as a divorce mediator from an office in the family basement; her grandmother, twice divorced, would start stories with "my husbands," a plural that struck the young Mlotek as glamorous. Mlotek's parents separated when she was nineteen—but, long before that, she writes, "my entire world was divorce." She grew up overhearing her parents fight about money and sensing the strain in their relationship. When she was ten, according to family lore, she proposed that her mother get a divorce. "Being able to end a marriage was a fact as obvious as all the other luxuries I was lucky enough to take for granted, like breakfast every morning and being left alone to read for as long as I wanted," she writes.

Mlotek's divorce came at the end of a thirteen-year relationship: she and her husband met as sixteen-year-olds and stayed together, an early and enduring commitment that marked them as outliers among their peers. "We knew something they didn't," Mlotek writes, of the clarity they shared and the identity it gave them. "We were each other's home. We were *together forever*." They didn't plan to marry but did so for visa reasons when Mlotek took a job in New York. One year later, they agreed to separate.

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Their divorce, which is the book’s spine, involved no children to worry about, no joint finances to unravel, no rigid domestic roles to reinvent. There were no debts; there weren’t even any pets. “We had our years and nothing else,” Mlotek writes. She and her husband faced no pressure to wed and no censure when they parted. The whole experience took place under circumstances so neatly constrained as to resemble a thought experiment.

Stripping divorce of practical and social baggage means that the focus of “No Fault” is internal by necessity: the book explores the end of a marriage primarily in terms of how it might change its central players’ feelings. Mlotek is, by her own admission, wary of discussing her feelings, and inclined to address painful episodes in her marriage with scrupulously evenhanded poise and diplomacy—as is her birthright, being the child of a divorce mediator. But, as the divorce gap implies, feelings among the divorced are not always so easily managed.

“No Fault” joins a number of recent books by women that take up the dissatisfactions of heterosexual matrimony, including “[Splinters](#),” by [Leslie Jamison](#), and “[Liars](#),” by [Sarah Manguso](#). (Still other authors, in a mini-genre adjacent to these divorce stories, have described adventures in open marriage and polyamory.) Mlotek is not even the only Canadian woman this year to publish a book centered on a brief marriage that dissolves after a move to New York—there’s also “[Sucker Punch](#),” a collection of autobiographical essays by the writer Scaachi Koul. As the novelist and critic Hermione Hoby points out, in an [essay](#) on the “remarkable proliferation of contemporary divorce narratives,” these books, on the whole, present divorce as liberation and marriage as oppressive, a tendency that Hoby regards with exasperation. “In 2025, divorce simply does not

have the same kind of legibly feminist—and emancipatory—thrust it had decades ago,” she writes.

Mlotek’s book stands out for its avoidance of such clear-cut binaries; her analysis is defined instead by an insistence on ambiguity. “I was married and now I’m not, and when I consider either state I worry it seems more like trying to describe a dream I never had,” she writes, in one representative passage. Uncertainty, in her telling, is a matter of principle. Marriage is unknowable, divorce ineffable, her own opinions and experiences elusive. “In a novel, a writer must prove to us they know what everyone is thinking,” she writes, in a section on the novelist [Deborah Levy](#)’s account of life after divorce. “In a memoir, a writer must admit they barely know what they’re thinking, let alone anyone else’s thoughts.”

Alongside Mlotek’s personal narrative, “No Fault” offers a social history of divorce and meditations on the cultural detritus she turned to while grappling with her separation—from [Nora Ephron](#)’s “[Heartburn](#)” to a 2001 paparazzi photo of Nicole Kidman to [Joan Didion](#)’s “[The White Album](#). ” “We are here on this island in the middle of the Pacific in lieu of filing for divorce,” Didion wrote, in a 1969 passage that Mlotek quotes. “I became very jealous whenever I remembered a sentence Joan Didion wrote for the column she used to publish in *Life* magazine,” she writes. “How elegant, to leave it at that. How maddening.”

Another divorce memoir, “[This American Ex-Wife](#),” by the journalist Lyz Lenz, approaches the same material in a more pragmatic spirit: “I once read in an article that Joan Didion and John Dunne had once considered splitting up but had gone to Hawaii instead. In therapy, I asked to go to Florida. We needed time together. We needed time away. Maybe the Didion solution was the answer.” Lenz’s husband tells her that vacations are too expensive. Their therapist suggests doing a jigsaw puzzle together. Contra Mlotek, Lenz is pretty clear on what she’s thinking, and willing to hazard that she knows a thing or two about what the reader is thinking as well. “I’m not arguing that you personally should get a divorce. I mean, not necessarily,” she writes. “This book is not gentle divorce apologetics but a full-throated argument in favor of it.”

Where Mlotek relates her story with grave wistfulness, Lenz is angry, exuberant, and polemical. She grew up evangelical and homeschooled, ensconced in nineties purity culture, and she comes to divorce with the zeal of a convert. (“Lenz chose to marry a conservative Christian homophobe who refused to cook or clean and was bad in bed,” Hoby writes, which seems a touch ungenerous.) Her upbringing held marriage as a holy commitment to be endured through all its ordeals: when she was eighteen, her mother gave her the 1998 book “[Domestic Tranquility](#),” by F. Carolyn Graglia, a three-hundred-and-seventy-two-page “brief against feminism” arguing that women find true fulfillment as wives and mothers. Lenz wed her first boyfriend, on the campus of their Christian college, then subordinated her ambitions to raising their children; after twelve years of marriage, she set out to make a new life. She burned her wedding dress in a friend’s back-yard chiminea. “Do you want to know how I finally got my husband to do his fair share?” she writes. “Court-ordered fifty-fifty custody, that’s how.”

Lenz, in her enthusiasm, makes a wildly sweeping case, one with an obvious heroine (her) and equally obvious villains (her ex-husband, also all husbands, patriarchy as a whole). Not every woman who weds today feels that she’s been “pushed” down the aisle by “the entire history of Western civilization,” as Lenz puts it. Yet, even in its propensity for overbroad extrapolation, her book conveys the pain and pettiness of divorce: the difficulty of disentangling two adult lives, and the unhappiness it would take to make that difficulty look worthwhile. And the domestic asymmetries that frustrated Lenz are the same ones second-wave feminists protested—they’ve persisted, even as the laws governing marriage and divorce have grown less onerous. The world changed plenty between “Kramer vs. Kramer” and “Marriage Story,” but all the old complaints still inspire couples to end marriages and, in turn, to make divorces themselves more bitter and fraught. This is a reality hard to detect in the serene pages of “No Fault”—a story of divorce that somehow lacks conflict, friction, or mess.

If marriage is not as legally binding as it once was, one reason is the emergence of no-fault divorce. Ronald Reagan signed America’s first no-fault law in 1969, as governor of California; New York, the last state to follow suit, did so in 2010. (This was late enough that the New York law

wasn't yet in effect when Elizabeth Gilbert went through the costly divorce that became the impetus for "[Eat, Pray, Love](#)"—a detail Mlotek includes in her omnivorous compendium of pop-culture divorce lore.) Before the no-fault era, getting divorced required proof of wrongdoing, such as abuse or adultery. The rules weren't impossible to circumvent, but doing so took time, money, and perhaps mild perjury. Mlotek quotes a paper on postwar divorce cases in Chicago which dryly notes the "remarkable" number of spouses who reportedly struck their partners exactly twice on the face, without provocation, and left visible marks, thereby enabling them to meet Illinois's minimum legal definition of "cruelty." No-fault was neither the beginning of divorce nor the end of marriage.

Not everyone agrees, of course. Stories of no-fault divorce still have a surprising power to inspire outrage, at least among a certain readership. Such stories often concern couples whose divorces are complicated by the presence of children, even (maybe especially) when the stories are told with confidence and conviction. In 2021, the journalist Honor Jones published an [essay](#) in *The Atlantic* about ending her marriage, called "How I Demolished My Life." In it, Jones describes realizing that she felt trapped by the suburban domesticity she'd once wanted, selling the house she and her husband had bought in Pennsylvania, and establishing what sounds like a solid co-parenting arrangement for their three children in Brooklyn. A chorus of voices emerged to denounce her selfishness. The conservative commentator Rod Dreher [wrote](#), "What tears me up about this essay is not so much what she has done—as bad as that is—but that Honor Jones is *proud* of what she has done, so much so that she wrote about it in the national magazine for which she works." She was getting away with something, he seemed to believe. "Just think," he urged readers, "how you would feel if a man had written this essay."

[J. D. Vance](#), another prominent critic of divorce, was once—like Mlotek and Lenz—a millennial memoirist drawing broad cultural lessons from his family history. In "[Hillbilly Elegy](#)," his parents' separation is the wellspring of childhood suffering; his grandparents' home is the one source of stability, and he idealizes their [volatile union](#). Speaking at a California high school in 2021, Vance lamented the modern view of marriage as "a basic contract, like any other business deal." Marriages such as his grandparents' were

“unhappy,” but they lasted. By “making it easier for people to shift spouses like they change their underwear,” Vance told his audience, the ethos of no-fault divorce had unleashed “very, very real family dysfunction.” He called it “one of the great tricks that I think the sexual revolution pulled on the American populace.”

Vance’s rhetoric represents a long-standing conservative religious opposition to liberalized divorce—the sort of politics Lenz absorbed in her evangelical childhood. Today, though, this style of anti-divorce scaremongering has found a new counterpart in the [so-called manosphere](#). There, the message is sometimes less “make sure you stay married” and more “avoid wedlock in the first place.” The two factions differ in their attitude toward marriage but share a sense that divorce is dangerous, and too easy to get. The influencer and accused human trafficker Andrew Tate has said that there is “zero advantage to marriage” for men in the Western world, because marriage destroys men when women leave, and “it’s very common that women leave.” (Joe Rogan, ever the open-minded man on the street, has conceded that men’s-rights activists make some good points on this front: “I know men who have gotten really fucked over in divorce.”) Divorce gives a human shape to the fear that anything a man loses was taken by a woman.

The most famous and most dubious divorce statistic holds that half of all marriages end in divorce. Only slightly less famous—but much more credible—is the claim that women file for divorce about seventy per cent of the time. To Lenz, it’s proof that women badly need an escape hatch. To Tate, presumably, it’s proof that women just want to break your heart and get your money. The same figure fits seamlessly into competing narratives, suggesting the totalizing intractability of their opposition—the two sides are left squabbling over ownership of the facts like a couple splitting marital assets.

In this context, “No Fault” enacts its own quiet backlash against a zero-sum outlook on divorce. Unlike either the divorce memoirists or the manosphere guys, Mlotek doesn’t want to draft personal stories into service of an argument—she barely wants to tell the stories to begin with. Periodically, people prod her for details on her marriage’s end, and she declines to gratify

them. “You never even tweeted about your divorce,” a friend chides at one point. Even a reader slightly frustrated with Mlotek’s evasiveness has to sympathize with her in the face of such a complaint. In “Sucker Punch,” Scaachi Koul writes that part of the pain of ending her marriage was struggling to address it online, after all the public stories and jokes she’d told over the years. “Writing about yourself for the internet means pulling off little pieces of your body and letting them walk around without you,” she reflects. “The internet is a record of my failures in so many ways, but none more blatant than how the person I loved most in the world and I failed each other.” Mlotek’s resistance to self-exposure, like her early coupledom, marks her as a generational anomaly. It sets her athwart a dominant feminist ethos of recent years, one that seems to animate memoirists such as Lenz: the belief that personal testimonials could be a tool of resistance, and that the privacy of bedrooms tended to protect the status quo.

But privacy, and particularly the privacy that exists within marriage, has also served in the no-fault era as a legal basis for rights—to contraception and other forms of sexual freedom—that are increasingly under attack. The idea that your marriage is your own (secular, individual) business is the kind of thing that bedevils religious conservatives. One imagines Vance gasping in horror at Mlotek’s account of the “airiness” with which she makes her wedding vows, recalling “how easy it was to swear I would want what I had”—as if marriage might be a commitment to one’s desires rather than a commitment to another person, or a role in a community.

Reactionary and revolutionary views of marriage alike offer narrative satisfactions that the liberal view seems to lack. Eulogizing a marriage undertaken in this spirit presents a storytelling challenge: it requires inventing the stakes yourself.

Mlotek—like many brides and grooms writing custom vows—doesn’t quite pull it off. But she does make privacy and its place in love feel idealistic and almost subversive. Her book is subtitled “A Memoir of Romance and Divorce,” and her reticence is perhaps the most romantic thing about it, testifying to an abiding intimacy that transcends any legal relationship. After she and her husband decide to separate, she manages to avoid telling most of her family and friends for nearly a year. “Maybe not wanting to tell

the people who mattered most was about giving my husband and me one last secret,” she writes. “One last thing we would know about who we were to each other before everyone else decided they knew who we were.”

Insofar as a book about divorce must propose some definition of marriage, this seems to be hers: *We knew something no one else did.* ♦



*Molly Fischer* has been a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2022. She covers books, style, the media, and culture at large.

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[On and Off the Menu](#)

# The Quintessentially American Story of Indian Pizza

In the eighties, a Punjabi immigrant bought an old Italian restaurant in San Francisco. The dish he pioneered became a phenomenon.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

March 24, 2025



*At Pijja Palace, in Los Angeles, the dishes taste as though the volume has been cranked up. Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin*

In 2021, Avish Naran had an epiphany. After graduating from culinary school, in Napa, he'd been cycling through the kitchens of high-end Indian restaurants in San Francisco and New York—Rooh, August 1 Five, Indian Accent—with an eye toward opening his own someday. “And then I realized, like, dude, there’s no fucking way that I’m going to be able to do

this shit as good as, like, any of these people,” he told me, referring to his former bosses. “All these guys are from India!” Naran was sitting at the bar of Pijja Palace, the restaurant that he opened in 2022 in the Silver Lake neighborhood of Los Angeles, on the ground floor of a Comfort Inn. He is thirty-three, tall and slightly gangly, with an open, goofy face that belies a deadpan sense of humor. The motel, which is owned by his father and his uncle, emigrants from London, is not far from where Naran grew up, in Echo Park. Before he took over the lease, the storefront was occupied by a podiatrist.

Naran, an avid Lakers fan, likes to call Pijja Palace a sports bar—every seat in the dining room has a clear view of at least one big-screen TV. But it has also become one of the city’s most coveted reservations: even three years in, getting a prime-time table requires some foresight. What keeps the place so busy is its namesake. *Pijja* is Hinglish for “pizza”; the restaurant’s chef de cuisine, Miles Shorey, trained at the Los Angeles outpost of Roberta’s, the generation-defining Brooklyn pizzeria. Pijja Palace’s thin-crust, tavern-style pies come layered with milky marinated paneer; with smoky tandoori onions and spicy bell-pepper jalfrezi; or with tart green-tomato tikka masala and craggy orbs of turkey kofta. A samosa-inspired iteration features korma sauce, tender coins of heirloom potatoes, and a spiral of bright-green mint chutney. The glass shakers on every table are filled with a heady mixture of Parmesan, oregano, dried chile peppers, and fenugreek.

The menu is rounded out by thrilling spins on sports-bar standards. At dinner a few weeks ago, my date gazed over at the table next to ours, where a server had just set down a platter of onion rings. Made with a batter of urad dal, also known as black gram, a legume typically used for dosas, they were so deeply bronzed that they seemed almost to sparkle. My companion sighed and said dreamily, “They’re so beautiful.” The question of whether he had recently partaken of cannabis (he had) was not immaterial: one of Naran’s inspirations is *Munchies*, the Vice video series. Everything on offer at Pijja Palace could easily be categorized as stoner food, dishes that taste as though the volume has been cranked up: a juicy lamb burger, blanketed in Amul cheese (a highly meltable canned product from India, made from buffalo milk); zesty piri piri fries, served with lime-pickle raita; malai rigatoni, tossed in a luscious tomato masala.

In a previous era, the food at Pijja Palace might have been classified as fusion, which Khushbu Shah, the Los Angeles-based author of a cookbook called “Amrikan: 125 Recipes from the Indian American Diaspora,” jokingly refers to as “the other F-word.” The term has fallen out of fashion, in part because it came to connote something gimmicky and forced, the slapping together of two or more cuisines purely for novelty’s sake. In devising the menu at Pijja Palace, Naran said, “I thought about the food that I ate growing up and how my parents would make American things with Indian flavors, like pizza, lasagna, meatballs. Samosas, they’d do the reverse, and fill them with cheese and jalapeños.” Among the restaurants his family frequented was a place called Julio’s, in Artesia, south of L.A., which offered pizza with Indian toppings, and appetizers such as desi poppers and masala wings.

Shah told me that pizza was a big part of her upbringing in Michigan. “But my dad would add a lot of stuff to make it more to his palate,” she said. “Little Caesars for a long time had these Zap Paks, and I swear the Indian population of Lansing just took too many of these seasoning packets. They started hiding it behind the counter. If we’re at home, my dad will always go to the pantry and get out the tub of achar masala and sprinkle it all over his pizza.” The food that Naran serves and the recipes that Shah features in her book—along with masala devilled eggs and makhani mac and cheese, she has a whole chapter dedicated to Indian-inflected pizzas—reflect an inevitable meeting of traditions. “Where cuisines intersect is where cuisine evolves,” Shah added. “That is just history.”

The first restaurant to become known for Indian pizza is Zante, in the Bernal Heights neighborhood of San Francisco. One day, a few months ago, I made a pilgrimage there, arriving midafternoon to meet the longtime owner, Dalvinder Multani. In the large, empty dining room, quiet but for a Punjabi radio station, I sat at a table by the window and sampled two of the restaurant’s most popular pies, served with mint and tamarind chutneys. One slice was vegetarian, thickly layered with masala sauce, paneer, spinach, and eggplant, plus garlic, ginger, green onions, and a sprinkling of fresh cilantro. The other featured a trio of lamb, chicken, and prawns, the last dyed a near-neon pink with paprika.

When I'd finished eating, I sipped from a warm mug of chai. Multani, dressed smartly in black, and, fiddling with a thick gold pinkie ring, joined me at the table. He'd learned to cook from his mother as a child in India, he told me, and in the early eighties, after he moved from Punjab to New York, he worked briefly at a pizzeria called Gloria's, on Main Street in Flushing, Queens. Multani moved to San Francisco, in the mid-eighties, and came across Zante, an Italian restaurant that was for sale. He quit his job and bought the place. He kept the old name and continued to offer pizza, but also started serving Indian food, including chicken tikka masala made according to his mother's recipe.

One day, someone suggested that Multani mash up the two cuisines, and so he did, topping a pizza with spinach, cauliflower, ginger, and mozzarella, and leaving off the tomato sauce. Eventually, he developed a special dough, too, incorporating cumin, chile flakes, and turmeric, which gives it a distinctly golden hue. "Everybody liked it!" he recalled. "We put it on the menu, and since that I never stopped. Off the hook, it was going. Everybody says, You made history," he told me, laughing with an almost stunned delight. "I'm the godfather." Over the years, his customers began to call him Tony.

The copycats, including a former Zante employee, got to work immediately. Multani has never minded the imitators. "Very good response, you know?" he said. "When you open more Indian pizza, it's more popular." Until the pandemic, business was great; now he gets by mostly on takeout orders. In the decades since Multani took over Zante, Indian pizza has become a national phenomenon, though until recently it was relegated to the realm of casual, pubby convenience food. Three years ago, Soleil Ho, then the San Francisco *Chronicle*'s restaurant critic, made the case that the form still hadn't been perfected. "Despite being the offspring of two all-time culinary greats, Indian pizza is more of a Chet Hanks than a Zoë Kravitz," Ho wrote, remarking that, "in most cases, the crust is both low-quality and unoptimized for the ingredient load."

"It can feel like crust with leftovers on it," Shah, the cookbook author, said. She'd found rare exceptions at Pijja Palace, where she hosted a Diwali party, and at a new restaurant in New York's East Village called the Onion

Tree Pizza Co., which uses a bubbly Neapolitan dough for its pies, including a masala margherita and one inspired by saag paneer.

Naran tries not to be too precious, or proprietary, about his craft. He frequented Zante when he lived in San Francisco. “I’m not gonna be over here standing like some stupid-ass hero,” he said. “I copied other people and I have the culinary-school background, so I’m able to chef it up a little bit. I think that that’s why Pijja Palace has been so successful.” He’s planning to switch from tavern-style to a more focaccia-like pan pizza inspired by Pizza Hut. On a recent trip to India, he told me, he’d been awed by the chain-pizza offerings. “They’re stuffing their crust with kebab, bro, they’re playing chess!”

Construction has begun on Naran’s next venture, Schezwan Club, in the storefront directly next door to Pijja Palace, which is also owned by his family. It was last home to the mysteriously named April 90’s Something, which described itself as a Thai-fusion restaurant. The new place, which Naran hopes to open later this year, will showcase his interpretation of Indo-Chinese food, with what he called a “heavy sambal program.” “Fifteen chile sauces, and we’re not even gonna name them,” he told me. “They’re going to be numbered, with no ingredients, and you fuckers have to figure out what’s in them.” The sambals will be used as condiments, but might also be served “like chips and salsa,” with fried wonton wrappers. “That’s my style of restaurant,” Naran said. “Like, not ethnic, but do what the fuck you want!” ♦



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

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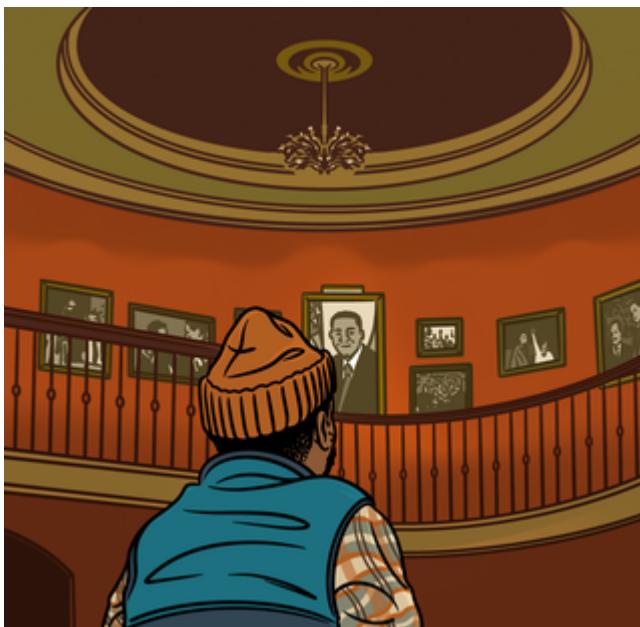
[The Theatre](#)

# “Purpose” on Broadway and “Vanya” Downtown

Branden Jacobs-Jenkins’s latest offers another family battle royale, and Andrew Scott dazzles in a one-man tour de force.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

March 20, 2025



*In Jacobs-Jenkins’s new play, a son considers his father’s legacy. Illustration by AJ Dungo*

Last season, the playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins had a Broadway hit at Second Stage’s Hayes Theatre with his Tony Award-winning “Appropriate,” a knock-down, drag-out comedy in which a quarrelsome white Arkansas family reunites for one last night on their decaying plantation estate. The set —a dimly lit, dilapidated mansion—represented both the family’s material connection to its slave-owning past and an American House of Usher, a place of palpable rot, subsiding slowly into the humid landscape.

Now Jacobs-Jenkins is back at the Hayes with “Purpose,” another thrilling battle royale in which, once again, a fractious family clashes over the course of a long night in a stately home. This interior, though, designed by Todd Rosenthal for the director Phylicia Rashad, is warm and welcoming and bright, an orange-walled great room backed by a curved staircase. Artifacts of Black heritage are everywhere. On the first floor, there’s a shrine to Martin Luther King, Jr.—a portrait with a Bible open beneath it—and, up in a second-floor gallery, we see vintage pictures of the family patriarch, standing by King’s side.

The family’s younger son, Naz (Jon Michael Hill), is a garrulous and wry narrator: he spends much of the play explaining backstory or, less usefully, hinting at what’s to come. “My father, the Honorable Reverend Solomon Jasper,” he says, gesturing to the portrait at the head of the stairs. “Some of you may be familiar with him, some of you not so much—and that’s fine.” He adds, dryly, “I guess it depends on how much you care about the American Civil Rights Movement.” (Hill, whose charismatic performance buoys pages of torrential monologue, often implicates the audience, to excellent comedic effect.)

The person we’re actually meant to recognize in Solomon (Harry Lennix) is the Reverend Jesse Jackson. When Naz’s friend Aziza (Kara Young) gets starstruck at meeting Solomon, she rhapsodizes about seeing a poster of him in her childhood classroom, emblazoned with his catchphrase (“Hope is right there!”), close kin to Jackson’s “Keep hope alive.” Still, Naz, whose solitary ways confuse his family, very much wishes that Aziza wasn’t meeting his adamantine mother, Claudine (LaTanya Richardson Jackson), or his famous father, or his ex-state-senator older brother, Junior (Glenn Davis), recently incarcerated for embezzling campaign funds. This last character borrows from the real Jesse Jackson, Jr., who pleaded guilty to fraud. His wife, here named Morgan (Alana Arenas), is in legal trouble, too; her anger betrays itself via wonderful little volcanic rumbles. Dinner, inevitably, unleashes a hilarious war of all against all.

In his work, Jacobs-Jenkins dexterously plays meta-theatrical games. When he’s in an experimental vein, he might fold in verbatim sections from other artists: in his masterpiece, “An Octoroon,” he reframes a nineteenth-century

melodrama by Dion Boucicault and has a playwright character, named BJJ, make tart comments. His Broadway plays are less overtly postmodern, but there's still a patchwork of influences below the surface. In "Purpose," Solomon shouts hypocritically about "truth" in the same way Big Daddy does in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," for example, and we register the echo. Jacobs-Jenkins incorporates several Jackson-family scandals, but he's also riffing on "Appropriate" and its same concerns: moral collapse, legacy, race.

In "Appropriate," we're meant to judge characters by their reaction to finding a book of lynching photographs in the house; in "Purpose," the contested book is a bound set of letters that Claudine wrote to Junior while he was in prison. Junior shocks his father by saying that he hopes to publish them—apparently, he is prepared to exploit the family name to reclaim his career. And where "Appropriate" buzzed hellishly with cicadas, this play hums with references to a hive of bees, kept by Solomon. Purpose, for the younger generation, is an extension of the individual will—and is thus confusing—but for Solomon purpose is a God-given design, like the bees' busy dancing. "For the Lord of hosts hath purposed, and who shall disannul it?" Isaiah asked. The movement that Solomon expected his sons to carry on has splintered, and so he looks at his family and feels very disannulled indeed.

Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company commissioned Jacobs-Jenkins to write "Purpose" nine years ago. (Davis, one of the playwright's original inspirations, is now the company's co-artistic director.) That's a long time, and "Purpose" does feel like a play made in several modes—sometimes broad, insult-fest comedy, sometimes discursive realism. The sheer ease of Jacobs-Jenkins's writing drives the headlong rush of the first act, but in the unbalanced second half his technique wavers. Naz's constant direct-address interruptions pall, and various Chekhov's-gun scenarios feel effortfully deployed.

Thankfully, the extended gestation also means that Rashad's production comes to New York from Chicago with much of its superb Steppenwolf cast intact. (Only Young and Jackson are new additions.) Every actor gets an aria-like monologue, which throws off the play's rhythm, but at least each

one is a bravura showpiece. Perhaps that's where the real promise of "Purpose" lies—in the idea that somehow every member of a family (or of a movement) can be sustained by our attention, rather than our worship. So much precious energy is wasted on building people into icons and tearing them down. Can there be a form of recognition that avoids celebrity? Steppenwolf's own ensemble model shows the way.

Bizarrely, there's a similar sense of ensemble in the stunning one-man production "Vanya," directed by Sam Yates and adapted by Simon Stephens from the Chekhov play, now being performed by the quicksilver Irish actor Andrew Scott downtown at the Lortel. For almost two hours, Scott—the "hot priest" from "Fleabag," and the magnetic Adam in Andrew Haigh's "All of Us Strangers"—takes on all the parts in Chekhov's heartbreak-in-the-country plot. Never changing out of a grotto-green silk shirt and khaki trousers, he larks about as the melancholy jokester Vanya; lowers his voice to a baritone to become Vanya's friend, the depressed environmentalist doctor Michael; and fiddles nervously with a gold chain to play the married Helena, who's drawn to Michael. He plays Helena's pompous husband, Alexander, too, flinging a scarf around his neck for a tour-de-force performance of fatuous self-regard.

But, then, it's all tour-de-force performance. Here is the ideal of a Chekhov company, in which even the tiniest part is being played by the best actor onstage. Scott may well be the finest actor of his generation; he's certainly the finest Sonia—Vanya's niece, who absorbs her own terrible romantic disappointments with an everyday saintliness—that I've seen in twenty years. Scott's musicality is so precise that I cannot describe it without thinking of a singer's phrasing, or of a violinist's bowing. He controls not only vocal timbre but also other subharmonics, creating an incredible tension in the room. You know how sometimes, as a violinist plays, you sense the rosin against the strings? It's like that.

In a night full of tearful pauses, Yates and the designer Rosanna Vize, one of the show's four creators, also find several ways to produce a sense of farce. (Characters are constantly stumbling through a freestanding door into awkward situations.) The show's own concept is gently laughed at, too. At one point, Scott acts out holding back an eager dog that wants to get to its

bowl. “Where’ve you been?” he asks the dog he’s just made up through mime.

Everything, even the Chaplinesque way Scott dances between acts, operates in service of Chekhov’s core wisdom—that grief does not end, but we can wear it lightly. In Stephens’s cleverest touch, he shifts our understanding of where Vanya’s sorrow lies, situating it not in his adoration of the unavailable Helena but in the loss of his sister, Sonia’s late mother, represented by a player piano onstage. A Gestalt therapist would tell us that in our dreams all the figures are really aspects of ourselves. This “Vanya” is that kind of dream, and so we see Scott, playing a brief duet with no one, in mourning for his sister’s life and his own—and, really, every life there is. ♦



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

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[The Current Cinema](#)

# In “The Alto Knights,” Robert De Niro Sings a Familiar Gangland Tune

*The great veteran of Mafia roles, cast as the rival bosses Frank Costello and Vito Genovese, anchors Barry Levinson’s exploration of mid-century Mob life.*

By [Justin Chang](#)

March 21, 2025



*De Niro’s double casting is an impressive stunt, somehow both meaningless and mesmerizing. Illustration by Paul Rogers*

How might a mid-century New York City [Mob](#) boss spend his nights? Frank Costello, the acting head of the Luciano crime family, prefers to stay in, with his wife and their two adorable dogs. No guns and no molls, except the ones that pop up on TV, in a trailer for the 1949 gangster classic “White Heat,” starring a viciously leering James Cagney. (“It’s your kind of Cagney . . . in his kind of story.”) Vito Genovese, Frank’s sometime friend and longtime rival, is having a more eventful evening, overseeing the murder of his wife’s ex-husband. The violence is compounded by a redundant frenzy of crosscutting, double-underlining the difference between Frank, a man of domestic leisure, and Vito, a jealous and vengeful killer.

The contrast is already night and day—or, rather, heads and tails. Both Frank and Vito, you see, are played by [Robert De Niro](#).

This is the odd gimmick of Barry Levinson’s biographical drama “The Alto Knights,” his first feature in a decade. After working with De Niro in “Sleepers” (1996), “Wag the Dog” (1997), “What Just Happened” (2008), and the Bernie Madoff telefilm “The Wizard of Lies” (2017), Levinson has now cast him in a blood-spattered Mafia history lesson, unfolding in a wing somewhere adjacent to the director’s 1991 film, “Bugsy,” where Frank and Vito popped up in brief, surly cameos. The tribal codes and brutish hierarchies of Italian American Mob rule are well-trodden screen turf for De Niro; who’s to say whether he might ever tire of donning a fedora, sitting in vintage automobiles, or dropping jocular anecdotes and staccato expletives? It’s your kind of De Niro, in his kind of story, but with a high-concept twist.

Such novelty seems a must these days for a crime-movie subgenre so susceptible to cliché. When De Niro played the hit man Frank Sheeran in [Martin Scorsese’s](#) “The Irishman” (2019), he was subjected to a battery of digital de-aging techniques; the distortions were distracting, but the performance was indelible and seemed, perhaps, to strike a note of finality. When your résumé includes a murderers’ row—the young Vito Corleone in “The Godfather: Part II” (1974), [Al Capone](#) in “The Untouchables” (1987), and Jimmy Conway in “Goodfellas” (1990), for starters—how much farther can you go without veering into overkill? De Niro was already courting accusations of self-parody in 1999, when he starred in the comedy “Analyze This,” riffing on his own greatest hits as a mobster in need of therapy—a proto-Tony Soprano.

But speaking of sopranos and, now, altos: De Niro may be singing a familiar tune in his latest roles, yet he also attempts, and largely achieves, a tricky two-part harmony. His double casting is an impressive stunt, somehow both meaningless and mesmerizing. As Frank, De Niro is all genial shrugs and winces, chattering in a recognizable lower register and grinning his classic jowly grin. As Vito, glaring from behind dark sunglasses, he looks ratty, distant, and tightly wound; even his skin seems pulled tauter. His voice jumps nearly an octave, approaching the tessitura of Joe Pesci in “Goodfellas,” and with a hair-trigger temper to match.

The film begins with a jolt of violence, then rewinds to the beginning: so far, so “[Goodfellas](#).” (Nicholas Pileggi, who co-wrote that Scorsese classic, is also the screenwriter here.) It’s 1957 when Frank, returning to his Central Park West penthouse, is shot by an assailant, Vincent Gigante (Cosmo Jarvis), on Vito’s cold-blooded orders. Frank survives, though he possibly wishes he hadn’t; he appears beleaguered, and singularly uninterested in retaliation. As a Mob war looms, the long, tangled arc of Frank and Vito’s friendship comes into truncated semi-focus, in a jumble of old photographs, big-band tunes, and scraps of voice-over. At times, an older Frank—like the aged Sheeran in “The Irishman”—addresses the camera directly, as if he were being interviewed, but Levinson doesn’t commit to the device with anything approaching Scorsese’s rigor, or his mastery of the rapid-fire digression.

And so we learn only in passing about the boys’ turn-of-the-century New York upbringing; their days at the Alto Knights Social Club, a hub of gangster activity; and their early entry into the forces of the Sicilian mafioso Lucky Luciano. Then came Prohibition and bootlegging, which catapulted them into new spheres of social and political influence. Frank ascended to the top of the Luciano power structure in the nineteen-thirties, after Vito, his predecessor, fled the country to avoid a double-homicide rap. Vito got stuck in Italy during the Second World War, leaving Frank and the operation to thrive without him. Now, after more than a decade of relative peace and prosperity, of paid-off cops and flourishing casinos, Vito is back and bent on regaining control—even if, as made clear by that opening gunshot, he has to eliminate his best friend to do it.

There are many fascinating tales tucked away amid this buildup, but “The Alto Knights” is too hurried to unpack them; it settles for spraying chunks of them at the screen, like so much expository buckshot, before rushing back to the spectacle of its duelling De Niros. Coming from the Barry Levinson who gave us films like “Diner” (1982), “Avalon” (1990), and “Liberty Heights” (1999)—a storyteller well attuned to the complexities of immigrant assimilation and boyhood friendship—it feels like a curious misdirection of talent.

It has taken more than fifty years for “The Alto Knights”—or “Wise Guys,” as it was known during its time in development hell—to make it to the screen. The ninety-two-year-old Hollywood veteran Irwin Winkler, one of the film’s credited producers, was in his mid-forties when he acquired the rights to “Frank Costello, Prime Minister of the Underworld,” a book co-written by George Wolf, Costello’s trusted lawyer. That was in 1974, not long after Costello died, of natural causes, at the age of eighty-two; it was also around the time that [The Godfather](#) and [The Godfather: Part II](#) were reshaping the American gangster movie forever.

Here it may be worth noting, just in case De Niro’s casting didn’t already supply enough of a meta-winkle, that Costello was a crucial model for Vito Corleone—a connection that becomes clearer as “The Alto Knights” settles into a workmanlike groove. Frank, like Corleone, is presented as the most reluctant of killers; he shuns drug dealing, prefers diplomacy to violence, and sees himself as a professional gambler and philanthropist, not a racketeer. By contrast, Vito—Genovese, that is, not Corleone—pushes drugs aggressively, resorts to violence early and often, and scoffs at any pretensions of legitimacy, especially given the legalized thuggery of the politicians with whom Frank has curried favor. (“They own this fucking country,” Vito spits. “They’re bigger gangsters than we ever could be.”) Vito is a monster, but he’s also the more honest crook.

The movie spends a lot of time driving home these differences. Frank adores his wife of nearly four decades, Bobbie (Debra Messing), and her frowning and chiding affirm that the love is mutual; Vito weds an Italian American night-club owner, Anna (a terrific Kathrine Narducci), and she comes to loathe him and his greed with a fiery gusto. Sometime later, forced to testify before a Senate committee investigating interstate-commerce crimes, Vito and his cronies plead the Fifth; Frank, eager to flaunt his respectability, proves far looser-lipped—a mistake he will pay for with prison time.

Many of these episodes, although part of the historical record, have been embellished, streamlined, and reshuffled for the sake of narrative flow. (The boldest change: Genovese actually rubbed out his wife’s ex in 1932, a full seventeen years before the release of “White Heat.”) Departing from the

facts is, of course, no crime; what undoes “The Alto Knights” is its hectic insistence on its own authenticity. The jittery editing exudes more anxiety than it does pulp energy, and nary a scene goes by that hasn’t been needlessly goosed with banner headlines and popping flashbulbs. Toward the end, though, this dubious, shapeless patchwork of a movie does achieve a strange, halting power—by making an inquiry into the nature of power itself. Vito, seething and remorseless, grabs at control relentlessly; Frank, in no mood to fight, tries to cede it graciously, resulting in a lopsided tug-of-war. You nod in furious agreement when Frank’s closest ally, Albert Anastasia (Michael Rispoli, fierce but bighearted), insists on swift retribution against Vito for making a move against a big boss. And you chuckle grimly when, in 1957, Mafia bosses gather for a historic summit in Apalachin, New York, and Frank, in a perfectly calculated show of deference, maintains the stealthiest of upper hands.

Levinson, who can find warmth and humor in most circumstances, is naturally drawn toward Frank’s gentility. If the film feels a little juiceless as a result, its restraint seems of a piece with Frank’s own caution. Unfair as it would be to compare “The Alto Knights” to “The Irishman,” some of Scorsese’s mournful grandeur—the mounting sense of futility, the bitter awareness of time’s passage—does cling to Levinson’s film by association. In both films, it’s De Niro’s Frankness that keeps you watching. Just when you think you’re out, he pulls you back in. ♦



*Justin Chang* is a film critic at *The New Yorker*. He won the 2024 Pulitzer Prize for criticism.

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# Poems

- **“Arms”**

By Richie Hofmann | “We heard about the boy / Who drowned while swimming / With a dolphin.”

- **“Woman in a Landscape”**

By Robin Becker | “Naked, I wanted / to be useful to her in the color fields / of July and August.”

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[Poems](#)

# Arms

By [Richie Hofmann](#)

March 24, 2025

Even far from home, we felt safe.

We walked around the ruins. Bodies of men whose heads and privates

Were smashed off. None of the statues had arms.

We heard about the boy

Who drowned while swimming

With a dolphin.

Later, we were by the pool.

My father read

A magazine. I could see pictures in his sunglasses

When he turned a page.

On the island where boys drown,

I remember his arms pulling me from the water,

An archeologist in a bathing suit.

The night was humid, the stone he put me down on

Warm. It would have been a catastrophe for my father,

But it wouldn't have changed a thing in the world.

I was a boy who drowned, the old women would say,

Drawn from the water

By his father's arms.

The tide came in.

You wouldn't have known there was ever a beach.

*This is drawn from “The Bronze Arms.”*

*Richie Hofmann* is the author of books including “[A Hundred Lovers](#)” and “[Second Empire](#).”

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# Woman in a Landscape

By [Robin Becker](#)

March 24, 2025

I didn't need the painting to remember  
the Westfield River coiling below  
steep walls, the sun burning my upturned  
face clear of features, my awkward arm  
and bent leg trying to appear relaxed  
on the rock for Deborah practicing  
her figure painting. Naked, I wanted  
to be useful to her in the color fields  
of July and August—where I ached  
to shed my shame with my clothes,  
to trade my barely acceptable  
twenty-four-year-old body for one  
I could admire as I admired hers.

Still, when she sent me a PDF of the fifty-  
year-old painting—dark hemlocks and pines  
hemming the water—I remembered walking  
downhill with my flashlight, a dumb city  
girl spooked on dirt roads by weird sounds.  
I tried to be brave, each day at my desk,  
tried to find language for my lesbian desire  
on drives up light-drenched Route 9  
with Deb through Hadley and Williamsburg.  
When I look at the painting now  
I wish I had found some tenderness  
then for the person lying on the rock—  
ardent, earnest with her imperfect  
young breasts and belly.

I wish I'd found her comely against  
the silver-blue river, rising with her  
doubts and fears on reliable legs  
all summer to leap from rock to shore.

*This is drawn from “Midsummer Count: New and Selected Poems.”  
[Robin Becker](#) is the author of “[The Black Bear Inside Me](#)” (2018) and “[Midsummer Count](#)” (2026).*

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# The Crossword: Wednesday, March 19, 2025

*A beginner-friendly puzzle.*



By [\*\*Caitlin Reid\*\*](#)

March 19, 2025



[\*\*Caitlin Reid\*\*](#) has been constructing crosswords since 2017. Her puzzles have appeared in the *Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *USA Today*.

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