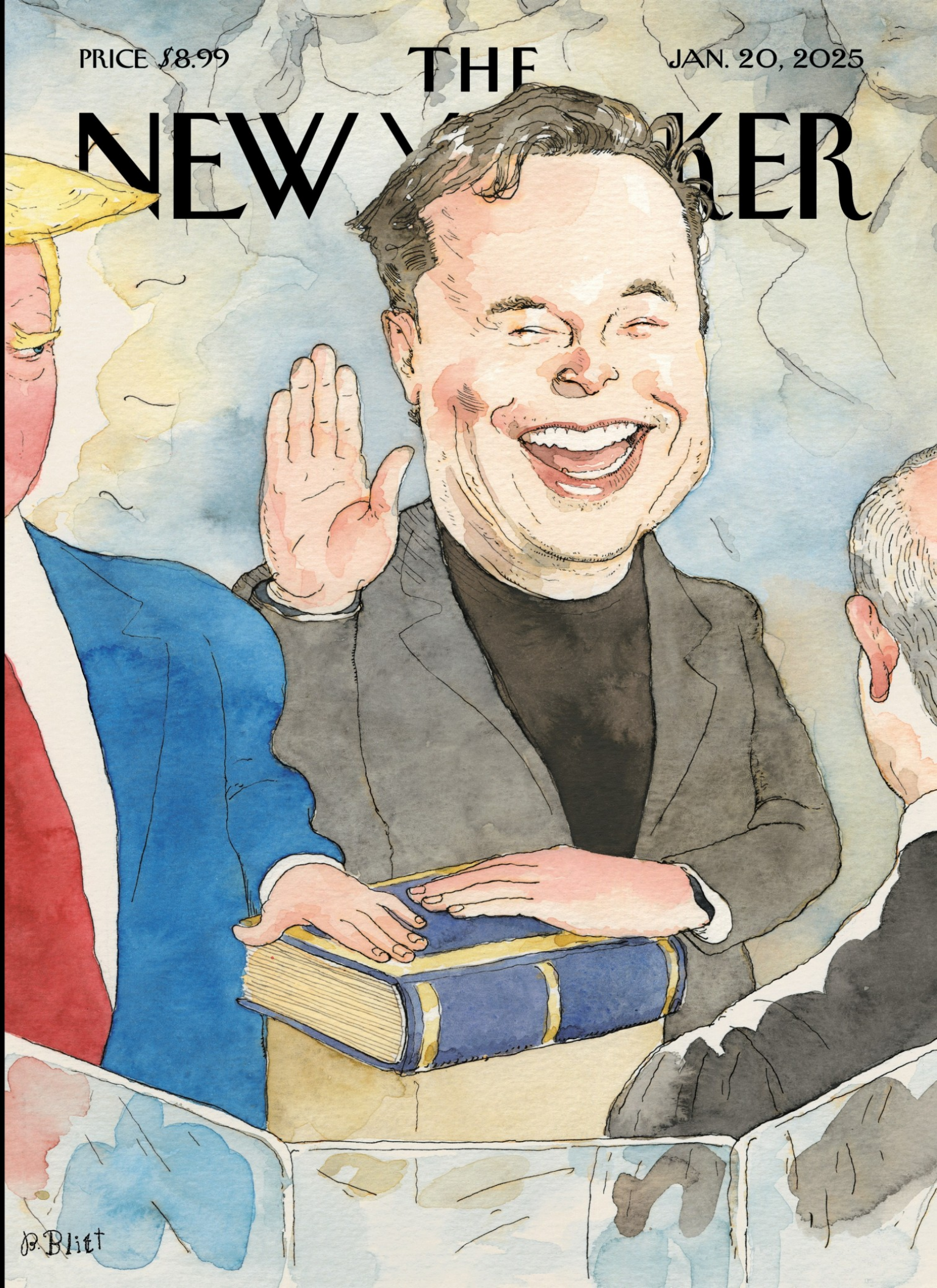
PRICE $8.99

THE NEW YORKER

JAN. 20, 2025



The New Yorker Magazine

[Jan 20]

Goings On

- **The Outsized Influence of De La Soul**
  Also: Ronald K. Brown’s “Grace” and its sequel; the Broadway comedy “All In,” reviewed; the Philadelphia Orchestra’s study of Mahler, and more.
- **A Limousine Driver Watches Her Passengers Transform**
  By Alexandra Schwartz | In the eighties, the photographer Kathy Shorr became a chauffeur, capturing working-class New Yorkers on their way to new lives.

Goings On

The Outsized Influence of De La Soul

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January 10, 2025

Sheldon Pearce
Pearce has written about music for Goings On since 2020.

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

For nearly two decades, De La Soul was one of hip-hop's most important acts and among the most under-acknowledged. In the late eighties and nineties, the seminal group—formed on Long Island by the rappers Posdnuos and Trugoy the Dove and the d.j. Maseo—built a jazzy career on irreverent wit and outsider charm, its chummy dynamic underscored by the chemistry of its m.c.s. The trio's 1989 début, "3 Feet High and Rising," is one of the best rap albums ever made, a sampling milestone that disrupted the gangsta-rap Zeitgeist. Its success set in motion a four-LP run that has rarely been matched: the intricate, conceptual "De La Soul Is Dead" (1991); the zany "Buhloone Mindstate" (1993); and the solemn, territory-marking "Stakes Is High" (1996).

De La Soul.Photograph by Anthony Barboza / Getty

The group's impact isn't limited to that classic run—its achievements include the 2004 album "The Grind Date," which revelled in a rap world that it helped imagine into existence alongside the producers J Dilla, Madlib, and 9th Wonder, and the 2016 album "And the Anonymous Nobody…," which was nominated for Best Rap Album at the Grammys. But those initial albums defined De La's experimental identity and outlined its outsized influence; years of label disputes kept that music off the Internet, leaving the group practically inaccessible to generations of listeners. In 2023, De La's right to its albums was restored, finally bringing its catalogue to streaming, but, just as it seemed like a door was opening for the embattled group, Trugoy died. His loss is immense for a trio that always prioritized interplay, but the remaining members carry on, honoring a shared legacy. On Jan. 17, De La Soul returns home for a show at Lincoln Center's David Geffen Hall, making good on its storied history amid transition, and reintroducing itself once more.

About Town

Broadway

The setup of **“All In**”—comedians and actors read short fiction by Simon Rich—emphasizes presence over preparation. There’s a *touch* of Broadway glossiness here; Alex Timbers directs, and the Bengsons sing plaintive Magnetic Fields songs as interludes. But the vibe is charity event minus the charity: the rotating cast samples from a grab bag of charming celebrities (John Mulaney, Lin-Manuel Miranda, Richard Kind, Chloe Fineman) who read scripts without leaving their chairs. The cutest bit I saw was a noir manqué about baby siblings—a two-year-old P.I. takes on a missing-stuffie case for his infant sister, who hasn’t developed object permanence. I enjoyed it a great deal. As for the rest of the show, I’m like that *bébé fatale*: I can’t quite hold the thing in my mind.—*Helen Shaw (Hudson; through Feb. 16.)*

Soul

There is a shiftiness to the appeal of the Brooklyn quintet **Phony Ppl**. Since 2008, the group has evolved from a groove-focussed, rap-inflected R. & B. band to something harder to define, spiralling out into funk, jazz, and even bossa nova. It has only grown bolder with a mid-career lineup change—now composed of Elbee Thrie (vocals), Elijah Rawk (guitar), Bari Bass (bass), Matt Byas (drums), and Aja Grant (keyboard)—and its seamless experimentation hints at an omnivorous palate and an understated virtuosity. “Mō'zā-ik,” from 2018, demonstrated the full extent of the group’s boundary pushing, and its most recent album, “Euphonyus” (2022), is just as restless. But it was the 2015 album “Yesterday’s Tomorrow” that marked the first significant step in the Phony Ppl evolution, a milestone now celebrated back home with a trio of tenth-anniversary shows.—*Sheldon Pearce (Cafe Erzulie; Jan. 14-16.)*

Dance

Shaylin D. Watson and Austin Coats.

Photograph by J Boogie Love

“Grace,” the luminous masterpiece that **Ronald K. Brown** made for the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre in 1999, ranks as one of the greatest and most enduringly spirit-lifting dance works of the past twenty-five years. The Ailey company revived it beautifully in December, but it’s also wonderful to see it performed by Brown’s own troupe, Evidence. His company’s fortieth-anniversary run at the Joyce pairs “Grace” with “Serving Nia,” a sort of sequel made in 2001. Like “Grace,” it is religious in meaning and rich in make-you-want-to-move musicality. Unlike “Grace,” it’s funny in parts. One of its tracks is Dizzy Gillespie’s “Swing Low, Sweet Cadillac.”—*Brian Seibert (Joyce Theatre; Jan. 14-19.)*

Classical

Continuing its study of Mahler, the **Philadelphia Orchestra** returns to Carnegie Hall with the Ninth Symphony, the composer’s last completed. Written soon after the death of Mahler’s daughter and soon before his own, the symphony is a sombre, reflective, and reverberant adieu, brewing such melancholy that Leonard Bernstein theorized that Mahler was foretelling his own end. But perhaps even more devastation lies within the other work on the program, “Songs for Murdered Sisters.” This eight-piece song cycle was written in response to the true story of the brutal killings of three women by the same ex-boyfriend, on the same day. The piece was composed by Jake Heggie, in collaboration with the author—and here, lyricist—Margaret Atwood. Its soloist—and its progenitor—is the baritone

Joshua Hopkins, whose sister was one of the victims.—*Jane Bua (Carnegie Hall; Jan. 15.)*

Movies

Hitomi Nozoe in "Giants and Toys."

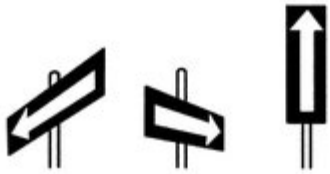
Photograph courtesy American Genre Film Archive

Since the nineteen-seventies, Jonathan Rosenbaum has been among the most influential and authoritative of film critics. To celebrate the publication of "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities," a teeming and vital volume of his previously uncollected writings from 1964 to 2023, Metrograph is hosting a two-film program curated by Rosenbaum, featuring the Yugoslav director Dušan Makavejev's defiantly sexual essay-film **"WR: Mysteries of the Organism"** (which led to the filmmaker's prosecution and exile) and Yasuzō Masumura's exuberant satire **"Giants and Toys,"** a scathing comedy of celebrity as corporate manipulation. Rosenbaum will be on hand Jan. 18 for post-screening discussions. (For those who can't be there, "WR" is streaming on the Criterion Channel, "Giants and Toys" is on such services as Amazon and Kanopy, and Rosenbaum has a superb Web site, jonathanrosenbaum.net.)—*Richard Brody (Metrograph; Jan. 18-19.)*

Off Broadway

Amir Reza Koohestani's Farsi-language **"Blind Runner"** (part of Under the Radar) is a study in grays, both in its design (by Éric Soyer) and in its metamorphosing, twilit narrative. At first, we're watching a husband and wife (Mohammad Reza Hosseinzadeh and Ainaz Azarhoush) meeting in

surveilled visitations, after the wife has been jailed in Tehran. Then Azarhoush—simply by closing her eyes—becomes a different Iranian woman, one blinded by official forces, who hires the first woman's husband as her sighted running guide. Meaning melts: is this a romance, a protest, a dream? Koohestani hates the way that governments discriminate between "types" of refugee, and so the show, which often uses video projections to superimpose the actors' faces, encourages us to perceive the way one person's suffering may as well be another's.—*H.S. (St. Ann's Warehouse; through Jan. 24.)*



Pick Three

Helen Shaw on the best of the fests beyond Under the Radar.

Illustration by Marco Quadri

1. Live Artery, at New York Live Arts, has many thrilling offerings, but I'm most excited to see the choreographer and theorist Miguel Gutierrez's piece **"Super Nothing"** (Jan. 12-18), a quartet about interdependence as a response to grief. Gutierrez's deeply thoughtful, often righteously furious practice has grown to encompass many forms, including the educational podcast "Are You for Sale?" Any new Gutierrez performance is a cause for celebration—and, often, action.

2. The **Exponential Festival** makes aesthetic mayhem at the Brick Theatre and its satellites. I've been waiting impatiently for **"Emphasis Mine"** (Jan. 26), a new play by Spencer Thomas Campbell, who wrote my favorite ever Exponential show, "Chroma Key," from 2017, a hilariously absurdist neo-noir about crime in a multiverse. This reading from the company Title:Point includes performances by Deep Fringe superstars—Peter Mills Weiss, Jessica Jelliffe—guaranteeing a certain level of bizarre combustibility.

3. Prototype, co-produced by Beth Morrison Projects and *HERE* Arts Center, will be polished by comparison, but I'm interested in their messiest offering: David T. Little and Anne Waldman's goth-rock opera **"Black Lodge"** (Jan. 11-15), which scrambles our senses between live performances by Timur and the Dime Museum and a projected film by Michael Joseph McQuilken. The visuals, full of scary hospitals and a "Mad Max"-style desert, look creepy, but it's the juxtaposition between industrial noise rock and Timur's rasping, operatic tenor that raises the hair on my neck.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- Georgia O'Keeffe at home
- "The Telepathy Tapes"
- In praise of Maine

Photo Booth

A Limousine Driver Watches Her Passengers Transform

In the eighties, the photographer Kathy Shorr became a chauffeur, capturing working-class New Yorkers on their way to new lives.

By Alexandra Schwartz

January 7, 2025
Photographs by Kathy Shorr

In 1988, Kathy Shorr had just graduated from the School for Visual Arts with a B.F.A. in photography and was looking for new material to shoot. For her thesis, on ballroom dance, she had gone to dance studios all around New York, and she wanted to find another subject that would let her spend time with people, immersed in their environment—preferably something that would afford her a salary. She thought that she might drive a taxi, because she loved driving. But she realized that customers would be rushing in and out of the car, and the rides would be too short to take more than a couple of photos. So she decided to try chauffeuring a limousine instead.

Shorr got a job at a limo company in Red Hook, Brooklyn. “It was not a fancy place,” she told me recently. As a woman, and a young one, she was a

novelty among her co-workers, men who drove as a career. Passengers were always surprised to see her, but not unpleasantly so. She started in the spring, the high season, and worked weekends, shuttling celebrants to proms, weddings, quinceañeras, and one lesbian commitment ceremony in the West Village; she stocked the car's bar herself. "About an hour into the drive, I would say, 'Oh, excuse me, I'm a photographer,' " Shorr recalled; would it be all right if she photographed her passengers for the rest of the trip? Save for one man, who was concerned about being recognized—"He was pretending to be an important person," Shorr said—everyone agreed. She told her subjects that she hoped to make a book of the pictures. Now, thirty-six years later, she has: "Limousine," which was published in November by Lazy Dog Press.

Shorr shot in black-and-white, with a Nikon, often leaning through the partition that divided the driver from the driven during stops, so that the back of the car became a de-facto photo booth. From the moment that she announced her creative intentions to her subjects, she told me, "the whole dynamic of control and power in the car changed." The passengers had hired her to work, unobtrusively, for them: "Suddenly, I became the person *they* were working for." Some soaked up the limelight. Here is a beaming bridesmaid, lovely in a spaghetti-strap sheath dress and lace gloves, posing by the Bailey Fountain, at Grand Army Plaza; for a moment, she becomes the focus of the day, as the bride lingers behind. And here is a couple locked in a passionate embrace, the man pressing the woman into the car's bench seat as if they are starring in a film noir about forbidden desire. Actually, they were teen-agers, on their way to prom. When Shorr asked if she could shoot them kissing, they were more than happy to oblige.

A limousine is a kind of set; to enter one is to play a role, even without a camera present. "When people come into the car, everybody is dressed up, and you take on a new persona when you dress fancy," Shorr told me. "Your behavior and manner are very different than if you're just going out in jeans or sweats with the same people. Your persona elevates. But, as time goes by, your real personality comes out." Look at Shorr's photo of a trio of bridesmaids pressed together on the car's back bench, having a drink in the middle of the afternoon, relaxing on their way to the reception. The one by the window has just taken a pull on her cigarette; dress bunched up around

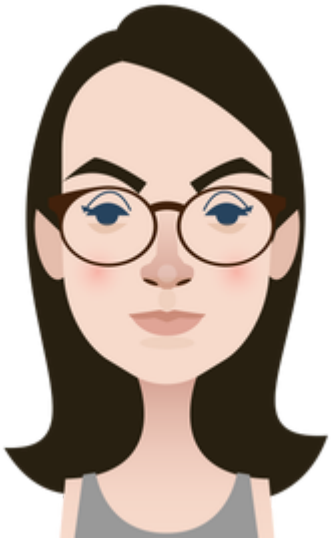
her knees, she looks away from Shorr’s camera, having briefly put away her public face.

“Limousine” offers a delightful time-capsule view of a bygone era in fashion—hair teased to the heavens, satin dresses with tight hips and big puffed shoulders, acid-washed jeans rolled at the cuff—and of a bygone New York, too. Most of the people whom Shorr photographed were working-class Brooklynites, as was she. This was the era of corporate raiders, greed-is-good Wall Street ambitions, Trump Tower. The limousine was seen as an accessory to such ostentatious wealth, but it was affordable to rent one, especially with a group; it represented, Shorr told me, “the idea that you, as a working-class person, could live or act like a rich person, if only for a day.” One of Shorr’s photos shows a group of young men in bow ties who look like they might be bond traders. They lounge with their legs up, confidently meeting the camera’s gaze. They are ushers at a wedding, on the way from Brooklyn to a reception in the Bronx. “They were the kind of guys I grew up with,” Shorr recalled. “They were very, very polished. Their clothes were impeccable; their hair was just right. And they were playing with the dynamic of me being a woman and them being men, you know, a flirtatious kind of thing. They got into that pose; they just worked with me. I know they gave me a very nice tip.”

The limousine, in “Limousine,” is not a mark of élitism, but a great equalizer. Shorr drove, and photographed, people of all races, ethnicities, customs. “It was approachable,” Shorr said—not like a black car, which might signal the presence of a businessman or some other important person not to be bothered. “It had much more of a people’s kind of feeling.” When her long Lincoln rolled into a neighborhood, everyone from kids to elderly ladies would come over to look inside. The subjects of one photo, a casually dressed couple with their young son nestled between them, weren’t passengers of hers at all. Shorr was parked on Ocean Parkway, her car empty, and they asked if they could come sit inside to feel what it was like.

Shorr grew up in Bushwick, in an intergenerational house with her brothers, her parents, her grandparents, and her great-grandparents. She got her interest in driving from her maternal grandmother, the only person in the family who owned a car. She chauffeured the limo for nine months, and got

so good at maneuvering it that she could parallel park on a city street, as she did one night when she dropped off a client at Lincoln Center and went to Lincoln Plaza Cinemas to see “Babette’s Feast” before she was due back for pickup. “I had a foot in both worlds,” she told me, of that time in her life. “I could relate totally to the people that I was driving. But I also had just graduated from school, and I was a different person.” The subjects of her photographs are on their way to new lives, too: growing up, graduating, getting married. “Limousine” is, in a sense, a family album, though it connects people whose paths never consciously crossed. Its subjects don’t share genes or a name. What they have in common is an important moment spent in the back of a special, celebratory car, preserved, forever, by a stranger’s camera.



Alexandra Schwartz has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2016, and is a co-host of the magazine’s Critics at Large podcast.

The Talk of the Town

- **The Inauguration of Trump’s Oligarchy**
  By David Remnick | Certain business titans have made Mar-a-Lago a scene of such flagrant self-abnegation, ring-kissing, and genuflection that it would embarrass a medieval Pope.
- **On the Ground During L.A.’s Wildfire Emergency**
  By Emily Witt | With four fires raging, tens of thousands have evacuated and others are confronting the precarity of where they live.
- **How the Stonewall Inn Bricks Avoided the Trash**
  By Michael Schulman | When the improvised weapons that (apocryphally) spurred the gay-liberation movement were discarded during a renovation, Kurt Kelly, a current owner, went dumpster diving.
- **Jhumpa Lahiri’s Writing Career Began in Stolen Notebooks**
  By Jennifer Wilson | The author surveys school book reports and some fan mail, from M. Night Shyamalan, in her archives, which she recently sold to the New York Public Library.

Comment

The Inauguration of Trump’s Oligarchy

Certain business titans have made Mar-a-Lago a scene of such flagrant self-abnegation, ring-kissing, and genuflection that it would embarrass a medieval Pope.

By David Remnick

January 12, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

In modern terms, a Presidential Inauguration is an open-air branding opportunity. John F. Kennedy, a hatless Cold Warrior, placed his

Administration at the vanguard of a new generation “born in this century,” and delivered an internationalist vow to “pay any price, bear any burden.”

On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump set a distinctly different inaugural tone, delivering a sunless stem-winder of populist fury in which he vowed to heal the hellscape of “American carnage.” No longer would the country bow to self-serving élites and rapacious foreigners: “America will start winning again, winning like never before.” Upon leaving the reviewing stand, George W. Bush was heard to say, “That was some weird shit.”

Trump was apoplectic about the coverage of his first hours in office, and he dispatched his spokesman, Sean Spicer, to the White House briefing room to declare that the press had “intentionally framed” images of the crowd to make it seem paltry, when, in fact, Trump had drawn, Spicer huffed incredibly, the “largest audience ever to witness an Inauguration, period.” Spicer then shifted registers to one of unmistakable threat. “And I’m here to tell you that it goes two ways,” he said. “We’re gonna hold the press accountable.” With that, the Era of Trump was truly inaugurated.

Joe Biden, whose Presidency is now grinding to its conclusion, had hoped to render Trump’s Administration a historical fluke—a fleeting, if ugly, interregnum. And, as Biden leaves office, he can reasonably argue that jobs are up, inflation is down; violent crime has declined; and, for the first time in a generation, there are no American soldiers engaged in foreign battle. Nevertheless, Biden’s obdurate unwillingness to step aside for younger, more plausible Democratic candidates resulted in the reëmergence of his nemesis. Once more, the music of apocalypse is in the air: “Our Country is a disaster, a laughing stock all over the World!” Trump declared recently.

He will return to the Oval Office with a résumé enhanced by two impeachments, one judgment of liability for sexual abuse, and a plump cluster of felony convictions. He will take the oath of office next week at the scene of his gravest transgression, his incitement of an insurrection on Capitol Hill. Still, Trump soldiers on, as if all the legal accusations against him are badges of merit, further proof of his anti-establishment street cred.

Since the election, he has proposed so many advisers of low character and dubious qualification that he has overwhelmed the circuitry of the

confirmation process and the public sphere. It's almost as if the early proposition of Matt Gaetz to head the Justice Department were a way to divert attention from the unalloyed awfulness of so many others: Pete Hegseth, Kash Patel, Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., Tulsi Gabbard, Mehmet Oz, and Kristi Noem among them. The dessert for this feast of misbegotten nominations was served when Trump appointed Kimberly Guilfoyle, the longtime fiancée of his eldest son, Don, Jr., as the new Ambassador to Greece—a move that accommodates the son's fresher affections for a Palm Beach socialite.

Across the land, a willing suspension of disbelief has taken hold. (Critical thinking is so 2017.) Certain titans of Silicon Valley, Wall Street, and (God forgive us) the media have hustled off to Mar-a-Lago, a scene of such flagrant self-abnegation, ring-kissing, and genuflection that it would embarrass a medieval Pope. Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon and the owner of the Washington *Post*, no longer seems determined to fight the darkness; instead, he kills an endorsement drafted by his editors, watches as some of his most skilled reporters head for the exits, and pays forty million dollars for a documentary on Melania Trump. Mark Zuckerberg's *maga* conversion is now so thorough that he has added Trump's friend Dana White, the C.E.O. of Ultimate Fighting Championship, to the board of Meta.

One of Trump's most effective political maneuvers might be called "whacking the beehive," a propensity to unleash so much buzzing menace into the air that it's impossible to maintain calm, much less focus. Will he set up detention camps for undocumented immigrants? Will he split with *nato* and cut off Ukraine? Are we about to send the 82nd Airborne to descend on the good people of Nuuk?

For decades, Vladimir Putin's greatest rhetorical gambit has been the charge of hypocrisy. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, American critics have rightly described Russia as an oligarchic state. In the nineteen-nineties, a half-dozen or so hustlers emerged from the rubble of the old system to exploit their proximity to Boris Yeltsin and his family to snatch up invaluable state properties—oil fields, mines, television stations—at knockoff prices. Putin came along, in 2000, and eventually deposed most of

the first-generation oligarchs, replacing them with his own satraps. He created a personalist system in which all power and all fortunes depended on his good graces.

Perhaps what is most striking about the ascendant Trump Administration, which takes pains to cast itself as the champion of a forgotten working class, is its own oligarchic features. The influence of big money in American politics is hardly new. To read Theodore Dreiser's "The Financier" is to plunge headlong into the muck of Gilded Age deceit. The essential modern text is Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission, the 2010 Supreme Court decision that equates money with speech, resulting in an ever more corrupt system of campaign finance.

Something ominous, if not entirely novel, is taking shape in Washington. When Trump takes the oath of office, on January 20th, Elon Musk, the wealthiest man in the world, will not be far away. Like so many other tech billionaires, Musk apparently thinks of himself as a self-reliant genius-of-the-future, a Nietzschean superman, and yet he well knows that everything from the rise of the Internet to the creation of many newer technologies profits from the support of the state. What's more, Musk's influence, unlike that of his Gilded Age predecessors, is amplified by his gargantuan following on a social-media engine in his possession. When Trump steps up to the lectern next week to recite the oath of office, he will stand beside his wife. But he will have a great deal of other company—multibillionaires who have shamelessly dispensed with principle to seek an indulgent new President's favor and enhance their fortunes. ♦

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

The Lede

On the Ground During L.A.’s Wildfire Emergency

With four fires raging, tens of thousands have evacuated and others are confronting the precarity of where they live.

By Emily Witt

January 9, 2025

Photograph by Caylo Seals / Sipa USA / Reuters

Early this week, the National Weather Service started sending out alerts in Los Angeles about a “life-threatening and destructive” windstorm set to begin on Tuesday afternoon. The threat of fires had been implicit—the conditions for them were good, as is often the case in the area. The Palisades Fire began as a brush fire on Tuesday morning; by the end of the day, it was rapidly approaching three thousand acres in size. Even if you were far from the flames, you couldn’t help but feel uneasy. The wind had been gusting violently all day. I kept plans to meet my dad for dinner. Driving over, I saw palm fronds sliding across the road, and lawn furniture tumbled about. We met at six-thirty at a German beer bar in Highland Park, and, before we had ordered drinks, he received an alert on his phone about the Eaton Fire, which broke out shortly after six in the San Gabriel Mountains above the city of Altadena, where my brother lives. My parents

were staying with him. They decided to evacuate, and my dad booked a hotel room on his phone. Not long after, the electricity in the restaurant cut out. Back home in Mount Washington, I could see flames eating their way down the flanks of the San Gabriel Mountains. A strong wind blew, and then a tree in the yard fell down. Around ten-thirty that night, another fire, the Hurst, picked up near Sylmar.

By the next morning, breathing was like trying to inhale a campfire. In downtown Los Angeles, which was veiled in smoke, local government officials convened for an update at the Kenneth Hahn Hall of Administration. The good news was that there had been no confirmed fire-related deaths in the Palisades. But there had been two related to the Eaton Fire. That number would later rise to five. And, as of eight o'clock on Wednesday morning, there were four fires, spanning more than seven thousand acres. A thousand structures had been destroyed in the Palisades on the previous night. The damage in Altadena was at a hundred structures and counting. (By the next morning, the official estimate rose to more than a thousand there, too.) More than seventy thousand residents of Los Angeles County were under orders to evacuate their homes, and tens of thousands more were warned to be ready to follow them. More than four hundred thousand people were without electricity.

The ability of the firefighters to respond was limited by the number, size, and location of the fires, and by the unusual intensity of the Santa Ana winds, which the previous night had reached seventy miles an hour in some places. "There are not enough firefighters in L.A. County to address four separate fires of this magnitude," Anthony Marrone, the chief of the L.A. County Fire Department, said. "The L.A. County Fire Department was prepared for one or two major brush fires, but not four, especially given the sustained winds and low humidities." The fire department, which also handles emergency services in the county, was at "drawdown"—everyone who could be called into work had been. The wind had grounded firefighting aircraft for much of the night. In the Palisades, water pressure had been lost by three in the morning, as the extra strain on the system temporarily ran three crucial storage tanks dry. Firefighters from other California counties and other states were meeting to offer aid. The mayor of Los Angeles, Karen Bass, was still en route back to California from a

diplomatic trip to Ghana. Many schools were closed. Employees with respiratory issues were encouraged to stay home, and officials suggested that the West Side should be avoided altogether. Also closed: Griffith Park (and access to the Hollywood sign), Runyon Canyon, and the L.A. Zoo.

Meanwhile, the online hyperbole, conspiracy theories, and quick takes on Los Angeles were generating their own weather system. From the ground, the social-media response looked self-interested and craven, a reminder of the dissonance between the two realities. At Zuma Beach, in Malibu, emergency workers had set up a command post to coördinate the response to the Palisades Fire. To get there, I took a back route, which takes you up the 101 Freeway through the San Fernando Valley and then crosses over the Santa Monica Mountains to the beach. On the normally breathtaking drive over the mountains, the car shuddered in gusts of wind, and when the first glimpse of the Pacific came into view it was heaving with whitecaps. At Zuma, the command center was set up outside a lifeguard station; it had previously been in Will Rogers State Beach, but the area had gotten smoked out. A map of the county had been put up on the wall of a large garage, and uniformed members of state and local agencies gathered next to racks of surfboards and kayaks to discuss the next phase of evacuation plans. Thomas Shoots, a spokesperson with *CAL FIRE*, the state firefighting agency, told me that the aircraft were flying again, but where the fire might go next was still unpredictable.

“These winds, they’re erratic,” he said. “It’s not like they’re just blowing in one direction. We know the Santa Ana winds, we have that northeasterly flow, but really there is no part of this fire that is buttoned up.”

I continued south down the Pacific Coast Highway, past the green lawns of Pepperdine University and the deserted parking lots of the Malibu Country Mart, the Palisades Fire visible in the distance as a billowing cloud. It was near Carbon Beach that I saw the first beach house in flames. In Los Angeles, it’s a known phenomenon that houses in the hills sometimes burn; the risk comes with the territory. But this was different—not only was the house facing the ocean, it was several miles away from the heart of the Palisades Fire and had presumably been set alight by embers carried with the wind. Beyond it, more houses were smoldering or engulfed in flames,

and the Pacific Coast Highway receded south into a vague haze of smoke and flashing lights. I parked on the side of the street that wasn't on fire. Except for first responders, the area had mostly been evacuated, but a couple of people, longtime Malibu residents, were standing around in civilian clothing.

"We've been through a few, but this is the worst ever," Janice Burns ("no pun intended"), who works in real estate and has lived in Malibu since 1978, said. "Ever, ever, ever in fifty years."

"It's up there," Thomas Hirsch, a dentist who has been in Malibu since 1965 and lost his house in the 2018 Woolsey Fire, agreed.

They waved at a man walking down the sidewalk. This turned out to be Jefferson Wagner, the two-time former mayor of Malibu and owner of Zuma Jay Surfboards, which has been in business for fifty years. Wagner also lost his house in the Woolsey Fire, and has been living in a condo while its replacement is under construction. I asked how this fire compared with the others he has seen.

"This is worse than the Woolsey Fire," he said. "And 1993, that was three hundred and sixty-five homes. This is a lot more than that."

Fire trucks drove past us. Wagner identified one that had travelled all the way from the Bay Area city of Piedmont. We looked across the street at the scorched estate, which like many houses on the Pacific Coast Highway had been set back from the road and hidden behind gates. The tall white wooden fences were now half gone and still licked by low flames; a tangle of metal was all that was left of the building behind them. "That's David Geffen's old house," Burns remarked. (The music mogul had sold it for a reported eighty-five million dollars in 2017.) The conversation turned to calculations of risk.

"You're in a fire zone, you know it's a risk," Hirsch said.

"Or you live in Kansas, and you're going to have a tornado," Burns said.

"Or you live in Florida, and you have a hurricane," Wagner added.

“It’s the price you pay for this view,” Burns, looking out at the ocean, said.

In Santa Monica, I drove by an evacuation center, where a steady stream of residents arrived carrying bottled water or diapers. At the Brentwood Country Mart, on the edge of the mandatory evacuation zone at San Vicente Boulevard, I stopped for a coffee, then watched the winged doors of a black Tesla open and Harrison Ford step out—it was still L.A. Around one in the afternoon, my family called to tell me that my brother’s house in Altadena, which he started renting in 2020, had burned down. I left the West Side and made the familiar drive up there to meet him back in the neighborhood. The Pacific Palisades is a wealthy enclave with modernist architecture and houses with views of the sea. Although Altadena, which you can see laid out in a grid as you drive toward the San Gabriel Mountains, has gentrified in recent years, it has traditionally been a middle-class suburb to nearby Pasadena. Former residents include the science-fiction novelist Octavia Butler and the physicist Richard Feynman.

As I turned east from Lincoln Avenue, I could see that the destruction was immediate and ongoing. The noxious air smelled of burnt plastic. A few residents stood outside their destroyed homes, trying to put out the last flames with garden hoses. (Earlier that day, at the press conference, a Department of Public Works official had wearily said that customers needed “to understand that it’s really quite futile to fight fires with the hose at your house.”) Other houses were still in flames. I got out and spoke with a couple, Dietra Moses and Ben Lieberson, who were standing in front of the ruins of their home. Around four in the morning, they were woken up by an evacuation order to a house filled with smoke. They had lived in Altadena since 1999. “It was, like, coming from London, what a perfect place,” Lieberson, who is British, said. “Quiet, got a big yard, trees. Chill, nice people, such a mixed community of people—just chill, you know?”

Now groups of television cameramen dressed in yellow fire gear wandered the streets. I met up with my brother, and we drove farther up the hill, toward the foot of the mountains. Block after block of the city was incinerated; the place we knew was simply gone. In the wreckage of the houses, only the occasional recognizable object remained: some trash bins melted on one side, like the marshmallows in a s’more; a Santa sled that

had not yet been put away for the season; the frame of my niece's bike in what used to be my brother's garage. The wind had by then died down—it was, at least in Altadena, almost completely still. ♦

Emily Witt is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of "Future Sex," "Nollywood: The Making of a Film Empire," and the memoir "Health and Safety."

Dept. of Totems

How the Stonewall Inn Bricks Avoided the Trash

When the improvised weapons that (apocryphally) spurred the gay-liberation movement were discarded during a renovation, Kurt Kelly, a current owner, went dumpster diving.

By Michael Schulman

January 13, 2025

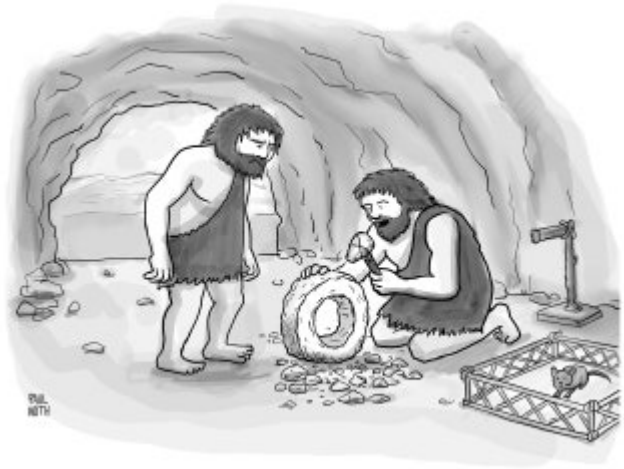
Illustration by João Fazenda

Who threw the first brick at Stonewall? The question has been argued over by generations of queer historians, with little consensus. By some accounts, either Marsha P. Johnson or Sylvia Rivera—gender-nonconforming activists on the scene—hurled the first brick at police raiding the Stonewall Inn, in

June, 1969, launching the riot that spurred the gay-liberation movement. (Both denied credit.) In Roland Emmerich's 2015 film, "Stonewall," it was a Midwestern hunk named Danny in a white T-shirt. (Fictitious.) Was it even a brick? There are reports of a construction site nearby from which rioters took bricks, but people also threw coins, cobblestones, beer bottles, and trash cans. At one point, they used a parking meter as a battering ram.

Here is the story of a Stonewall brick that can be told with relative certainty: In 2019, Kurt Kelly, one of the bar's current owners, was up in his office; outside, construction workers were zhuzhing up the building's façade, in anticipation of the uprising's fiftieth anniversary. Kelly realized that the old bricks were getting thrown in a dumpster. "I'm going, They're throwing away history!" he recalled recently. "So I grabbed my manager. I go, 'C'mon, grab that bag!' I got a bagful of them and threw 'em in my car."

Kelly stored the bag of bricks in an undisclosed location. (He is anxious about theft.) He also has beams from the roof, which had caved in before he and his associates took over the place, in 2006. Kelly, who came to New York in his twenties, to pursue acting, used to take his boyfriend to the Stonewall in the nineties, for bingo nights hosted by the drag queen Kenny Dash. ("She called herself the Bingo Bitch," he said.) Years later, he was working as a bartender at the Duplex, a piano bar down the street, when "our Budweiser rep came and said, 'The Stonewall's going under,' " he recalled. Kelly teamed up with the owners of the Duplex to buy the Stonewall, fending off a Starbucks, a jazz club, and the expansion of a nail salon next door. "It was a dump," he said. "No one ever treated this club for its historical value. There were rat holes. Little bags of coke were all over the place." They refurbished the interior to look like a sixties gay bar. In 2016, President Barack Obama named it a national monument.



“This invention could be a game changer for hamster fitness.”
Cartoon by Paul Noth

As for the salvaged bricks, Kelly realized they had value. In November, one of them went for thirteen thousand dollars at an auction to benefit the Stonewall Inn Gives Back Initiative, which supports queer safe spaces. “I’m going to offer some to the Smithsonian,” Kelly said. Not long ago, he got a call from a patron of the American LGBTQ+ Museum, which is slated to open in 2027, in a new wing of the New York Historical. Did the Stonewall have anything museum-worthy? Kelly donated a brick, which became the first item in the museum’s collection.

“I can show you the one,” Kelly said. He was sitting in the back room at the Stonewall, just before opening. He plunked the brick on a cocktail table. It was gnarled, like something from ancient ruins, and it glowed under the disco lights as “Rhythm Is a Dancer” blasted. The surface that had faced the sidewalk was smooth; the back had a ridged perimeter and traces of the word “EMPIRE.” Subsequent brick research suggested that it was a product of the Empire Brick Co., which had a plant in Stockport, New York, in the early twentieth century and drew from the clay banks of the Hudson River. The brick likely made its way to Christopher Street in 1930, when the building, originally a nineteenth-century stable, got its brick-and-stucco façade, with arched doorways. There it remained, as the place became a Mafia-run gay bar, a Chinese restaurant, and, finally, a landmark. “To me, Stonewall means strength in numbers,” Kelly said. “We’re not giving up the fight.” He laughed and added, “We might need to fight back with this brick!”

A week later, Kelly was up at the New York Historical, for the new L.G.B.T.Q.+ museum's breaking-ground ceremony. A jazz trio played in the lobby, as donors, activists, and local officials ate fruit skewers and mingled. "For us, it's very much a seed of something that will grow here," the museum's executive director, Ben Garcia, said, of the brick. At noon, the crowd filed into the auditorium, where the brick stood onstage in a glass case. (A curator explained that it would later be documented, catalogued, and put in temperature-controlled storage.) There were speeches to come from Governor Kathy Hochul, the Manhattan borough president, and other dignitaries, but Kelly sneaked out before it began. "Believe it or not," he said, "there's a bar that's gotta be run." ♦

Michael Schulman, a staff writer, has contributed to The New Yorker since 2006. He is the author of "Oscar Wars: A History of Hollywood in Gold, Sweat, and Tears" and "Her Again: Becoming Meryl Streep."

The Literary Life

Jhumpa Lahiri’s Writing Career Began in Stolen Notebooks

The author surveys school book reports and some fan mail, from M. Night Shyamalan, in her archives, which she recently sold to the New York Public Library.

By Jennifer Wilson

January 13, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

It was below freezing the other Friday morning, in Long Island City, when the author Jhumpa Lahiri walked into a nondescript brick building beneath

the Queens Boulevard overpass. She was wearing a long white wool coat and maroon suède boots. “That’s her!” someone said, springing up from a bench. As Lahiri took off her coat, she was given a nametag that read “BookOps” over the logo of the New York Public Library.

The N.Y.P.L. had just acquired Lahiri’s papers, among which are school book reports, an Italian rail ticket with scribbled ideas for a novel, and a piece of fan mail from the director M. Night Shyamalan, in which he shared that he’d cried after reading “Interpreter of Maladies.”

Lahiri is only fifty-seven—on the young side for selling her archive—but she was taken with the idea of having her work kept alongside “Brontë material.” Plus, the sale is an opportunity to declutter. “I have a number of piles stacked up,” she said of her homes, in Brooklyn and Rome, and her office at Barnard. The library took about forty linear feet of stuff off her hands.

For Lahiri, the line between home and library is porous. Lahiri’s father was a cataloguer at the University of Rhode Island library. “All the scrap paper in my house was old catalogue cards,” she said. In 1986, after her sophomore year at Barnard, she got a part-time job at the N.Y.P.L.’s main branch. “I was hired to sit on a stool and count the number of people going into the main exhibit.” She recalled: “It was on children’s literature.” Now her own childhood writing and the rest of her materials will be stored in a vault under Bryant Park that’s kept at a steady temperature of sixty-three degrees and a relative humidity of forty-eight per cent.

In a small conference room, Lahiri met with the curator Carolyn Vega to look through some of the folders from the archive. Laid out on a table was a drawing from the fifth grade of a black cat. “I don’t know why this one ended up surviving,” she said. “I never had a cat. I never really thought about cats.” Next to it was Lahiri’s first book, “The Life of a Weighing Scale,” which she “self-published” in 1976, at the age of nine. “There was a contest in my elementary school,” she said. “Everyone had to write a book. The prize was that it got to be in the school library.” She skimmed the browned pages. The story, which she wrote in the fourth grade, is told from the point of view of a bathroom scale. In one scene, the scale gets rained on from an open window. “It’s pouring right on me, poor me. I better push

myself over," the scale says. Lahiri smiled and said, "I would say there are little hints of Julia Kristeva's abjection theory here—nascent."

On the next table was a book report with a big red apple drawn on the cover alongside the title "Manhattan." Lahiri was around ten when she drew it, but New York beckoned. "I grew up in a tiny provincial place in New England," she said. "There were times when I felt like a total freak of nature because of the way I felt that my family was perceived. We were so conspicuous." Lahiri loved acting in plays but was typically cast as the villain—the witch in "Hansel and Gretel," the Queen of Hearts in "Alice in Wonderland." "I think that was partly because I wasn't blond and white, to cut to the chase," she said, pointing at a school script for "Oliver Twist," in which she played Fagin, the evil pickpocket. "I had three and a half solos," she said, reading her old notes on the script.

The casting, actually, was apt: Lahiri liked to swipe extra notebooks from school closets. "While the teachers would be out to smoke a cigarette, I would sort of very stealthily go and take one or two. My first dishonest act." Her early attempts at fiction were written in those notebooks, mostly "stories about the victims of mean girls," she said, gesturing at one that she'd titled "Jeanette." She went on, "I didn't show these things to any adults, including even my parents. And I clearly couldn't show them to my teachers, because they were written in these stolen notebooks."

Spotting a computer printout of "Roman Stories," from 2022, she shuddered at the sight of Track Changes in the margins. "They're violent," she said. "And ugly." She still prefers writing in notebooks. She opened up "Jeanette" and observed how she had numbered the pages, leaving many blank.

Vega interjected, "Virginia Woolf did the same thing." (Lahiri's papers will now join Woolf's in the Berg Collection of English and American Literature.)

"I thought the best, most amazing thing I could possibly do with myself would be to get to the end of one of these notebooks," Lahiri said. "All I wanted to do with my life was fill the pages." ♦

Jennifer Wilson is a staff writer at The New Yorker covering books and culture. In 2024, she received a Robert B. Silvers Prize for Literary Criticism.

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Letter from Israel

Netanyahu’s Media Poison Machine

The talk-show host Yinon Magal is at the center of a campaign to protect the Prime Minister and destroy the opposition.

By Ruth Margalit

January 13, 2025

“I collect people. I influence people. I make people small,” Magal says.Photographs by Amit Elkayam for The New Yorker

On the night of the U.S. Presidential election, Yinon Magal, the host of a popular talk show on Israel’s Channel 14, burst onto the set wearing a “*TRUMP 2024*” baseball cap. “I’m a journalist first and foremost,” he told the studio audience. “So I won’t tell you who I’m supporting—Donald or Trump.” His fans gave him an obliging laugh; a father and son sitting beside me snickered loudly enough to be captured on camera. (Before the taping, a studio manager had advised the crowd to react generously, “or Yinon will kick you out.”)

The Trump bit was just a preamble; the show's real focus was a scandal involving Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. An hour earlier, Netanyahu had called his defense minister, Yoav Gallant, into a private meeting and fired him. Netanyahu cited differences over Israel's prosecution of the war in Gaza. But, in Gallant's telling, the main reason was political: he had refused to support a law exempting yeshiva students from military service—a sop to ultra-Orthodox politicians, who help fill out the coalition that keeps Netanyahu in power. The Prime Minister's critics were accusing him of sacrificing military stability to advance his own interests. Magal offered a mocking rejoinder: "Hello! Calm down! You're the ones who said that everyone responsible for October 7th should leave. So what's the matter? We started with Gallant!"

Every week night at nine, Magal's show—"Hapatriotim," or "The Patriots"—assembles a roundtable of hard-right media personalities, nationalist former liberals, and politicians from Netanyahu's Likud Party. Most of the guests, like Magal, belong to a loose confederation known as the Bibi-ists, devoted to defending the Prime Minister as he moves increasingly to the far reaches of the right wing. If Channel 14 is Netanyahu's Fox News, Magal is its Tucker Carlson—an object of such devotion that his fans have to be dissuaded from charging the stage to take selfies with him during commercial breaks.

Magal was once a prime-time newscaster, and at fifty-five he still looks the part: a rugged beard, piercing blue eyes, a blandly wholesome face. These days, though, he is an unapologetic combatant, delivering his version of the news in a hunched-over-the-deck posture that has been described as "gorilla pose." Magal favors building Jewish settlements among the ruins in Gaza. He thinks the military has courted catastrophe by being "too busy" integrating women into combat roles. He has encouraged the "voluntary migration" of political opponents, which would remove not just Palestinians from Gaza but also liberal Jews from Israel. He dismisses criticism of the government as sanctimonious and occasionally treasonous. He and his panelists heap contempt on judges, journalists, academics, and the opposition leader Yair Lapid, whose verbal flip-flopping is the subject of a daily segment. "The level is that of bullies in the locker room," Chen Liberman, a reporter for the investigative program "Uvda," told me.

In the past two years, Israel has undergone unrelenting political upheaval, war, and international criticism. Netanyahu is on trial for corruption, over allegations that he sought favorable media coverage and illicitly accepted expensive gifts. (He denies any wrongdoing.) Yet he has stayed in office, and Channel 14 has thrived as his defender. In early 2023, an effort to radically expand the government's power by weakening the courts set off the largest protest movement in Israel's history. Magal lashed out at the demonstrators, calling them "barn burners" and "Kapos," connoting Nazi collaborators. Then came the attacks of October 7th, when a Hamas-led force stormed into Israel, massacring civilians and taking hostages. As Israel has carried out a devastating war of retribution in Gaza, Magal and his guests have projected a reassuring sense of moral conviction. Watching Channel 14, it is easy to believe that "we are winning, and everything is honey," as Oren Persico, a writer for the media-criticism publication the Seventh Eye, put it. "After the trauma of October 7th, people were longing for that."

Channel 14, once an obscure station known for interview shows and religious-themed children's programming, has become the favored news source of a growing right-wing movement. Yet Magal still insists that he is an underdog. In his view, the Israeli left and its supporters in the media are a "thought dictatorship"—never mind that Netanyahu has held power for fifteen years. Liberman told me, "Victimization is his most effective fuel. So you preserve the sense of being a victim even after you've won over and over and over again."

In the studio, as Magal argued that Netanyahu had had no choice but to fire Gallant, I was struck by the almost jubilant atmosphere. Military unity used to be sacrosanct in Israel—especially on the right, and especially in times of war. Yet now a defense minister had been sacked under dubious circumstances, and the audience cheered. Magal cut to a clip in which Gallant said, "Israel's security has been and remains my life's mission" and saluted the fallen soldiers. People sitting near me laughed, and Itamar Fleischmann, a panelist and a former political consultant, lingered on Gallant's "strange salute." Other guests expressed hope that the chief of staff would be the next to go.

Magal says that he is both a journalist and an entertainer, just “as a cucumber is both green and long.” After the families of the Israeli hostages in Gaza held a vigil to mark a hundred days of war, he performed a burlesque of sympathy on the air: “Oh, the grief! The grief!” During the taping I saw, he showed footage from Tel Aviv, where protesters had swarmed the Ayalon Highway, blocking traffic and lighting bonfires. “It’s Lag b’Omer on Ayalon again,” he said, referring to a Jewish holiday that is marked with fire. “And these are the same people who cried for years about pollution and the environment?”

Channel 14 seems to run on a simple equation. Whatever serves Netanyahu’s interests, Magal and “The Patriots” promote. What doesn’t, they mock and dismiss. “There’s no coherence,” Tehilla Shwartz Altshuler, a media expert at the Israel Democracy Institute, a nonpartisan think tank, told me. “It doesn’t matter what Bibi said yesterday. It’s all about what serves him today.” Magal once described himself as a “vessel” for messages from Netanyahu. When he was asked who he saw as a potential heir to the Prime Minister, he deadpanned, “Me.”

“Are you with me or against me?” Magal texted, with a winking emoji, when I asked him to meet. Then he invited me to an apartment that he keeps as an office, in a tree-lined section of northern Tel Aviv. The neighborhood is a center of liberal Israel—though, as the left has lost influence, it has come to resemble an embattled bastion. Down the street from Magal’s building, a sign hanging from a balcony referred to Netanyahu without mentioning his name: “*GUILTY*.”

I knocked at Magal’s door, and he yelled for me to come in. He was sitting at the kitchen table, which was strewn with bills and a copy of the Talmud. On one wall was a rendering of the Third Temple, which he believes will be built in Jerusalem. “I don’t know if it will take a year or a hundred years or ten years, but it will happen,” he said. The State of Israel had become disconnected from its Jewish identity, Magal argued: “The alternative brought disaster on us. The so-called rationalism of seeing all people as equal, and thinking that the Palestinians, like us, just want peace and a state—that rationalism ended in Kalashnikovs and pickup trucks and R.P.G.s.” Magal’s world view—nationalistic, tribal, intolerant—is ascendant, not only

in Israel, he said, but around the world. “We are winning everything. Trump. Ratings. The war—of course.”

The operation to support Netanyahu and to diminish his opponents appears so well orchestrated that it has gained a quasi-military nickname: the poison machine. In 2022, the Israeli parliamentarian Naftali Bennett recalled negotiating with Netanyahu after a recent election failed to yield a clear winner. According to Bennett, when Netanyahu realized that he was considering forming a government without him, he warned, “I’ll send the Army on you.” (Bennett explained that Netanyahu meant “his mouthpieces, the whole operation.”) Bennett’s tenure as Prime Minister lasted only a year.

In recent years, people close to Netanyahu have promoted a series of outlandish falsehoods, claiming that Ehud Barak, a former Prime Minister, is a pedophile; that Benny Gantz, another political opponent, had an affair that made him susceptible to blackmail by Iran; that the husband of a prominent anti-government protester was in contact with the leader of Hamas days before the October 7th massacre. Gideon Sa’ar, an opposition legislator who withstood such attacks for years, told me, in 2023, “It’s a working method of slandering and tainting political rivals. Everyone who criticizes Netanyahu receives ‘treatment.’ ” (Last November, Sa’ar relented and joined the government; he is now the foreign minister.) “Uvda” recently uncovered text messages sent by Netanyahu’s wife, Sara. In them, she orders a longtime aide to dispatch protesters—“full force”—to the homes of people involved in Netanyahu’s trial, including the chief prosecutor, a prominent witness, and the state’s attorney general.

Magal dismisses the notion of an orchestrated campaign. Instead, he described a “battle” being waged between Netanyahu’s camp and everyone else. “I see my role as deciding the battle and insuring that we will win,” he told me. “I collect people. I influence people. I make people small, I make people weak.”

As we spoke, his phone kept lighting up. “Want to see?” he asked. He scrolled through dozens of messages: “The greatest media personality we’ve ever had here.” “You’re the man.” “The charisma . . .” “Thank you for making us stop apologizing.”

“It’s infinite! A thousand a day,” he said. Often, he selects his favorite messages and forwards them to his mother. “True,” she responds. “Very true!”

Magal calls himself a *dos*, a derogatory Hebrew term for the religiously observant. You wouldn’t know it to look at him. During my visit, he wore a clingy gray T-shirt and jeans, with no kippah; he has a buzz cut, which evokes his days in an élite special-forces unit called Sayeret Matkal. Netanyahu also served in Sayeret Matkal, and the two men’s biographies contain striking similarities. Both spent most of their childhood in Jerusalem, with secular Ashkenazi parents. Both followed an admired older brother to Sayeret Matkal, and both became commanding officers. Both saw themselves as outsiders in a hostile environment. Magal’s father, a career military man, voted for the Labor Party but told his sons, “You’re Jews first and foremost. You’re closer to the Haredi man in Brooklyn than you are to the Druze soldier fighting alongside you.”

In the military, Magal was doggedly ambitious, according to a former soldier from Sayeret Matkal. He rankled his subordinates by volunteering them for extra navigation sessions. As a leader, though, he was introverted and tentative. The former soldier recalled that during field exercises team members “would ask him on the military radio, ‘Yinon, left or right?,’ and he would dawdle and say, ‘I’m still thinking.’ He was the exact opposite of who he is today.” Later, his unit mates started a WhatsApp group but excluded Magal. “The team is supposed to be like brothers, but no one is in touch with him,” the former soldier said. “He was never liked.”

“I always pack a book so I have a constant reminder of something I could be doing but instead choose to ignore.”

Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

In 1995, Magal was twenty-six, out of the Army, and feeling aimless. “My wheels were spinning in the air,” he told me. It was an anxious time in Israel. The government of Yitzhak Rabin had negotiated a historic peace accord with Palestinian leaders, but hard-liners on both sides felt betrayed. Suicide bombers struck repeatedly inside Israel, and right-wing demonstrations grew violent. Though Magal was skeptical of the peace agreement, he didn’t get involved in the political dispute. Instead, he travelled to India—“the cliché of the Israeli who goes searching for himself”—and spent a year trekking, riding motorcycles, and taking drugs.

One night in Dharamkot, a destination for Israeli seekers, a friend invited him to join a predawn meditation ritual, which led to an unexpected epiphany. At the end of the session, Magal recalls, he opened his eyes and saw his friend bowing to a statue of the Buddha—a grave violation of Jewish law. “It rocked me,” he said. He began to frequent Chabad centers in India, and he returned home with a newfound piety and a deepened commitment to right-wing ideas.

He got a job at Army Radio, a popular station run by the military, and worked his way up from stringer to reporter. In 1999, he asked to become the correspondent in the West Bank, which was then a source of stories about the excesses of Jewish settlers on Palestinian land. He had a clear goal—“I wanted to change the coverage of the settlers”—but he did not announce his politics. Nadav Eyal, a columnist and author who worked at the station at the time, recalled, “He wore shalwars from India and wasn’t ideologically affiliated. He was a good guy. Journalism was different then. We didn’t know anything about his opinions.”

Israel is a media-obsessed place; the first Hebrew-language newspapers appeared before the founding of the country. Yet for decades there was only one television channel, a PBS-style public network, and three-quarters of the population tuned in to its evening news broadcast. Barely a decade after Magal secured his first media job, he became the network’s top anchor, and soon he was famous enough that fans stopped him on the street. Still, he felt scorned by his peers. He told me that he was compelled to keep his views

“mostly in the closet,” and has compared being a right-leaning journalist in a liberal environment to undergoing a forced conversion.

Netanyahu made similar complaints, but at greater volume. He once griped that the media and the left were “trying to carry out a governmental coup.” After a failed campaign in 1999, he blamed negative coverage, telling associates, “I need my own media.” Magal was not yet ready to provide it. Although he supported Likud, he criticized those who exhibited a cultish devotion to Netanyahu. As he puts it now, he was still a “values voter.”

The popular sketch-comedy show “It’s a Wonderful Country,” on Channel 12, has a recurrent Magal character: a derisive, pearl-clutching blowhard whose tagline is “Oy, oy, oy!” (As in: “Oy, oy, oy! They took away our democracy!”) In November, the show aired a fierce takedown of “The Patriots.” The subject was the hostages—“Who, I remind you, weren’t democratically elected,” the Magal character announces—and the panel credulously parsed a series of outrageous conspiracies. “I’m not so sure that when we look at what happened we won’t find that those kibbutzniks kidnapped themselves to topple Netanyahu,” the Fleischmann character muses. “If true, then it’s crazy!” Magal responds.

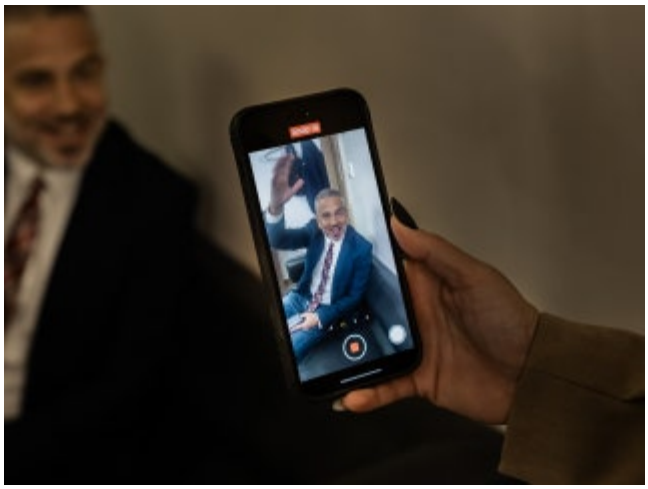
People who worked with Magal a decade ago remember a more centrist figure. In 2012, he left his television job and joined the online news site Walla. Its politics did not align with his. “The news desk was very leftist, very Tel Avivian, very gay-friendly,” Dan Magen, a former colleague there, said. But Magal was warmly received; he was a star in media circles, and a low-grade heartthrob in Tel Aviv. Magen recalled “a lot of excitement among female producers.”

The next year, Magal was promoted to editor-in-chief, and launched a section called Walla Judaism. In 2014, during Israel’s offensive in Gaza, he came up with a slogan—“First of all, Israeli!”—that the site used in a national advertising campaign. But his tenure was not without conflict. Walla journalists regularly complained that Netanyahu and Sara sought to influence coverage of them, and by all accounts Magal repeatedly backed his employees. (The Netanyahus deny the allegations.) When the site ran a story about the Netanyahus’ inflated expenses, which included more than a thousand dollars’ worth of scented candles, the C.E.O. texted Magal to

remove the article from the home page. Thirty minutes later, he wrote again: “Lose the goddam candles already.” Magal assented, but told his boss, “By the way, I went to that house once and felt like I was at a séance.”

Finally, Magal was ordered to kill the article altogether, and he grew furious. “This goes beyond any ethical boundary,” he wrote back. “With all due respect, we can’t make stories about the Prime Minister disappear.” These days, Magal argues that many politicians tried to influence coverage. But, when we spoke, he allowed that the Netanyahus’ interference was particularly onerous. “It was a nightmare,” he said. “I just wanted to escape.”

In 2014, Magal was offered an appealing way out. Naftali Bennett was rebuilding his party, Jewish Home, in preparation for a forthcoming election. He and Magal had served together in Sayeret Matkal, and they remained on good terms. Did Magal want to join? Magal soon got a seat in the Israeli parliament, the Knesset, where he revealed a swaggering, cantankerous side. He addressed Arab lawmakers in Arabic, telling them from the lectern, “There will be no Palestinian state from the river to the sea!” Chaim Levinson, a journalist for the liberal newspaper *Haaretz*, recalled joining a staid panel on the role of the press in which “Yinon suddenly started screaming at me, ‘You! The media! Tried to shut me up!’ ”



Magal’s fans are so devoted that they have to be dissuaded from charging the stage to take selfies with him during commercial breaks.

Magal savored the performative aspect of politics. “I was a meteor,” he says. Yet his career didn’t last long. That November, a Walla writer named

Racheli Rottner accused him of harassing her during his farewell party, at a bar in Tel Aviv. Rottner wrote on social media that she had always liked Magal, defending him whenever colleagues “dismissed him out of what felt to me like blind, automatic leftism.” So she was surprised when he leaned in close at the bar and told her, “The entire time we were working together I was horny for you. I would look at you and think about your tits and ass.”

Rottner’s post spread quickly, setting off what was perhaps Israel’s first #MeToo scandal. Magal—married, with four young boys—quickly issued a response on Facebook, in which he described the incident as “things that were said between friends” and apologized vaguely to “anyone who was hurt.” Then he fled to Rome with his wife, hoping that the scandal would pass. Instead, three more women came forward to accuse him of unwanted sexual advances, including grabbing one by her backside and forcing a kiss on another. (The police opened a criminal investigation, then closed it, citing a lack of evidence.) Though Magal wanted to fight the allegations, Bennett sought his immediate resignation from official duties, and he left parliament soon afterward.

When I asked about the farewell party, Magal told me, “I was drunk and high. I didn’t remember it at all.” Then he made an attempt at introspection: “I’m relatively good-looking, and I’m successful, and things come easily for me, so I allowed myself too much, and that’s not O.K.” Yet, even after a decade, he seemed freshly aggrieved. Magal has blamed Bennett for “calling me a true friend and then stabbing me in the back.” He still sounds angry at *Yediot Ahronot*, the country’s leading daily paper, for devoting fifteen pages to the scandal. “I went through a lynching,” he told me. “I’m mad at the media more than I am at the women, because the women wanted publicity.” Rottner declined to sit for an interview with me, but she wrote a tart response to Magal’s assertion: “I certainly enjoyed the death threats, curses, and false rumors calling me a cheating slut that I was awarded thanks to this coveted ‘publicity.’ ”

After leaving the Knesset, Magal was out of work for two years, with rising debts that he had to ask his family to help pay off. “I was broken,” he says. His outlook fundamentally changed. “He got into an Archie Bunker mind-set,” Levinson, the *Haaretz* journalist, who was once friendly with Magal,

said. “He saw the left as a hypocritical camp that was out to destroy him. Since then, he has developed not a right-wing ideology but a social hatred of the left.”

The Walla interference case led to an indictment, and Netanyahu faced criminal charges for bribery and fraud. In the summer of 2023, Magal appeared in the district court in Jerusalem to testify. It was a surreal spectacle: Netanyahu’s foremost media defender had been called as a witness for the prosecution. His fans filled the courtroom. At one point, according to a report in the Seventh Eye, Magal turned to them and murmured, “Oy, oy, oy!,” generating waves of laughter.

On the witness stand, Magal argued that Walla had been “hostile” toward Netanyahu. When prosecutors read him a previous statement in which he had called the site’s coverage “objective,” he waved away the discrepancy. “I suppose it was convenient for me to think that I was maintaining some kind of objectivity when I worked there,” he said.

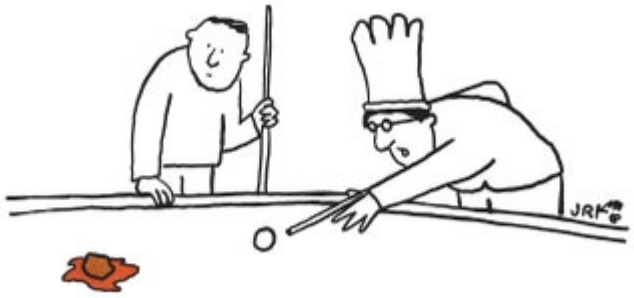
Shimon Riklin, a close friend of Magal’s and a host on Channel 14, recalled his own conversion to Bibi-ism. An ardent settler leader, Riklin used to attack the government from the right, arguing that Netanyahu was not building housing fast enough in the occupied West Bank. One day in 2016, he got a phone call: the Prime Minister wanted to meet at his office. Riklin recalls that Netanyahu opened with a joke. Two men, a left-winger and a right-winger, apply for a job. The leftist goes before the application committee and is asked, “When did World War Two start?” He replies, “1939.” “Very good,” they tell him. “And when did it end?” “1945.” “Very good. How many Jews were killed?” “Six million.” “Very good.” The rightist walks in and gets the same questions. “How many Jews were killed?” “Six million,” he answers. This time, the committee says, “Names! We want names!” Netanyahu’s implication, Riklin said, was that “we’re the alliance of the oppressed. They will never accept us.” He told me, “That moment, everything clicked for me. I heard him out and thought, That’s exactly how I feel.”

Around that time, Magal and Riklin helped form a group, which they described as the “new right,” to coördinate efforts to fight what they saw as the media’s left-wing bias. A debate broke out within the group over

whether it was better to infiltrate mainstream organizations or to attack the establishment from the outside. One of the members, a political reporter named Amit Segal, told me that it was a “choice between evolution and revolution.” Segal had chosen the former; he works for Channel 12, Israel’s most watched news outlet, where he presents right-wing views while preserving an air of scrupulous independence. Riklin and Magal went outside, eventually taking jobs at Channel 14. The station was obscure, but its mission attracted Magal. As he put it, the goal was to “change the consciousness of the State of Israel—turn it into something more religious, more Jewish. In the battle between being Israeli and being Jewish, Channel 14 brings the agenda of being Jewish first of all.”

In 2020, at the height of campaign season, a video spread online. Shot at Netanyahu’s residence, it shows Magal, Riklin, and another Channel 14 host playing guitars and singing a song from Psalms. At one point, Netanyahu, wearing a suit, walks in and joins them. By then, the three hosts had established a WhatsApp group that they call the Bureau, in which they discuss the slant they will take on the day’s news. Their messages are then amplified on Channel 14 and on social media, where Magal has nearly a million followers across various platforms—a considerable number in a country of ten million. When Netanyahu appears on “The Patriots,” he posts on social media, urging his citizens to tune in.

The hosts’ tools are journalistic, but their content is propaganda, according to Achiya Schatz, the director of Fake Reporter, a nonprofit group that monitors disinformation. “They are the superspreaders,” Schatz said. “They shape our political culture.” Their messages often echo those from the Prime Minister’s office. In October, Channel 14’s Web site ran a column by Jacob Bardugo, a political adviser to Netanyahu who is one of the network’s stars. It appeared to be a talking-points memo from Netanyahu’s inner circle: “You have to mention that this brings us closer to a deal. . . .” “You have to talk about how it’s not a coincidence. . . .”



“Meatball, corner pocket.”
Cartoon by Jonathan Rosen

Riklin told me that he and Magal inform Netanyahu’s positions as much as he informs theirs. In 2016, when an Israeli medic fatally shot a wounded Palestinian militant who had earlier stabbed a soldier in Hebron, military leaders pressed for a severe prison sentence. Netanyahu went along at first. Then, a few days later, amid an uproar orchestrated by Magal and Riklin, he began to express sympathy for the medic. Riklin said, “We’re presented as a bunch of idiots with a fax. But, from my experience, there’s total balance between us and him.”

In 2023, the government’s attempt to overhaul the judiciary divided Israeli society. There seemed to be new proposals every day: to override Supreme Court decisions, to give the government effective veto power over the selection of judges, to transform outside legal advisers into political appointees. Liberal Israelis viewed these efforts as anti-democratic and dangerous. But Netanyahu’s administration and its political base were undeterred.

One of the regular panelists on “The Patriots” is Irit Linur, an author once known for her liberal views. When I met her recently, she quoted a lyric that had become a staple of the anti-government protests: “I will not be silent, for my country has changed its face.” Then she rolled her eyes. “Well, countries change their faces,” she said, sipping a cappuccino. (Like Magal and Riklin, she lives in Tel Aviv; as one journalist put it, “They enjoy the comforts of the world they incite against every evening.”)

Linur complained that protesters “call Netanyahu a dictator”—but would a dictator be standing trial, as Netanyahu is doing? Her camp was attacked for being unenlightened. And yet, she insisted, “I care more about minority

rights than Aharon Barak," a famously liberal Supreme Court Justice, who is now retired. Which minorities was she referring to? "The Haredim, for example," she said. I asked about Palestinian Israelis, who account for a fifth of the population. She told me that she supported their rights—as long as they didn't have national aspirations. "You know what?" she said, growing irritated. "Even if I'm less 'enlightened,' I am the majority!"

Magal covered the protests with his usual gleeful disdain. Inwardly, though, he was worried. (He told me he believed in hindsight that the protesters had won: "They managed to convince people that it was the end of democracy.") Netanyahu, sliding in the polls, needed a friendly venue. That April, he appeared on "The Patriots," where he was welcomed like a ballplayer on his home turf.

The left "has woken up," Magal complained to him. They're "in ecstasy." What's more, intelligence reports indicated that Israel's enemies were paying close attention; the threat of war was looming. "Is it serious?" Magal asked.

"I think it's overblown," Netanyahu replied, with a half smile. He added that Israel was prepared for every scenario. Six months later, Hamas launched its attack across the border.

October 7th, 2023, fell on the Jewish holiday of Simchat Torah, so Channel 14 paused its programming, instead filling the screen with a colorful slide that read "Broadcasts will resume after the holiday." There was no coverage as thousands of militants from Hamas and Islamic Jihad infiltrated border communities and killed some twelve hundred people; as they took civilian hostages and set homes ablaze with families trapped inside; as the terrorists uploaded euphoric videos of themselves parading their human loot through the streets of Gaza.

No one doubts that Hamas instigated and carried out the massacre. Ask Israelis what caused it, however, and you'll get wildly different answers. Magal believes that Israelis "brought October 7th on ourselves" by not being tough enough. Palestinians—whom he calls Arabs—"need to understand that we are the landlords here." On the night of the attacks, he

tweeted, “It’s time for Nakba 2,” referring to the mass expulsion of Palestinians during the formation of Israel.

Throughout the war, “The Patriots” has insisted that Netanyahu was not at fault for missing the signs of an invasion—that security officials purposefully kept intelligence from him. The idea was planted by Netanyahu, in a late-night social-media post, and, though the post was quickly deleted, Magal took up the argument. Even after a military report concluded that senior commanders had begun calling the Prime Minister’s office at two o’clock on the morning of the attacks, the Bibi-ists insisted that the security officers were at fault. “They didn’t wake you!” Magal told Netanyahu in June, sounding exasperated. The occasion was the Prime Minister’s first interview with Israeli media since the attacks, eight months before, and Magal proved reliably unexacting. “How would things have been different had they woken you up?” he asked. Netanyahu affected a magnanimous tone: “Yinon, there’s no point getting into these things.”

On “The Patriots,” the discussion of the war alternates between triumphal and venomous. Moshe Feiglin, a former member of the Knesset, said, soon after the attacks, “If the goal of this operation is not destruction, conquest, eviction, and settlement, then we haven’t done a thing!”A few weeks later, a Likud lawmaker named Keti Shitrit said, “If you ask me personally . . . I flatten Gaza, I have no sentiments.” Last February, Fleischmann said of civilians in Gaza, “I think the more humane solution is to starve them.” Magal himself suggested, in June, “Wipe those people out. As far as I’m concerned, let five hundred civilians remain there.” Until recently, the home page of Channel 14’s Web site kept a running tally of Palestinian casualties, including women and children, with the headline “*Terrorists we eliminated*.”

Since the war began, participants in Channel 14’s shows have called at least fifty times for the military to carry out genocide in Gaza, according to Israeli nonprofits that monitor the broadcasts. In September, the groups—the Democratic Bloc, Zulat, and the Association for Fair Regulation—filed a complaint with the attorney general against the station. Michael Sfard, a human-rights attorney who represents them, said that the complaint was part of a larger story, “about an Israeli network that has turned into a

platform for incitement to war crimes at a time of war, and that is closely backed and supported by the Prime Minister and his allies."

Channel 14 enjoys huge regulatory benefits that its competitors—which have to maintain independent news departments with a publicly appointed board of directors, and are obligated to hand over a percentage of their earnings to support original Israeli productions—do not. The government "turned the entire regulation of television on its head in order to help out Channel 14," Shwartz Altshuler, of the Israel Democracy Institute, told me. In 2018, she was asked before parliament to speak about media regulation. She called out the lopsided treatment that Channel 14 received. "It was the only time I was ever kicked out of a Knesset committee," she said. That year, a former Netanyahu spokesman told police investigators about a meeting that Netanyahu had held whose subject was "the need to provide a tailwind" to the network. According to the investigative site Shakuf, the current government has quadrupled its advertising spending on Channel 14, while cutting ad funds for its main competitors by more than half.

Occasionally, Channel 14 participants are forced to issue apologies. Yet the network has been undeterred in its coverage of the war. Its owner is a reclusive billionaire named Yitzchak Mirilashvili. Born in St. Petersburg, Mirilashvili grew up during the tumultuous period after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As rival oligarchs fought to secure the assets once held by the state, Mirilashvili's father made a huge fortune in businesses spanning oil, real estate, and diamonds. Yitzchak, who moved to Israel in his youth, made his own fortune by helping found Russia's largest social-media site, VK. Both he and his father are major donors to the Chabad-Lubavitch movement.

The channel's coverage of Netanyahu has prompted comparisons to Fox News, but a more apt analogy may be to Russia's Channel One, the Kremlin-affiliated network. Channel One broadcasts are "a gladiator arena of opinion-makers, each inflaming the other, in front of a live audience," Persico, of the Seventh Eye, said. "That's 'The Patriots' exactly." On both outlets, he added, the investigative reporting is negligible. And there is little distance between officials and those who cover them. When I spoke to Magal, he indicated that he had spoken to Netanyahu just a few days earlier,

after news broke that one of his aides had been accused of leaking a highly classified security document to the German tabloid *Bild*. Magal said of Netanyahu, “When he has a message, he calls me.”

Critics of Channel 14 argue that the real problem is not simply the coverage, which is easy enough to turn off. It’s that the network has changed the media landscape: by going so far to the right, it has forced the mainstream to the right, too. Liberman, the “Uvda” reporter, told me, “Once you have an outlet that cries out the loudest and has people on it who call for genocide, if a reporter is out there working on a story about the plight of the Gazan people, then they’ll attack you and label you Al Jazeera.”

More than a year into a war that, according to the Gaza health ministry, has killed an estimated forty-six thousand Palestinians, Israel has not allowed a single journalist into the Gaza Strip without military supervision. On the rare occasion when news of the humanitarian disaster there reaches Israeli screens, it tends to focus on the soldiers and their targets in Hamas. At times, the boundary between the press and the Army vanishes altogether. Last October, Danny Cushmaro, a respected longtime presenter on Channel 12, embedded with a military battalion in southern Lebanon. In one report, a soldier teaches him how to detonate an explosive device. Cushmaro is then seen pressing a button, and a thunderous explosion reduces a building to rubble. Persico, of the Seventh Eye, said that the incident was a “direct result” of Channel 14’s influence.

Not long ago, Magal posted an illustration on X of a man standing before a split screen. On the left side are demons, stormy skies, and the logos of Israel’s three mainstream television channels. On the right: flowers and sunshine and the logo of Channel 14. “That’s the entire difference,” Magal wrote. For once, even his critics agreed.

Tune in to “The Patriots” on any given night and you’ll see Magal and his guests having a blast. “We don’t take ourselves too seriously, and we don’t have a sourpuss look on our faces,” Linur, the panelist, said. They seem to spend more time picking apart social-media posts by liberal activists than they do discussing policy. Magal’s name recently cropped up in the International Court of Justice, in The Hague, as part of genocide allegations brought against Israel by South Africa. (A video he shared in 2023 showed

Israeli soldiers singing that they would “wipe out Amalek”—a Biblical enemy of the people of Israel.) Yet he grows visibly bored when asked to consider the kind of Palestinian leadership he would like to see replace Hamas.

When we spoke, I asked about the dissonance between the show’s lighthearted packaging and its inflammatory rhetoric. In a segment last summer, Magal announced that an Israeli air strike had killed a top Hamas commander. Then he paused, and added, in an oh-by-the-way tone, that it had also killed forty-two Gazan civilians. The live audience was briefly silent, adjusting to his cue. Then it broke into applause. Magal took in the response with a teasing smile.

Magal laughed when I mentioned the segment. “It’s a kind of game of walking on the edge between what I can say and what I can’t, between what’s politically correct and what people really feel,” he said. “These are games that I enjoy playing out on television, because everyone understands the situation, and the leftists get angry and the right-wingers are happy, and it creates high emotions. So it’s good television.”

O.K., forget television, I said. Are there innocent civilians in Gaza?

It was the only time, in an hour and a half of conversation, that he paused to think before replying. Finally, he said, “What’s innocent? I think they all want to eradicate us.”

Even children? I asked. “What do I know, children?” he said. “You see what they’re taught in kindergartens with weapons and grenades and mortars. It’s a violent, primitive culture.”

Later, he returned to the subject. “Personally, it often hurts me to see their pain. And immediately I tell myself, ‘Yinon, have no mercy. Have no mercy! Even when the pictures are hard to take. Yinon, remember, he who shows mercy to the cruel will end up being cruel to the merciful.’ ”

For months, Magal and his fellow-panelists had argued against a deal with Hamas that would bring about a ceasefire in Gaza and free the hostages—even as most of the hostage families, and a substantial majority of the

population, pleaded for such a deal. Magal said that the families, in their protests and vigils, were “playing into the hands of Hamas.” An investigation published last year by the financial newspaper *TheMarker* showed a “systematic effort” on social media to delegitimatize the hostage families and depict them as politically motivated. The poison machine has come for them.

“The Patriots” didn’t dwell on the accusations that Netanyahu’s far-right coalition partners had threatened to topple the government if a ceasefire deal was reached. But last year Magal told Eli Elbag, whose teen-age daughter is among the captives, that a deal will never be negotiated, because “if there is a deal, there will not be a government.”

In December, the negotiations between Israel and Hamas reportedly reached a breakthrough, raising hopes of a “partial” deal, in which a six-week ceasefire would be exchanged for the release of some thirty hostages. For once, Netanyahu’s coalition partners did not veto the agreement outright. Almost overnight, the tone on Channel 14 changed. Magal welcomed the prospect—“God willing.”

The reality of a partial deal is hard to fathom: scores of wounded people returning home from the Gazan underworld after more than a year in captivity; a brief cessation of hostilities that are then resumed—even as famine spreads across Gaza. But it is harder still to fathom a continuation of the status quo: strikes on schools and hospitals across Gaza; fires raging in Palestinian tent cities that are supposed to provide safe zones; a daily drip of Israeli military casualties; a hundred hostages left behind in airless tunnels.

Israel is a difficult place to live, Magal conceded when we spoke. He mentioned a recent exodus of liberal Israelis, fed up with the rocket strikes and the government’s extremism. “People think that they are choosing to leave, but they’re not,” he said. “The land is vomiting them out.” What will the new country—the country he has fought to achieve—look like? I asked. “I’m not worried,” Magal replied. “The Haredim will serve in the Army, and they will work. And people from the left wing who are still here will become right-wing. It’s a process. This place will not crumble.” He smiled. “Things will only get better and better and better.” ♦

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Personal History

Tabula Rasa

A project meant not to end.

By John McPhee

January 13, 2025

Illustration by Seb Agresti

This is the fifth article in the "Tabula Rasa" series. Read Volumes One, Two, Three, and Four.

Bleb

"Bleb" is worth eight points in Scrabble. Thought you might like to know. I have known the word since Wednesday, June 11, 1958, when I learned it

from a company physician at Time Incorporated, in Rockefeller Center. He said I should have been hospitalized four days ago, but there was nothing much to do about it now, go back to work.

I went back to work, writing two weekly sections of *Time* called Milestones and Miscellany. Each filled just one column on a three-column page, and writing them was the entry-level job of new young writers. Milestones were squibs about births, deaths, and marriages, bits of information culled from newspapers and the wire services. Miscellany was a stack of ten or eleven one-sentence news items to which I added puns as titles. *Time the Weekly Newsmagazine*, March 17, 1958:

> TWO TIRED. In Three Rivers, Mich., Thomas Kline, 11, smashed into a moving automobile with his bicycle, later confessed to police: "I fell asleep at the handlebars."
>
> ABSENCE MINDED. In Miranda de Ebro, Spain, the school principal ordered the school doors closed at 9 a.m. as a disciplinary lesson to late students, gave up the project when 50% of the teachers were locked out.
>
> POLE APART. In Grand Junction, Colo., a shiny new police car drove into a municipal parking lot on a routine assignment, slowly cruised around as the driver checked the left side and his companion checked the right, smacked head-on into a telephone pole.

My first wife and I lived then at 285 Avenue C, in Stuyvesant Town, on the Lower East Side. On June 7th, as I did routinely, I left the apartment soon after nine and headed for the subway and work. You might ask why I was going to work on a Saturday. *Time's* writing week was Wednesday through Sunday, and our weekend was Monday-Tuesday. En route to the subway, I had not even reached Fourteenth Street when I suddenly felt very sharp pains in my chest. I tried to brush them off as anxiety. I had no shortage of that in general, and these were days of particular anticipation and concern. Our first child was due. Cursing my mental stress, not to say neurosis, I kept going, and got to work about an hour before a phone call summoned me home. The time had come for us to go to the hospital, which was across town and up near the George Washington Bridge.

For some weeks, I had taken birthing classes there, so that I could be in the delivery room until the final minutes, when I would be sent out by Mary Jane Gray, the obstetrician. That day got longer and longer, the baby uncoöperative (an unfair description of my beloved oldest daughter), and the chest pains persisted. Was this a hundred per cent anxiety or was it to some extent a heart attack? Already in my head was a first edition of the hypochondriac's coronary almanac. Pericarditis? Aortic aneurysm? Angina? Myocardial infarction? One of my heroes was an Oxford don who, when stricken with a heart attack in the South of France, got into his car, drove seven hundred miles to a Channel ferry, got off at Dover, and went home. If he could do that, I could make it from the delivery room down the hospital stairs and across the street to stare at the Hudson River.

Across the street from the main entrance to Columbia-Presbyterian was Bard Hall, a dorm of sorts for medical students. I was familiar with it, friends having lived there. In Bard Hall, students had helped me concoct medical scenes for the hour-long plays I had written for live television. Out the back doors was a terrace overlooking the Hudson. The new day June 8th was not far beyond first light. I stood on the terrace watching the river while my daughter Laura was born.

Cartoon by Roz Chast

I expected the chest pains to disappear on cue but they did not, while I spent a couple of days—*Time's* Monday-Tuesday weekend—shuttling back and forth in our old Mercury between the hospital and the Lower East Side. On Wednesday, after I returned to work, the pains were still present, so I went down to a lower floor where Time Inc. maintained a medical office. A doctor listened to my chest, called for an X-ray, and some minutes later told me that my left lung had partly collapsed. On the lung's surface, a pimple-like development called a bleb had popped. As if from a flat tire, air had escaped into the chest cavity, where—the term "cavity" notwithstanding—there was no room for the air. The pressure amplified the pain from inflammation around the bleb.

The Caribou Rack

When people come to visit for the first time, I am sensitive about our living-room windows and sensitive about a caribou rack, which hangs from invisible fishing line against the brick chimney of our kitchen fireplace. The fireplace is obsolete, long filled with pussy willows, andirons cold for

years, fatwood at rest, fixed in time. The caribou rack, as I have always called it, is actually one half of a complete set of antlers, snow shovel forward, the right half. Our living room—close by, and built as an addition—was designed on graph paper by Yolanda Whitman, my wife, and ratified by an architect, who generously if not flatteringly said he thought the fenestration remarkable in its proximity to the golden ratio (1:1.68). The principal set of windows is a recumbent rectangle about twenty feet wide and a bit over five feet high, with seven components of varying width—four narrow ones flanking two larger ones, all separated by dark mullions, with what appears to be a fifth of an acre of plate glass in the center, framing a woods-and-meadow scene. Deer in the scene. The red fox. Wild turkeys. Robins. Wrens. Bluebirds. Grackles. Vultures. A bear once. As birders are much aware—others, too—birds fly headlong into such windows, fall, flutter in great pain, and die. That doesn't happen often here—once, maybe twice, a year—but that is once or twice too many for certain people we know, including former students, whom I am anxious to impress, and who leave with the fresh impression that I am an environmental hoax. They mention anti-collision decals and reflective repellents.

My concern about the caribou rack is in the hope that it not suggest Teddy Roosevelt, the gun lobby, and the mounted head of Simba. As it happens, Priya Vulchi, a student from my writing class in 2020, was here recently. Sitting in the living room and looking out through the controversial windows, she confirmed that one glance at the caribou antler had instantly altered her appraisal of me.

I have done nothing about those big windows, but there is nothing I would ever need to do about the caribou rack if visitors knew its story. I didn't shoot the caribou. Nobody shot the caribou. Caribou shed their antlers once a year. In 1975, I picked up the rack off the tundra in Arctic Alaska. Paddling, I carried it down two rivers to Kiana, where an Inuit storekeeper kindly wrapped it up to go as checked baggage to Newark. When I left Fairbanks, I had also checked ten pounds of mooseburger. I didn't shoot the moose, either.

The Swimming Pool

What folktale begins with a blacksmith in Michigan and ends with a bullfrog in New Jersey?

This one.

In 1888, a blacksmith named Lambert, in Ypsilanti, co-founded a metallurgy company that events swept forward into automobile parts (fenders, running boards, hoods, gas tanks, radiator shells) and a less futuristic line of corn cribs, grain bins, and silos. In 1956, in Kentucky, my brother married Joan Lambert, a great-granddaughter of the blacksmith. Joan had grown up in Grosse Pointe, Michigan, where the family had settled after the business inevitably migrated to Detroit. Clayton & Lambert, as it is still known, became particularly sophisticated in the use of stainless steel.

When the Second World War approached, a great problem in naval ordnance was coming with it. The cartridges that held the projectiles fired from naval guns were made of brass. As it happened, there was an acute shortage of brass. Clayton & Lambert worked out a way to make the cartridges from steel. In the course of the war, they produced—in Michigan, and at a plant they established in Kentucky—seventy-five million cartridges. Given the objective, who cared what that cost? Well, among others, the Bureau of Ordnance did. Versus brass, the steel cartridges saved the Navy forty-five million dollars.

Thirty years after the war, a truck from Kentucky showed up at my house, in New Jersey, with a swimming pool in it. This was not an aboveground tub. Intended for an excavation eight feet deep, it had a length of forty feet, a lappable swimming distance, one-fourth as long as a fifty-metre Olympic pool. Clayton & Lambert (Clayton had died in 1913) had applied their expertise in stainless steel to a line of swimming pools not only for private yards but mainly for towns, summer camps, and urban neighborhoods. Broad stainless panels, bolted one to the next and sealed, formed their vertical sides. Because they were unlike all other pools, you couldn’t say that they were state of the art. They were the art.

The site we had chosen for our pool was a shady grove of cherry trees, walnuts, and pin oaks beside our garage. The soil mantle there was, as it is

on nearly all of our property, scarcely three feet deep, over diabase, an igneous bedrock that is about as hard as anything in nature. You don't dig holes in it. We needed McAlinden the Blaster. The uppercase "B" is from me. We had met him ten years earlier, when we were building our house and needed to make room for the basement.

Merritt McAlinden, who had landed at Utah Beach on D Day and gone through the Battle of the Bulge, knew his way around what had come to be known as commercial explosives applications. He came to dig our basement. Bedrock three feet down. Required excavation more than twice that. McAlinden studied the architectural blueprints closely, studied the scraped-off diabase, and planned an arrangement of explosive charges. Ka-boom. After the rubble was cleared, we had a flat, smooth, igneous surface on which concrete was poured directly. In sixty years at this writing, the house, resting on the diabase bedrock, has not settled a sixteenth of an inch.

For his explosive feats, Merritt McAlinden was a local legend, and part of the reason for that reputation was a water tower in a town north of Princeton, which hired him to get rid of it. As the story goes, authorities assured him that the tower was empty. Ka-boom. Like a supermagnified golf ball coming off a tee, the tank fell a hundred and sixty-five feet to the ground and a million gallons of water spread through the town.

With a white, marble-dust bottom and the stainless-steel sides, our pool had no paint, no artificial color, but your eye saw it as an incredibly beautiful blue, the blue of a severely clear sky. Enter our grandson Tommaso—Tommaso McPhee, whose parents are Luca Passaleva, of Tuscany, and Jenny McPhee. Tommaso is an optical physicist who wrote his undergraduate thesis in optics and has earned an advanced degree at the Institut Polytechnique de Paris. Tommaso, how does the pool achieve that ethereal blue?

> The short answer is that water molecules absorb much more red light than blue light, owing to the different vibrations of hydrogen and oxygen ions, and thus the water in your pool appears blue. You might ask, So why isn't a glass of water also blue? In a small body of water, light travels such a short distance that it absorbs less red light and

appears clear. The larger the body of water, the longer the path of light and the more red light is absorbed.

In winter, I often swam a mile and a half at lunchtime in one of Princeton University's pools. The tedium eventually got to me. Now, though, in the warm months, I had blue water out the back door, and could flip back and forth a somewhat shorter distance and call it a day. Most afternoons, the pool was alive with our big family, actually a pair of merged families, and, as time passed and our kids went into their high-school years, swarms of visitors. The diving board reverberated like a storm in the next township. There was so much life in the pool that high-school girls stood up nude where the water was four feet deep and compared breasts. These breast-offs were not exactly competitive but not inexactly, either.

In some way, somehow, those yeasty years vanished as our eight children went through as many colleges and out into eight worlds. For a couple of decades, such a stretch of time, we parents had the pool for the most part to ourselves. As Yolanda and I began to age, our property began to show age, and mansions were built in the woods around us. Our house, in its early days, had been far up an unpaved road in forest. After the road was paved, the mansioneers turned their lots into parks, clearing the Jersey jungle, the impenetrable understory of barberry, bittersweet, viburnum, autumn olive, poison ivy, two kinds of honeysuckle, two kinds of privet, and grapevines that go up the tallest trees. At our place, the low vegetation thickened.

“Fine! If you’re going to take away my phone, then I guess I’ll just become an accomplished violinist!”
Cartoon by E. S. Glenn and Colin Nissan

Decay just goes with our world as we deepen into old age. The mansions around us, many of them unoccupied much of the year, are themselves a form of decay. We last used the swimming pool long ago. I forget how long. Gradually, its plumbing rebelled. For diverse reasons, sequential failure occurred in pipes that run underground from pump and filter to returns, skimmers, and drains, a circumstance known as reduced circulation. The pool’s wintertime cover, taut and sturdy, has not been removed in summer. Acorns fall on it, and wild cherries, and walnuts. I have resisted suggestions, not all of them from daughters, that I call this piece “The Wild-Cherry Orchard.” I’m no Chekhov. I’ll get over it. A deer walked onto the pool cover, probably for the acorns and cherries if not the walnuts. It fell, apparently, and kicked so violently as it tried to save itself that it left wide holes in the fabric. The pool could have been situated well away from trees, in the meadow outside the back door, but who wants to wreck a meadow?

Although we live on the highest ground in Princeton, and the nearest brook is headwatered hundreds of yards away, a bullfrog now lives in the swimming pool. In late evenings, we hear it there, at lengthy intervals: “Croak. . . . Croak. . . . Croak. . . .”

The Pitted Outwash Plain

From high school onward, I looked upon geology as a source of imagery, analogy, and, above all, metaphor. Thirty years went by, though, before I found myself actually writing about the science. A few pages into “Basin and Range,” the first of the books that would eventually be collected as “Annals of the Former World,” I explained the why of what I was doing. The passage began this way:

> I used to sit in class and listen to the terms come floating down the room like paper airplanes. Geology was called a descriptive science, and with its pitted outwash plains and drowned rivers, its hanging tributaries and starved coastlines, it was nothing if not descriptive. It was a fountain of metaphor—of isostatic adjustments and degraded channels, of angular unconformities and shifting divides, of rootless mountains and bitter lakes.

Exemplary enough to be mentioned first, the pitted outwash plain asserted itself as a possible subject for a piece on its own, an idea whose relevance and intensity have steadily grown as I have advanced in age, nevertheless doing nothing about it.

When continental ice sheets melt, water comes off in big rivers that dig lakes in stream valleys and pile up gravels as hills. Great bergs of ice break away intact, roll forth, settle down, and turn into ponds. The ponds evaporate, signing the outwash plain.

Welcome to the A.A.R.P.

Think of countless themes with “The Pitted Outwash Plain” for a title. Divorce. The ride home in the school bus after losing in the state tournament. Donald Trump’s first hundred days. Glacial Lake Saginaw, glacial Lake Maumee, glacial Lake Chicago, and the creation of the Great Lakes.

Half of Brooklyn is on an outwash plain—Prospect Park to Coney Island. I’ve seen others. In Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin. In Switzerland, there

are outwash plains from valley glaciers as well as from sheet ice. Alaska, too. The Laurentide ice in New Jersey stopped thirty miles north of Princeton, and its gravels composed Mt. Holly, thirty miles south. I not only live on the pitted outwash plain; I am one. I am a healthy, appetitious, happily married, bicycle-riding grandfather of ten, who, off the bicycle, wobbles with peripheral neuropathy and has an occasionally crippling trochanteric bursitis, an occasionally inflamed patella, and stents in both eyeballs. I am, like, forty per cent blind. For some years, my larynx has been swimming in phlegm, the result of an undetermined ratio between reflux and postnasal drip. Cramps and muscle spasms visit me like Verizon bills. I attribute my antiquity to dark-chocolate almond bark.

Spelling Bee

Tedious, invidious, devious, conquer, identify, magnify, sibilant, uranium.

Spelling Bee is a word game owned by the New York *Times* and available online for two clicks, a good way not only to waste time but to use it. At four in the morning, sleepless anyway, I think up words that fit its requirements.

Typhoid, transient, pregnant, poignant, glowing, galloping, parasite. What do these words have in common?

They contain seven different letters and only seven no matter how much longer they may be.

Euphemism, euphuism, painted, sainted, fainted, sagacious, liriodendron.

Spelling Bee online is presented as six hexagons encircling a seventh. Each hexagon contains a letter.

You find words there of four or more letters and each word you find must contain the central letter.

Tell, yell, hell, hello, elegy, tottle, otology, geology, theology. You are off to a fair start. Theology contains seven different letters. Spelling Bee calls that a Pangram.

Elsewhere in the *Times* one day, Emma Goldberg interviews Malcolm Gladwell about his book “Revenge of the Tipping Point.” The two of them seem to think in Pangrams: policing, strictly, negative, minority, podcast, underdog, quality, creative, contingent, audience, critique, contagion, rewriting, measured, storyteller . . .

Would-be, could-be, potential Pangrams are the words I think up in the night, hoping to doze off. To me, they seem like fat sheep jumping fences. There is, withal, a counterproductive factor. While the words are meant to put me to sleep, they ignite my phlogiston and stand me straight up out of bed to write them down. As of today, I have written down more than two thousand of them, each containing seven and only seven different letters.

On repeat and therefore extraneous letters, they can extend to any length: tectonicist, hairdresser, ratiocination, monomaniac, liriodendron.

You could try pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis, the longest word in the English language, but it has fourteen different letters and is one dead ram.

Trees for the Forest

Sixty years ago, when I was writing the Show Business section of *Time*, I lived in the forested northwest corner of Princeton, as I still do. Back then, I commuted to New York from Princeton Junction, and one day I noticed a sweet-gum leaf sticking up out of the ballast gravel beside the junction platform, a beautiful leaf, star-shaped, six-lobed, a rich glossy green. The stem that went down into the gravel was much like stiff wire. I pulled up and put in my briefcase an eight-inch tree. The train was late. I noticed other leaves of the same sort, and four more of those little trees went into my briefcase, too.

There was precedent for this biological absorption. One early morning, half a mile from my house on Drake's Corner Road, I had come upon a pheasant that had been hit by a car and was struggling but could not stand. I stopped, opened the hatch of my Volvo, and put it inside. I remember saying, aloud, "Pheasant, if you're alive when I come home, I'll let you go. If not, you roast." There was no turning back just then. I had a train to catch. We cooked the pheasant.

In a men's room high in the new Time & Life Building, 1271 Avenue of the Americas, I soaked some paper towels, put the little sweet-gum trees on them, and more wet towels over them, and then placed the whole assemblage within dry towels before returning the trees to my briefcase. After a day full of flacks, actors, and producers, I went home to Princeton and planted the trees the following morning, soon after first light—three along the driveway, one on the way to the swimming pool, one at the edge of a meadow behind the house. Four of those sweet gums are now about fifty feet tall within their pyramidal crowns. As they color in autumn, they are truly exceptional, because they will be red, gold, and green, all three

colors present in most individual leaves. You would think a display like that would be pleasing to Yolanda, who long had a business called Whitman Indoor Gardens and had studied botany in the Bronx. But she came to hate the sweet gums, especially the one on the way to the pool. Sweet gums drop a fruit that is small and spherical and bristling with sharp points like a porcupine the size of a golf ball. Barefoot, on her way to, say, the pool, she stepped on enough of this fruit to bring on a schism in our relationship. One day, I returned from somewhere and noticed that there was no sweet gum on the way to the pool.

Yolanda was in other ways sensitive to landscape architecture. She decided that our driveway's approach to the front of our house was blunt. A driver's view went straight across a small open lawn to windows. The scene was one-dimensional and needed intervention. At a nursery, she bought a sugar maple. This was no leaf on a wiry stem. It was three inches in diameter breast-high and its roots were packed in a large, nourishing ball. It was professionally planted. We have something like six hundred trees on our property and scarcely needed another one, but this maple soon became by far our most beautiful tree. Its d.b.h. is now seventeen inches. In autumn, its color is a yellow so bright it stands out in a world of surrounding gold. On a calm autumn day, as Yolanda and I came up the driveway and approached the sugar maple, it suddenly dropped a hundred per cent of its brilliant-yellow leaves, a shower that lasted only a minute or two. Nothing like that had ever happened and has not happened since. The sugar maple was just showing off. ♦

John McPhee, a staff writer since 1965, has published more than thirty books, including "Tabula Rasa, Volume 1."

Profiles

Lorne Michaels Is the Real Star of “Saturday Night Live”

He’s ruled with absolute power for five decades, forever adding to his list of oracular pronouncements—about producing TV, making comedy, and living the good life.

By Susan Morrison

January 13, 2025

In the comedy world, Michaels is a mysterious object of obsession. Conversations about him are peppered with comparisons: he is Obi-Wan Kenobi (Tracy Morgan), Oz (David Spade, Kate McKinnon), Charles Foster Kane (Jason Sudeikis), a cult leader (Victoria Jackson), Tom Ripley (Bill Hader).Photograph by Brigitte Lacombe for The New Yorker

Every week at “Saturday Night Live” is just like every other week. The weeks are the same because they’re always fuelled by hard work, filled with triumphs and failures and backstage arguments, and built around a guest host—Jennifer Lopez, Lizzo, Elon Musk—who often has no idea what he or she is doing. Over the past fifty years, the job of Lorne Michaels, the

show's creator, has been to make the stars look good, and to corral the egos and talents on his staff in order to get the program on the air, live. Since the début of "S.N.L.," in 1975, he has fine-tuned the process, paying attention to shifting cultural winds. What began as an avant-garde variety show has become mainstream. (Amy Poehler has characterized the institution that made her famous as "the show your parents used to have sex to that you now watch from your computer in the middle of the day.") But the formula is essentially unchanged. Michaels compares the show to a Snickers bar: people expect a certain amount of peanuts, a certain amount of caramel, and a certain amount of chocolate. "There's a comfort level," he says. The show has good years and bad, like the New York Yankees, or the Dow, and the audience has come to feel something like ownership over it. Just about all viewers of "S.N.L." believe that its funniest years were the ones when they were in high school. Michaels likes to say that people in the entertainment business have two jobs: their actual job and figuring out how to fix "S.N.L." (When J. D. Salinger died, in 2010, letters surfaced in which even he griped about what was wrong with the show.)

Cast members and writers have speculated for years about the secret behind Michaels's extraordinary tenure. "It's him and Hitchcock," John Mulaney told me. "No one else has had this kind of longevity." Half of them think that Michaels has repeatedly been able to remake the show for a new audience because he's a once-in-a-lifetime talent, a producer nonpareil. The other half wonder whether Michaels, gnomic and almost comically elusive, is a blank screen onto which they've all projected their hopes and fears and dark jokes—whether he, like the cramped stages in "S.N.L." 's Studio 8H, is just a backdrop for the ever-shifting brilliance of the country's best comic minds.

The kickoff to every episode, the weekly Writers' Meeting, is at 6 *P.M.* on Monday, on the seventeenth floor of 30 Rockefeller Plaza, in Michaels's Art Deco office, which overlooks the skating rink. Monday, Michaels says, is "a day of redemption," a fresh start after spending Sunday brooding over Saturday night's mistakes. (On his tombstone, he says, will be the word "*uneven*.") The guest host, the cast, and the writers squeeze into Lorne's office—everyone in the business refers to him by his first name, like Madonna, or Fidel—to pitch sketches. People sit in the same places each

week: four across a velvet couch, a dozen on chairs placed against the walls. Others stand in the doorway or wedged near Michaels's private bathroom, and the rest are on the floor, their legs folded like grade schoolers. The exercise is largely ceremonial. It's rare for an idea floated on Monday to make it onto the air. The goal of the gathering, which Tina Fey compares to a "church ritual," is to make the host feel like one of the gang. In the nineties, the host Christopher Walken both confounded and delighted the room when he offered, in his flat Queens drawl, "Ape suits are funny. Bears as well."

Chevy Chase, Dan Aykroyd, John Belushi, and Michaels at Elaine's, in 1975.Photograph by Jonathan Becker

The Monday meeting unleashes a process that has been followed since the show's inception. After Michaels and some handpicked staffers have dinner with the guest host on Tuesday, writers stay up all night churning out sketches. Michaels is a night owl, and he thinks nothing of scheduling a meeting at 1:30 *a.m.* As with many of his idiosyncrasies, he has turned his nocturnal habits into a philosophy. "Fatigue is your friend," he told me, during a series of conversations. "Fatigue wears down the critical faculties, the inner editor. If you're tired, it's easier to go, 'How about this?' " In the seventies, the overnight marathons involved a lot of drugs and drinking. Gilda Radner used to bake cookies for the writers—useful for forming

alliances and getting them to write good parts for her. (That gambit wouldn't work as well today, now that Ozempic is the drug of choice.)

Wednesday is when the contours of the week's show emerge; from a lot of amorphous goofing around, sketches materialize. That afternoon, they are presented at a table read. Michaels reads the stage directions for each sketch aloud but refrains from commentary. "My favorite Lorne is read-through Lorne," Seth Meyers told me, noting that it's the one time of the week when Michaels is completely open. "I've been to plenty of them where he sat stony-faced for the full four hours. But when he's surprised he has one of the great laughs, a real head-back, mouth-open thing."

Afterward, Michaels has a smaller meeting, with his chief lieutenants, in which he "picks the show," in "S.N.L." jargon, selecting which sketches to pursue. The sketches that survive aren't necessarily the funniest. Other factors inform the choices: What will make the host happy? Which groupings of pieces can be staged within the physical constraints of Studio 8H? Does everyone in the cast have something to do? Are there "tonnage" issues (too much scatological humor, too many accents)? Will enough sketches play in all fifty states? Is there enough topical material? Michaels has said that, in putting together a lineup, he is trying "to find enough colors to make a rainbow."

On Thursday, carpenters are at work building fake living rooms and dive bars while the performers block and rehearse. An unusual thing about "S.N.L." is that the writers are in charge of producing their own pieces: they dictate what the set and costumes look like and what music is needed, and they direct the actors. This is why "S.N.L." 's writers' room generates so many future showrunners. As Mulaney, who used to write for the show, puts it: with each sketch, "for five minutes NBC is yours."

On Friday, the staff often hears Michaels say, "We have nothing." He'll be staring tensely at the index cards on his bulletin board, which lay out each tentative segment. Employees a quarter of his age are amazed that, after fifty years, he can still seem scared. If things look particularly bleak, he'll ask writers if they've been saving any good material for an upcoming host, telling them, "Sometimes you have to burn the furniture."

On Saturday afternoon, in Studio 8H, there's a run-through of the sketches. The show is often considerably too long at this point, so more sketches might be cut (and their brand-new sets scrapped). It would be more efficient to choose the lineup on Wednesday, but Michaels likes to mull. "Snap decisions get you into trouble," he told me. "I tend to do *rolling* decisions." Sometimes the guest host nixes a sketch. In 2015, Donald Trump was to play a tree standing next to the Giving Tree, the Shel Silverstein character who gives and gives of herself until she's reduced to a stump. The sketch ended with the Trump tree calling the Giving Tree a sucker. Trump refused to do the piece, not because it portrayed him as heartless but because he worried that the tree costume made him look fat.

At 8 *P.M.*, there's a dress rehearsal in front of a live audience, with twenty to thirty minutes' worth of excess material. This is the do-or-die moment of every "S.N.L." week. It's the first time the comedy is seen by "civilians." Michaels, sitting in a foxhole underneath the audience bleachers, witnesses what gets a laugh and what doesn't. An assistant scribbles as he issues notes, and writers stand nearby for instructions on revisions. Once, when Jonah Hill was hosting, I sat by Michaels under the bleachers. Noticing that Hill has heavily inked arms, he ordered the costume designer to cover them up: "Tom! Lose the tattoos." After Hill muddled his way through a sketch about a cinema with a "farm to screen" snack menu, Michaels glumly declared, "Well, he can read." He called another sketch "entry-level comedy." To a writer of a segment that grossed out the audience, he icily said, "Can you take it and make it *longer*?"

But a subsequent meeting in his office each week, in the ninety minutes between the dress rehearsal and the live show, is when Michaels displays his superpowers. He is definite and direct in a way that he is not during the rest of the week—a mode that he describes as "being on knifepoint." His aversion to confrontation is outweighed by the urgent need for triage. He gives orders quickly. There is little joshing around. According to the oral history "Live from New York," by Tom Shales and James Miller, one night Michaels turned to Bob Odenkirk, then a writer, who was whispering to his neighbor as the minutes to airtime were slipping past. Michaels said, evenly, "Odenkirk, if you speak again I'll break your fucking legs."

Watching Michaels make these fast final decisions reminds Mulaney of a line from Stephen Sondheim's "Sunday in the Park with George": "The choice might have been mistaken, but choosing was not." Michaels's choosing is the zenith of the week. He loves not having any time left to obsess over details. It's all from the gut. The order is reshuffled, even more sketches are ditched, new endings are added. (Tina Fey has called such tweaks "adding a little turd polish.") If he makes a bad decision, there's always next week.

Late revisions are sent to a cue-card crew, who write new cards at lightning speed. Michaels has a superstitious side and clings to outmoded methods; he refuses to use teleprompters and requires script revisions to be done on paper. The atmosphere of controlled chaos is so well honed that the process can seem almost automatic, but it took Michaels years to establish his precepts of producing comedy. The problem with making it look easy, he often says, is that then people think it's easy.

When Michaels started "S.N.L.," he had dark, tousled hair, like Warren Beatty's in "Shampoo." His hair is now silvery and frequently barbered; it frames his face in a brushy fringe, as with a hedgehog, or a senator. He stands about five feet eight, but his posture and confidence compensate for his height. His smile, when he summons one, bisects his face like a slash. His eyes are close set and dark, with a glitter of mockery.

Michaels rules "S.N.L." with detached but absolute power. His office is decorated with a sign that Rosie Shuster, his first wife and a writer on "S.N.L." 's early seasons, found in a West Village antique shop: "*the captain's word is law*." It's a joke that isn't really a joke. But he doesn't micromanage every moment. "I've never been able to tell whether Lorne is driven by a managerial philosophy or a life-style philosophy," Robert Carlock, a writer who went on to help Fey develop "30 Rock," told me. "He'll let everyone fight things out while he's at Orso"—a midtown Italian restaurant—"and he'll come back after a nice dinner and make the decision."

A phrase that Michaels uses often is "the high end of smart," and he likes to say, "If I'm the smartest person in the room, I'm in the wrong room." But he harbors no illusions that his cultivated nonchalance is taken at face

value. One talent agent routinely tells clients auditioning for Michaels to remember that *he* is the real star of the show. He is the alpha in most of his employees' lives. To those people, and to the wider comedy world, he is a mysterious object of obsession. Conversations about him are peppered with comparisons: he is Obi-Wan Kenobi (Tracy Morgan), the Great and Powerful Oz (David Spade, Kate McKinnon), Charles Foster Kane (Jason Sudeikis), a cult leader (Victoria Jackson), Tom Ripley (Bill Hader). "There's so many people who, their whole lives, have been trying to figure him out," Hader told me.

Jon Hamm—a student of the show since he was six, when his divorced dad let him stay up and watch John Belushi—has hosted three times and says that he always learns from watching Michaels meet his deadline. He remembers Michaels explaining how sometimes he'll pick one sketch over another not because the writing is stronger but because it will be more powerful live. Hamm once delivered a monologue that involved showing pretend "clips" of his acting jobs before "Mad Men." The show could have pretaped the bits of him selling jewelry on QVC or doing standup on "Def Comedy Jam." (The joke: he sounds and looks just like Don Draper in all of them.) But Michaels knew that it would be more exciting for the studio audience to see him running around making quick costume changes and popping onto different stages. This is the essence of producing.

Michaels didn't always know how to do it. Born Lorne Lipowitz in Toronto in 1944, he started out as a writer and a performer. The rudiments of producing were picked up over time, as he tried to find a place in show business where he could have creative control. After graduating from the University of Toronto, he and a law-student friend, Hart Pomerantz, formed a comedy duo in the vein of Martin and Lewis. Michaels played the straight man, often interviewing a "zany" character played by Pomerantz. The team's signature creation, the Canadian Beaver, was played by Pomerantz as a bucktoothed rodent with an inferiority complex about his imperialistic neighbor to the south, the American Eagle.

“Legs? All I want is a comfortable bra.”
Cartoon by Dan Misdea

A gig on a CBC radio show ended with the duo being fired. Michaels wasn’t too heartbroken—he worried that their act was dopey and out of step with the culture. He and Pomerantz sold jokes to other comics and went to New York to meet with Woody Allen, who was looking for writers. The trio didn’t click, but after the meeting Michaels sent Allen a “bright joke”—one for smart people. A man is obsessed with the idea that there’s no such thing as an original thought—that, somewhere, another guy is thinking the exact same thoughts, at the exact same time. Eager to meet this mental doppelgänger, he somehow gets the other guy’s phone number. He dials the number . . . and the line is busy.

Allen didn’t use the joke, but he pronounced it very funny. “Woody saved my life with that,” Michaels told me.

In New York, he went to the Improv, in Hell’s Kitchen, and saw a young comic named Richard Pryor, who did a ten-minute one-man tour de force about a group of liberal New York actors bringing a play about interracial romance to a prison in the South. The warden keeps demanding to see a “dead n——” onstage. This was a new turn in comedy, devastating and brave, and Michaels wanted to follow it. He believed that comedy “should be of *use.*” He recalled being “messianic about it.”

But the work available to Michaels was far less ambitious. In 1968, when Michaels was twenty-three, he and Pomerantz moved to L.A. to be junior writers on an NBC variety program called “The Beautiful Phyllis Diller Show.” Michaels arrived for his first day with long hair encircled by a hippie headband. His colleagues were men in their fifties and sixties who’d started out in radio. The work seemed outdated, too. “The first assignment we were given was to write fifty ‘fag jokes,’ ” Michaels said. (Rip Taylor played Diller’s hairdresser, Paul of Pasadena.) Each episode ended with a production number saluting a “forgotten American,” like President James K. Polk. Michaels told himself that he’d ruined his life. He was shocked, however, when the first episode got strong ratings. The newspaper columnist Joseph Kraft had recently coined the term “Middle America,” and as Michaels spent more time in network TV he would learn to keep that demographic in his sights. He now regularly reminds his “S.N.L.” staff, “We’ve got the whole country watching—all fifty states.”

Although the Diller show eventually flopped, Michaels learned a lot from his colleagues there. One of them, George Balzer, who’d worked for Jack Benny, gave Michaels stacks of old Benny radio scripts. They were deceptively short, “because they were all pauses,” Michaels said. “I began to see what a joke looked like on a page. It was like knowing how to prepare a dish. Like: ‘To start with, the eggs go here.’ ” As he became a comedy scholar, he started to recognize that his own talent was more curatorial. He knew what was funny.

When Michaels told people that he wrote for TV, they’d sniff and say that they didn’t even own a set—they read books. “Television was embarrassing,” he said. “It was vulgar.” It was still seen as the boob tube. He started to understand what the philosopher Marshall McLuhan had been talking about back at the University of Toronto—the idea that, whenever a new mass medium emerges, it frees up the medium that preceded it, allowing it to innovate. “Television becoming so powerful liberated movies, so that movies no longer had the burden of being mass,” Michaels told me. Auteurs such as Stanley Kubrick and John Cassavetes were making rule-breaking films; the Rolling Stones and David Bowie were pushing the boundaries of rock and roll. TV was a backwater. Michaels was stuck

writing shopworn gags for a bitchy hairdresser character. “Everything *but* television was changing,” he said.

Although Michaels was questioning the point of TV, he still needed to work. After “The Beautiful Phyllis Diller Show” was cancelled, he and Pomerantz got hired at “Laugh-In,” a hit variety show on NBC that was hailed as TV’s first collusion with the counterculture. The comedy derived from pie-in-the-face burlesque, but what distinguished the show was its frenetic pacing. In a signature segment, the Joke Wall, performers in mod regalia poked their heads out of holes in a set, like cuckoos emerging from a clock, and spouted one-liners. (“What goes ‘Ho ho thump’? Santa Claus laughing his head off.”) The creator of “Laugh-In,” George Schlatter, proudly compared it to a pinball machine.

The show could be hilarious, but Michaels felt that its writers were disrespected—they worked out of a motel and never attended tapings or met the talent. Jokes were rewritten without consultation. “I was at a No. 1 show and a cool show,” he said. “But we were not part of the process.” Although “Laugh-In” was studded with jokes about the Pill, politically it was toothless. The show avoided thorny topics like the Vietnam War, except for silly bits such as Goldie Hawn biting her lip and saying, “I don’t like the Vietcong because in the movie he nearly wrecked the Empire State Building.” The writers couldn’t get any Nixon jokes on the air.

Working on a No. 1 show was no more satisfying than working on a failure. Michaels began dreaming of a show of his own—and he had the skills to pitch one. Sandy Wernick, a talent agent who would soon sign Michaels, told me, “Lorne had the greatest gift for gab that I had ever heard in a guy in his twenties. He had theories of what comedy was all about. He knew exactly where the comedy of that era was going to go.”

In 1969, the only network that would let Michaels run his own show was the CBC, so he retreated to Canada with Pomerantz to create “The Hart and Lorne Terrific Hour.” They did the Canadian Beaver shtick, among other bits, but Michaels began to realize that he was most engaged in the editing room, looking at how shots were framed and paying attention to lighting filters during musical acts. The show’s high point was “The Puck Crisis,” a mockumentary about an invasive species that spread Dutch puck disease,

devastating Canada's hockey-puck farmers. Alongside grim footage of lab-coated scientists examining shrivelled pucks drooping from branches, a dead-serious voice-over explains the blight's origins: "Puck pests, or puctococci, were accidentally carried over on the sticks of a touring Dutch hockey team." Michaels plays a newscaster interviewing citizens about the disaster, cutting in a clip of the real Canadian hockey star Bob Baun playing along. ("Without pucks, I'm just a guy who skates backwards.") Pomerantz, who was more of a gag man, told me, "*That's* producing. I wasn't good at that." "The Puck Crisis" embodied the kind of deadpan conceptual comedy Michaels wanted to make.

The show was popular, but the CBC dropped it after a few seasons. Michaels knew that the sort of unconventional humor he liked wasn't yet viable on American networks, but it was taking hold on a smaller scale, offscreen. In addition to Richard Pryor, comics including Lily Tomlin, Steve Martin, and Albert Brooks were beguiling club audiences with raw material that rarely made it onto the "Tonight Show." The common ground was a worldliness about drugs and sex, and skepticism about politics and corporate America. Show business—the hacky, sentimental kind—was another target.

After a string of dispiriting TV jobs back in L.A. (including a Perry Como special), Michaels met Tomlin, who'd been on "Laugh-In." They bonded over their ambivalence about TV, and the way it lagged cheesily behind the rest of the culture. It drove him crazy, he told her, when there was a sketch about marijuana on a Bob Hope special and the "stoned" performers just acted drunk. Starting in 1973, Michaels helped Tomlin make three network specials featuring long, character-driven sketches, with Tomlin addressing the audience in between. Tomlin told me, "Lorne can add to stuff, but he's not necessarily, like, a really diligent writer." He was better at shaping other people's ideas. He paid close attention to Tomlin's comedy style: she was freeing the form from punch lines, infusing sketches with psychological depth. Their first special together, for CBS, had a pointedly feminist slant. Tomlin mocked housewifery, telling viewers, "You're watching television when you could be doing something constructive, like putting your spice rack in order alphabetically." One sketch, vetoed by the network, had Tomlin playing a prim mother, Mrs. Beasley, calling her son in from the

back yard, which was actually a war zone, ablaze with exploding mortar shells. “Billy!” she yells. “Where’s your leg? You think legs grow on trees? Come on, leg or no leg, supper’s on the table.”

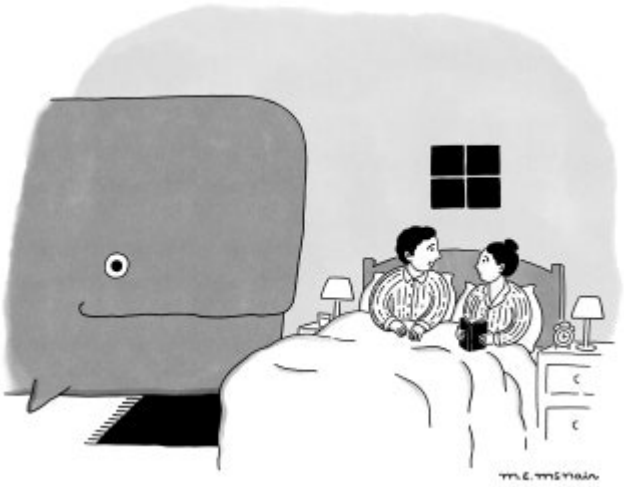
The special won two Emmys, but a CBS executive, Fred Silverman, called it “too esoteric.” The work that Michaels did with Tomlin came closer to his comedy ideal than anything he’d done so far. “She was probably *the* formative influence on me,” he said. But he also sensed that Tomlin could never headline a network series. “Lily was an artist, pure and simple,” he told me, and prime time “was about ‘How do you hold forty million people?’ ”

His attention wandered back to a show that he’d always had in his head: a mixture of film shorts, rock music, and sketches performed by a repertory company of young players. Sandy Wernick had been putting Michaels together with various middle-aged production execs, but they didn’t get it; Michaels explained to them that people in his generation were the first to have grown up with television, and they were sick of the same old pabulum. He wanted to recapture this disaffected group by satirizing the way TV saturated people’s thinking and shrink-wrapped the culture.

When Tomlin heard that Michaels was moving on, she felt that she’d been used as a stepping stone. She never confronted him about it, but she had the feeling, as she put it, of “when protégés float over you.”

In 1974, NBC had a problem to solve. Johnny Carson had announced that he wanted the network to stop airing reruns of the “Tonight Show” on Saturdays. So NBC’s new president, Herbert Schlosser, decided to create a program to fill the slot. He wanted to call it “Saturday Night,” and envisaged it being broadcast live from Rockefeller Center. Michaels had never considered late night before, and he was surprised, at a breakfast meeting with NBC executives at the Polo Lounge in the Beverly Hills Hotel, that the men didn’t flinch when he said that he wanted to do a show that looked as though a bunch of kids had sneaked into a studio after the adults went home. When he mentioned that he’d want to have Richard Pryor on the show, however, the mood got tense. Pryor had just punched an NBC page on the set of a Flip Wilson special, and the network was now entangled in a lawsuit.

Nevertheless, NBC made Michaels an offer. The sudden green light caught him off guard. He'd started to feel at home in L.A.; New York in the mid-seventies was in free fall, an intimidating place. He was also thrown by Schlosser's mandate that the show be done live. He was used to polishing for hours in an editing room. But a live broadcast, he soon realized, offered stealthy opportunities. You could skip producing a pilot, a process that makes "all your most conservative instincts come out," he said on a podcast—so "you find yourself doing what you *think* . . . will get you on the air." With no pilot, there'd be no audience-research reports and no notes from executives or advertisers. "The idea that I could do a show in which the audience would see it at the same time as the network was thrilling," Michaels said.



"I get that the sounds help you sleep, but I don't like the way he stares."
Cartoon by Elisabeth McNair

He accepted the job, telling NBC executives that his show would take shape organically over time. "We will always be experimenting on the air," he said. "I know what the ingredients are but not the recipe." He asked the network for three months to assemble writers and performers, and then three more months for them to jell as an ensemble. The show would have gruelling hours, he noted, so he was looking for "people you could drive cross-country with and not kill." One of his hiring mantras was that comedy, as a humanizing force, is too important to be left to professionals. He wanted "enlightened amateurs"—people with little or no TV experience. He hadn't considered that many of the talented people in that category had little or no TV experience because they had little or no interest in TV.

Around this time, Michaels went to see “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” in L.A., with his friend Rob Reiner. While waiting in line, they bumped into Chevy Chase, whom Reiner knew. Chase got Michaels’s attention the way he often got attention—by doing an elaborate pratfall. Michaels soon invited him to join his new show’s writing staff. “I knew instantly that Lorne was a funny guy,” Chase told me. “He wasn’t an initiator of humor as much as a *believer* in humor.” Chase signed on. Michaels also hired some friends from Canada as cast members—Dan Aykroyd (a master of disappearing inside a role) and Gilda Radner (who created characters of Tomlin-like sweetness). Through auditions, he hired John Belushi, who astonished the room with a deliriously strange character: a samurai billiard player. He brandished a wooden closet rod, grunting and rubbing his chin sagely; whenever it looked as though he was going to erupt into violence, he’d swing the pole down and mime a difficult billiards shot. (Michaels acknowledges that the bit would be considered offensive today. “There’s almost nothing we did in the seventies that I could do now,” he said in 2019, citing a sketch called “News for the Hard of Hearing,” in which an “interpreter,” Garrett Morris, repeats everything the anchor says, but shouting.)

Michaels originally conceived of the program as being similar to a magazine—a collection of distinct voices. One of the first staff writers, Anne Beatts, liked to note that he began hiring the writing team before the cast, practically unheard of in television. At the time, Michaels explained, “I became a producer to protect my writing, which was being fucked over by producers.”

He signed up Andy Kaufman after seeing him at a club and being entranced by his arty material. (“Man, that should’ve been at the Guggenheim,” an associate of Michaels’s had said at the club.) A subsequent screen test shows Kaufman sitting at a desk and reciting the lyrics to “MacArthur Park,” which are unsurpassed in their rococo inanity. He intones, “Someone left the cake out in the rain. I don’t think that I can take it. ’Cause it took so long to bake it. And I’ll never have that recipe again. Oh—no.” Michaels knew that he wanted Kaufman’s radical novelty in the show. “It was as beautiful a thing as you could witness,” he told the journalist Bill Zehme.

“He wasn’t enmeshed in the show business of it. . . . There seemed to be some other commitment, something very pure and more personal.”

Michaels had hipness covered, but he needed to insure that his show would have “hard laughs”—the ones that remind “you of a happier time in your life.” He’d seen a standup set by a Catskills-inflected comic named Alan Zweibel, and asked him to submit some material. Zweibel pulled two all-nighters typing up eleven hundred jokes. Michaels loved the first one: “The postal service is issuing a new stamp, commemorating prostitution. It’s a ten-cent stamp, but if you want to lick it it’s a quarter.” The joke had the cadence and payoff of a classic hard laugh, but with an edge. Zweibel came on board.

Michaels, haunted by the “Laugh-In” assembly-line method, wanted each sketch’s author to be recognizable from its style. He wanted a Black writer on staff and put out a feeler to the Writers Guild. A friend there sent over a play by a thirty-eight-year-old Juilliard-trained playwright and actor named Garrett Morris. Michaels liked what he read and hired Morris.

Michaels and his second wife, the model Susan Forristal (left), dance with Lauren Hutton at a gala event at the Metropolitan Museum, in 1978.Photograph by Ron Galella / Getty

The most astringent voice was Michael O'Donoghue, a literary snob and a high-strung perfectionist who, while at *National Lampoon*, had written "The Vietnamese Baby Book," a parody keepsake album noting such milestones as "Baby's first word (medic)." O'Donoghue regarded television as a lava lamp with sound, but he joined the writing staff, as did Anne Beatts, who was dating O'Donoghue; she bluntly told Michaels that she considered the Tomlin specials more feminist than funny. O'Donoghue broadcast his sensibility by decorating his office with pinups from a porn magazine for amputee fetishists called *Stump Love*. Although Michaels had never been a *Lampoon* partisan (he disliked its "sweat sock" attitude), he intuited that the couple's savage savoir-faire could be useful, and he promised them artistic freedom.

Michaels also wanted the show to look different. The typical variety-show set was a cyclorama wall, a seamless stretch of nothingness, decorated with mere "suggestions of sets": a lone lamppost, a window frame. Michaels asked for "hard-wall reality"—actual rooms, with doors and furniture, that wouldn't compete with the comedy.

In June, 1975, a few months before the show was to début, Michaels sent a three-page memo to NBC executives. He made sure not to overpromise, but he now knew how to talk like a producer. Of the rotating guest hosts, he said, "The requisite quality I am looking for is spontaneity. Fame and talent would not hurt." In addition to sketches by a repertory company, there would be pretaped commercial parodies ("enormously helpful in pacing a live show"). The memo refrained from spelling out his countercultural comedy code, described by Doug Hill and Jeff Weingrad, in "Saturday Night: A Backstage History," as "knowing drug references, casual profanity, a permissive attitude toward sex, a deep disdain for show-business convention, blistering political satire, and bitter distrust of corporate power." He understood what a network wanted to hear.

In hindsight, the memo's most striking quality is its marginalization of the rep players. But Michaels was keenly aware of how much talent he'd assembled. Aykroyd told me, "Lorne saw skills and abilities in people. He'd

say, ‘You can pull this off. You can sing this song.’ He could put it all together, and it would coalesce into something with impact.”

“Saturday Night,” Michaels told his staff, would feature sketches, not skits. Skits are one-joke bits done in grade school or by guys at the Rotary Club. A sketch is a vignette, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. His conception of the comedy he liked was similar to his conception of himself —underplayed, with a light touch, never “sweaty” or trying too hard. Michaels had a professorial management style, and whenever a staffer proposed an idea he’d immediately have a critique. If a pitch was too elaborate, he might say, “Premise overload.” To Michaels’s way of thinking, precision in comedy is as unequivocal as a surgeon’s cut. Miss your mark by a millimetre and the joke dies. He subscribed to Mark Twain’s observation that the difference between the almost right word and the right word is the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning. For this reason, he forbade improvising. “The way I work, you do all your work beforehand, and you write down the dialogue that you’ve actually chosen,” he told me. His models were auteurs such as Billy Wilder and Preston Sturges, writer-directors who expected actors to respect their words.

When reviewing scripts, Michaels would tell writers not to overexplain, to allow viewers to make key connections. He’d quote Wilder: “Give the audience two plus two and let them make four.” He scribbled comments on script pages and suggested new pairings of writers. “Cross-fertilization started,” Michaels said. “That was the thing that I was smartest about.” The writers played off one another like jazz musicians. Michaels’s wife, Rosie Shuster, whom he’d known since childhood, joined the writing staff, even though their marriage was fraying. She described the months of preparation as an incubation period in which “everybody was kind of falling in love and trying to crack each other up.”

“I’m not on the apps. I want to meet someone the old-fashioned way: by being born as an adult in the Garden of Eden, where my future husband is already waiting for me, naked.”
Cartoon by Juliana Castro Varón

Michaels didn’t anoint a head writer at first, although Chase and O’Donoghue each claimed the title. Michaels has credited Chase and O’Donoghue with helping to create the show, emphasizing that it was not a “full-blown-from-Zeus sort of thing.” He had originally pictured the show’s staff as a community without rank. But everyone was driven to win his approval. Laraine Newman, a cast member who’d done a Valley Girl character on a Tomlin special, told me, “You learned early on to distinguish Lorne’s real laugh from his fake laugh. The fake laugh would be ‘gasp gasp,’ a kind of inhale. The real laugh would be his face totally crinkled up, his teeth bared, and a kind of a wheeze.”

Michaels’s businesslike calm was a counterbalance to the whirling egos and animosities that drove his employees. When he held forth about the principles of comedy, some found him mesmerizing, but others merely tolerated it. Jane Curtin, part of the first cast, characterized him as the type of comedy professional who, instead of laughing, “says, with a completely straight face, ‘Hysterical.’ ”

A fake newscast had always been part of Michaels’s vision, and he initially expected to play the newscaster himself. As the air date approached, he changed his mind. It would be awkward to cut other people’s material while leaving himself in. That, he said, would be “a little too Orson Welles, even for me.” And it would have required being vulnerable in front of his staff.

Newman said, “You have your hat in your hand when you’re a performer. And that seems to be the thing that Lorne would want the very least in his life.” Chase was making Michaels laugh the most around the office, so, even though Chase had been hired as a writer, Michaels tapped him to anchor the segment, which he called “Weekend Update.”

On October 11, 1975, “Saturday Night” débuted. A traditional variety show would have opened with the guest host. But Michaels wanted viewers to know immediately that his show was, in Monty Python’s words, something completely different. His show jumped right into the comedy, with no glitzy preamble. (The first segment is now known as a “cold open.” Michaels told me, “I made that phrase up.”) The first thing viewers saw was a Dada-ish sketch in a minor key, written by O’Donoghue. Seated in an armchair, O’Donoghue begins giving an English lesson to John Belushi, whose schlubby bomber hat and sack of groceries peg him as an immigrant. The professor has the student repeat a series of phrases, starting with “I would like.” In a thick accent, Belushi repeats, “I would like.” Then: “To feed your fingertips.” Belushi: “To feed your fingertips.” O’Donoghue goes on, “To the wolverines.” The audience erupts into startled laughter—the show’s first. Soon, O’Donoghue clutches his heart, gasps, and falls to the floor. Belushi grunts and tumbles to the floor as well. After a pause, Chase enters, wearing a stage manager’s headset. Flashing his tennis-pro smile at the camera, he says, “Live, from New York, it’s ‘Saturday Night’!”

Steve Martin, whose standup career was just ramping up, watched the première on TV and was gobsmacked. “I felt like *I* was the avant-garde. I was the one doing the new comedy,” he said. “I thought, Oh, fuck—they did it. They had gotten there first.”

Michaels’s creation became a national sensation. It was especially a hit with the coveted youth demographic. Part of the show’s success lay in its tonal mixture. Albert Brooks contributed insider-y short films spoofing show-biz mediocrity; one was a reel of promos for fake NBC shows, including “Black Vet,” about an African American man back from Vietnam who opens a veterinary practice. Michaels balanced such material with warmer pieces—he wanted sketches drawing on staffers’ real lives. “What Gilda Ate” was a quiet monologue in which Radner listed things she’d eaten that

day, in a way that made clear she had a problem. (“I ate the whole thing!”) Michaels called moments like this “the show itself speaking,” adding, “That part was the sacred part.” Eager for more such moments, he lured Marilyn Suzanne Miller, with whom he’d worked on Tomlin’s specials, onto the writing staff. Miller told me, “Lorne was interested in inner life.”

The men on the show didn’t always welcome the feminine material. Tomlin hosted an early episode for which she pitched a sketch about a class that teaches female hardhats how to catcall men. (“Hey, stud muffins, wanna make bouncy-bouncy?”) None of the guys wanted to play the humiliated beefcake. Michaels eventually persuaded Aykroyd, who did the role justice in short shorts and a tank top. But Belushi sometimes said that he wouldn’t do pieces “written by girls.” The writers, meanwhile, kept casting Garrett Morris as a woman, which annoyed the cast’s actual women, not to mention Morris, who got sick of playing mammies and wearing dresses to impersonate Tina Turner or Pearl Bailey.

Michaels and his comedy partner, Hart Pomerantz, in the Canadian variety series “The Hart and Lorne Terrific Hour,” which débuted in 1970.Photograph from CBC Still Photo Collection

Michaels didn’t indulge what Shuster called the show’s “testosterone energy,” but he also didn’t intervene much. He was like a parent who lets his children sort out squabbles themselves. Penelope Spheeris, who produced Brooks’s short films, observed, “The cast and writers are the children. And he makes them compete with each other. And out of that competition comes two things—brilliant writing and a dislike for the other person.” For many staffers, trying to get Michaels’s approval was like

squeezing a dry sponge. “Lorne is repelled by the sight of needy people,” Newman said.

Even if getting what Miller called “female-feeling pieces” on the air was a priority for Michaels, one of his regular put-downs was to call a sketch “too ‘Carol Burnett.’ ” It was a stylistic observation, not a sexist one. “ ‘Carol Burnett’ was Broadway,” he told me. “We were rock and roll. Their sketches were about alcoholism, divorce, life in the suburbs—middle-aged stuff. I wanted us writing about *our* stuff.” “Saturday Night” featured jokes about Belushi’s doctor cutting off his drug supply, and a sketch set in ancient Greece in which Newman played a character named Anorexia.

Michaels’s dream host—Richard Pryor—appeared in the seventh episode and pushed the show to daring new heights. In one sketch, Chase plays a man interviewing Pryor for a job, and subjects him to a word-association test. “Dog,” Chase says. “Tree,” Pryor answers. Chase ups the ante, forcing Pryor, ultimately, to turn the tables and reverse the power dynamic:

Chase: Negro.
Pryor: Whitey.
Chase: Tar baby.
Pryor: What’d you say?
Chase: Tar baby.
Pryor: Ofay.
Chase: Colored.
Pryor: Redneck.
Chase: Junglebunny.
Pryor: Peckerwood!
Chase: Burrhead.
Pryor: Cracker.
Chase: Spearchucker.
Pryor: White trash.
Chase: Junglebunny.
Pryor: Honky.
Chase: Spade.
Pryor: Honky honky!

Chase: N———!
Pryor: *Dead* honky!

The sketch concludes with Pryor in a quivering rage and a whimpering Chase offering him the job at an elevated salary, making him “the highest-paid janitor in America.”

By the end of Season 1, the cast was being recognized on the street, but the breakout star was the preppy and handsome Chase. He began alienating his colleagues, sometimes talking about himself in the third person. One day, Aykroyd confronted Michaels in a fury: Chase was giving him notes on a Scottish accent. Michaels views this moment as the commencement of his becoming “the world expert on people getting famous.”

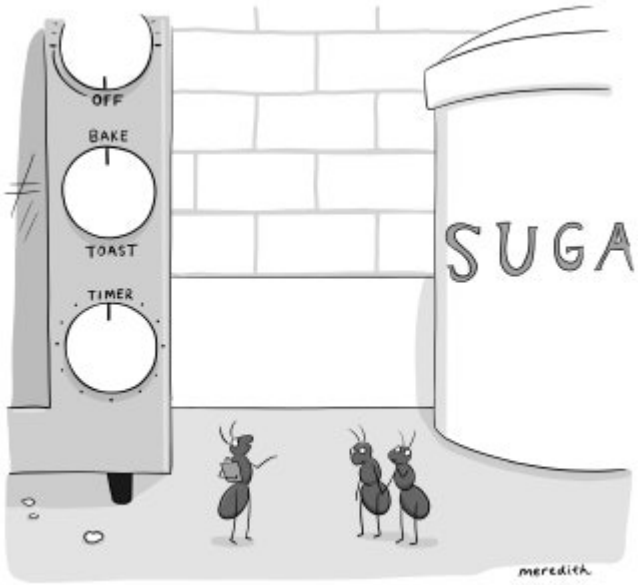
Hollywood began offering Chase movie deals. He and Michaels were intensely close, but Michaels decided that he wouldn’t beg him to stay. One of Michaels’s axioms about celebrity is “People don’t like to collaborate past the point of fame.” Of Chase’s possible defection, Michaels told his colleagues, “The show would take a hit, but we’d still be O.K.” He came to see turnover as the natural order of things—another lesson in his producer’s handbook. “People *burn out* in relationships,” he said to me, in work as well as in life. Chase, for his part, found Michaels’s businesslike pose confounding. Getting him to stay, Chase told me, “wouldn’t have fucking taken much! All he had to do is tell me he loved me, basically. But his nature is to be above it in some fashion.” He attributed Michaels’s reluctance to insecurity. “Frankly, I always felt back then that I was smarter than him, that I was really the guy who got the show going, not Lorne.”

When Chase left for Hollywood, Michaels replaced him with Bill Murray, someone who distinctly lacked a golden-boy aura. Murray, an Irish Catholic, grew up outside Chicago in a big working-class family. Michaels was starting to see that the show, like the city that was its home, benefitted from being in a permanent state of flux. Whenever the show’s rhythms were “getting to the point where smugness was about to creep in, I tried to kick it around a little,” Michaels told *Rolling Stone*. In addition to hiring Murray, he brought in Steve Martin as a frequent host. Martin forever changed the show by adding a flavor of comedy that was both goofy and brainy. He débuted an original song, “King Tut” (“Buried with a donkey! He’s my

favorite honky!”), in a live performance that Michaels mounted with lavish production values. The single sold more than a million copies.

The show’s popularity transformed it. The cast members found that their small talk, once centered on who was sleeping together, now focussed on the industry. Newman recalled a rehearsal in which “we were all talking about what we were naming our corporations.” Hers was Init Productions. Aykroyd’s was Applied Action Research Corp. Radner stopped, mid-blocking, and said, “What’s happened? We’ve joined the establishment.”

Anne Beatts used to say that you can only be avant-garde for so long before you become garde. This was certainly true for Michaels. He started wearing well-cut suits and blazers; he traded his sneakers for Italian loafers. He eventually bought a large apartment on Central Park West, in the building where his famous friend Paul Simon lived. Simon and his famous wife, Carrie Fisher, were next door, and they’d wander into each other’s apartments, referring to themselves as the Ricardos and the Mertzes.



“Best of all, this neighborhood is really walkable.”
Cartoon by Meredith Southard

In 1977, Michaels rented a ten-bedroom mansion in East Hampton. On Labor Day, he threw a lawn party with O’Donoghue, Chase, and Simon. The hosts asked guests to wear white. Michaels wasn’t sure how to think about his own event. Was he throwing a *parody* of a party that Jay Gatsby

would throw? Or was it the real thing, the ostentatious yet elegant exhibition of an out-of-towner's rapid ascent? At the party, he stood somewhat apart, idly fiddling with a badminton racquet. Jann Wenner was there, as were Shelley Duvall and Eric Idle. Guests ate watercress sandwiches and sipped a cocktail invented by O'Donoghue: the Soiled Kimono, two parts champagne and one part Japanese plum wine. (The White Party became an annual tradition, the guest list growing more splendid each year.)

Everything about "S.N.L." was now A-list. Among the cast members, there was a sense that Michaels was entering a different realm. "He spent a lot of time talking about where he was going to eat," Curtin told me. Belushi referred to the boss's fancy friends as "the dead." Once, he treated a reporter to his impersonation of Michaels making some calls: "Nicholson, can you hold just a second? I have Mike Nichols on the other line. Mike, can you hold for a second? I've got Mick Jagger on the other line. Mick, I'll be with you in a second. . . ."

In 1981, Michaels, having gone through an amicable divorce with Shuster, married Susan Forristal, a successful model, at a house he'd bought near the ocean, in Amagansett. He has never tried to conceal his appetite for the things that money can buy. People like to imagine, he said in "Live from New York," that he's on his way "into a hot tub with seventy-two virgins or whatever. Fine. I'd much rather my life be perceived as glamorous or stylish than as one of an enormous amount of work that is unceasing."

The show, which added "Live" to its title in Season 3, began giving audiences more of what they wanted most: repeating characters. The Coneheads, the Nerds, Mr. Bill—fans laughed at those no matter what. O'Donoghue considered recurring characters pandering, and Michaels occasionally announced that he wanted to banish them, but he never did. He was willing to risk the annoyance of critics—who, snooty about the show's popularity, regularly pulled out the lazy headline "Saturday Night Dead." But he wouldn't disappoint the viewers. A Snickers bar isn't the very best candy bar, but pretty much everybody likes it.

Lorne Michaels, Kate McKinnon, and Hillary Clinton on the set of "Saturday Night Live," in 2015.Photograph by Mary Ellen Matthews / NBC Universal

By the eighties, "S.N.L." had forged a clear path to Hollywood success—at one point, it was estimated that the top-ten-grossing movie comedies in history all starred alums of the show. "Animal House," which starred Belushi, brought hordes of new viewers to the show—a frat-boy contingent that Michaels called "the *undeserved* audience." In an interview with the *Times*, Jim Downey, one of the show's longest-serving head writers, compared its early days to "a children's crusade; people would camp out here and not think about anything but the show." Since then, he said, "anyone coming here knows what the formula is: a couple of hit characters, then you get a movie." There was more jockeying for position. Writers refined strategies to get their pieces on the air—making the set ultra-simple could work, and so could writing parts for Newman or Morris, who were both often under-used in the show.

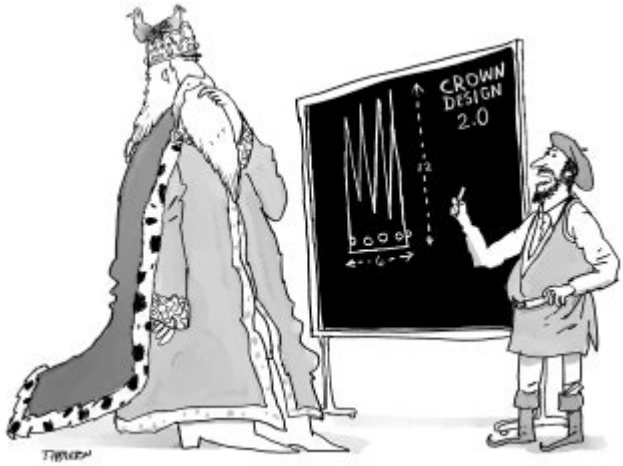
The all-night Tuesday writing sessions set a tone of dysfunction that permeated the week. A portion of the staff ran on cocaine. A pot dealer named Merlin roamed the halls. Michaels ignored such behavior, and he increasingly hid away from the cast, who always seemed to want more—airtime, money, attention. People took his cutting a sketch as a personal slight, and they sulked. "I began to be more removed, I think, because the consequences of my actions began to have greater and greater weight," Michaels said in a documentary about the show's first five years. "We were a team, and we had to stay together and fight for each other. At the same time, I had more power."

One story that Michaels tells on repeat goes like this: “I was on a boat once, and there was a man on the boat. He was from *the audience*”—that is, a normal human being. “The man was being funny in the way that Bill Murray is funny, and I thought to myself, I *know* Bill Murray. You know what I mean?”

When he told this story to Bill Hader, who joined the cast in 2005, Hader nodded yes. “But I had no idea what he was talking about,” he said. What Michaels was talking about was that, at a certain point, the show got away from him. By the fifth season, it had become an institution. And the millions of viewers had sucked up what he and the show were selling so avidly that the language of “S.N.L.” had rewired their brains. People inserted “S.N.L.” catchphrases into their wedding vows and used robotic Conehead voices around the water cooler. The show had become collective cultural property.

After Season 5, Michaels left the show, not entirely by choice. The breach stemmed from a tortured negotiation with NBC over Michaels’s request for some time to regroup; talks were ultimately derailed by Al Franken’s ridiculing the network president on air. Five years later, Michaels came back. Ratings had sunk, and the show had become reliant on pretaped bits. “It lost what is magic about it,” Michaels said in 1985. “I think ‘Saturday Night Live’ is about contact with another group of humans coming through this tube.”

In the conformist eighties, Michaels largely abandoned the Andy Kaufman strain of his formula. When picking the show, he leaned toward harder laughs—crowd-pleasers like Dana Carvey’s Church Lady, a bravura display of performing chops. “S.N.L.” continued to reliably supply fans with catchphrases such as “We just want to pump YOU up!” After a rocky return year, in which he hired too many young performers—three had been in John Hughes movies—Michaels focussed on making smooth transitions between casts, older players overlapping with new ones. He’d learned that it was crucial to notice “when the music changed.” It was useful when the new performers knew other cast members, helping the ensemble cohere. Carvey said, “Lorne’s always looking for chemistry—a group that would all fit together, like the Beatles.”



“Your Majesty, I think I’ve found a solution to all the pigeons that keep landing on your crown.” Cartoon by Tim Hamilton

In this less caustic era, one of Michaels’s rules became “Do it in sunshine”—that is, don’t forget that comedy is an entertainment. Colors should be bright, costumes flattering. People watch TV, he believes, as if they’re huddled around a fire at night. You don’t want too much “dark” in comedy: “You can just look out the window for dark.” Fred Armisen remembers Michaels saying, “There’s enough misery in the world.”

Michaels especially counsels his staff to avoid writing anger in a sketch: “It’s really difficult to make anger funny.” Idiots, he says, play better than assholes. He always wants his actors to give even the worst villain a spark of something appealing. Otherwise, the audience is simply repelled. “What the English know is that if you’re playing the greatest villain, make him charming,” he says. Newcomers to the show are often surprised to hear Michaels talking about wanting “sweetness” in sketches—the interior, emotional shadings that Gilda Radner and Marilyn Suzanne Miller specialized in.

With each passing year, Michaels has added to his list of oracular pronouncements. O’Donoghue, who sneered at the show’s softer turn—he once pushed for live gunfire in the studio—couldn’t stand the speechifying of “Lorne (the Rabbi) Michaels” and what he called Michaels’s “kindergarten comedy theories,” but many staff members loved the boss’s maxims. “To this day, I think about these proofs Lorne’s passed down,” Chris Rock told me. “It’s like mixing chemicals. Too much of this or too little of that and you’ve got a disaster.” He ranks Michaels, as a producer,

with Quincy Jones: both focus on fundamentals. “Comedy is no different than music,” he said. “There’s scales, and there’s keys, and there’s notes to hit.” Sometimes a sketch lives or dies because of some rhythmic alchemy. The famous Blue Öyster Cult sketch didn’t get on “S.N.L.” the first week it was rehearsed, with Norm Macdonald as the lead, but when Christopher Walken played the producer, and yelled “More cowbell!” in his very particular cadence, it exploded.

Although Michaels has firm rules about sketch comedy, he is more flexible about the talent-management aspect of his producer role. Different personalities, he believes, require different approaches. To some, Michaels will bark, “Don’t fuck it up.” Hader, who is prone to anxiety attacks, remembers Michaels coming to his dressing room when he hosted and snapping, “Calm the fuck down. Just have fun. Jesus Christ.” With others, he is warmer. Molly Shannon treasures the memory of how, when she was nervous just before going onstage, Michaels would “reassure me with his eyes.”

Michaels has changed his laissez-faire attitude toward substance abuse. The fatal overdose of Belushi led him to rethink his approach to people in his orbit with drug problems. He once said that, in the seventies, he felt that “as long as people showed up on time, did their job, it was nobody’s business what they did in their bedroom or what they did in their lives. That value system turned out to be wrong.”

Because Michaels oversees a bunch of comedians, his personality tics have been ruthlessly and relentlessly catalogued and mocked in the writers’ room, as a way to release the competitive pressure. When Conan O’Brien was on staff, he invented a game called “Which Paul?” The setup is that Michaels is inviting someone to dinner with his friend Paul. “And you’d want to figure out, is it Paul Simon or Paul McCartney?” O’Brien explained. Hader does an impression of Michaels name-dropping serial killers as if they were A-listers. It is staff canon that there is practically no piece of information one can tell Michaels that does not prompt a rapid-fire “No-no-no-no, I know” or a languorous *“Right.”* There used to be a writers’-room bit about this compulsion: one version has Michaels strolling on the beach in St. Barts with one of his young children, who points at the

rising moon and says, full of wonder, “Look, Daddy!” Michaels shoots back, “*No-no-no-no*, I know. We had the moon in the seventies.” His sarcastic “*Right*” became part of the most famous caricature of him: Dr. Evil in “Austin Powers,” by the “S.N.L.” alum Mike Myers. Dr. Evil also raises a pinkie to his mouth when he’s scheming, a reference to the nail-biting Michaels would do when pondering which sketches to cut. (Myers has often denied that the performance was entirely based on Michaels, but in fact it’s a rare act of caricature theft—a beat-for-beat imitation of an impersonation of Michaels by Dana Carvey, which Carvey performed only while sitting in the makeup chair, in a bald wig, at “S.N.L.”)

The in-jokes about Michaels are funny because they draw on aspects of who he really is: the mogul who maintains a poise that verges on prissiness, the rich man who advises people just starting out on where to vacation. (Fey does a riff in Michaels’s voice about buying a vacation home on the planet Naboo, from “Star Wars,” and how chic and undiscovered it is.)

The “loose reins” approach that Michaels professes to take with talent can be double-edged. Summoning his best Michaels voice, Hader conjured Michaels’s damage-control instinct: “If you start drowning, he’s not, like, ‘Here’s a life jacket.’ He’s, like, ‘Oooh, look at that guy drowning in my pool. That’s disgusting—let’s go over here and hang with Alec Baldwin.’ ” Baldwin himself, who has hosted seventeen times, sized up Michaels’s management methods as “Darwinian,” saying, “Lorne just stands back and lets them cannibalize each other.” Michaels knows that his sink-or-swim protocol is tough on new hires. “The only thing that justifies that level of abuse is the exhilaration of it working,” he has said.

Michaels in his office with Leslie Jones, dressed as Donald Trump, in 2017.Photograph by Will Heath / NBC Universal

New recruits haven't always known whether Michaels's fitful management style is a demonstration of ambivalence or technique. Jan Hooks, who had a stellar five years on the show, went through a hard time after the death of her mother. Michaels adored Hooks and considered her a star. But, when Kevin Nealon asked Michaels to give her a little praise, he responded, "I understand what you're saying, but you'll find that it's never enough." He told me, quoting a former therapist, "A baby looks at the mother and thinks, Why do you only have two breasts? Why do you not have three breasts? It's an insatiable demand, and you see it in performers, and you see it in writers."

Michaels's mentoring technique has tormented certain staffers. When Chris Farley was a new cast member, he went to Bob Odenkirk with tears in his eyes. Farley said that every time he messed up Michaels told him that he'd hit it out of the park. And every time he killed Michaels chastised him for not making enough of an effort. "Chris was mind-fucked," Odenkirk said. "Lorne clearly felt that if you kept people off balance they'd try harder."

Odenkirk found Michaels's process hard to parse. "You'd think that you'd say, 'We're gonna pick the best sketches, and then we're gonna shine 'em up as best we can,' " he told me. But, the way the show runs, "the focus is on just getting it to happen and not on the quality level." When he worked at "S.N.L.," he felt that it was straitjacketed by having its arbiter be a man who was a teen-ager in the fifties. "I thought, Fuck this guy for being in charge," he said. "Shouldn't 'S.N.L.' be for each generation?" (Odenkirk now says of this attitude, "I was a dick.")

The one time writers were certain to hear Michaels's feedback directly was during dress rehearsal, when they saw him in laser-focus mode under the bleachers. Even today, during those two hours, he watches what the audience watches, but he sees more—lighting, music cues, wigs, accents, entrances. "If you were to read a year's worth of his notes from dress rehearsal, you'd have a master class in TV production that is unparalleled," the former "S.N.L." writer A. Whitney Brown told me.

Many writers have sat beside him watching their sketches die, only to have him turn and say, with stony sarcasm, “You must be very proud.” If the host’s monologue is flat, he’ll moan, “Can we get *any* charm out of him?” If a piece is too erudite, he might tell its writer, “Can they take the Emmy *away*?” John Mulaney said, “May the cast members go to their graves never knowing the things I heard under the bleachers.”

Chris Rock, who mopped floors before joining “S.N.L.,” in 1990, was impatient with colleagues who moped if their sketches got cut. “I learned everything I know from that show. You got to shoot your shot that week,” he told me. “Killing onstage isn’t subjective. When people talk about fair and unfair, I’m, like, ‘Shut up.’ It’s, like, ‘Get bigger laughs.’ ”

The format Michaels created fifty years ago guaranteed the show’s perpetual adolescence. Anne Beatts used to describe Michaels as “the leader of the Lost Boys.” In “Peter Pan,” the boys never grow up; at “S.N.L.,” the young performers all get replaced, with Michaels presiding in a role that’s part Wendy, part Captain Hook. Although he is now eighty, the company he’s kept has prevented him from becoming a dinosaur—or, worse, an unhip dinosaur. Sticking to his Snickers-bar concept sustained the show, and it has sustained him. Michaels dotes on his family—he has three grown children with his third wife, Alice Barry—but colleagues have always felt that, really, he is married to the show.

His decades of producing experience have imbued “S.N.L.” with a clockwork stability. Every week, the sketches are written, the index cards shuffled, the vases of flowers replenished. New employees are still routinely terrified of him; when the office feels too friendly, whispers circulate that Michaels doesn’t like “the tree-house vibe.” Will Ferrell thinks that Michaels’s emotional withholding is part of a baseball-derived management style. “Baseball players keep the highs not too high and the lows not too low,” he said. “Lorne knows that it’s a long season.”

Michaels is now the age at which men like him become connoisseurs of history. A reader of biographies, he keeps a mental list of historical figures whose careers remind him of his own. The roster is not modest. There’s Thomas Edison. (“He didn’t think he *invented* anything. He thought he *perfected* things, and that all the ideas he perfected were already in the air.”)

There’s William Shawn, who was a mentor to Michaels and who ran this magazine for thirty-five years, corralling a gang of talented, needy egos in order to produce a weekly publication. Then there’s Shakespeare. The playwright, Michaels likes to note, first had to get his work approved by the Lord Chamberlain and the court—the network bosses of their day. Then Shakespeare scrambled to get his show on the boards—not unlike a week at “S.N.L.,” hurtling toward Saturday. Instead of 11:30 *p.m.*, Shakespeare’s deadline was sunset; Michaels talks of him shaving minutes from “Hamlet” to end the play before dark. Shakespeare also wrote expressly for the actors in his company. “I know he had a Belushi,” Michaels told me. “That’s why Falstaff appears in three plays.” Above all, Shakespeare was “the ultimate problem solver.” Like Michaels, the Bard saw to it that, despite any obstacle, the show would go on. ♦

This is drawn from “Lorne: The Man Who Invented Saturday Night Live.”

Susan Morrison is The New Yorker’s articles editor and the author of “Lorne: The Man Who Invented Saturday Night Live.”

A Reporter at Large

How Religious Schools Became a Billion-Dollar Drain on Public Education

A nationwide movement has funnelled taxpayer money to private institutions, eroding the separation between church and state.

By Alec MacGillis

January 13, 2025

In Ohio, a trove of mostly unpublished correspondence between Catholic leaders and government officials reveals the origin of one of the most dramatic expansions of private-school vouchers in the country.Illustration by Ben Wiseman

This article is a collaboration between The New Yorker and ProPublica.

On a Thursday morning last May, about a hundred people gathered in the atrium of the Ohio capitol building to join in Christian worship. The "Prayer at the Statehouse" was organized by an advocacy group called the Center for Christian Virtue, whose growing influence was symbolized by its new headquarters, directly across from the capitol. It was also manifest in the officials who came to take part in the event: three state legislators and the ambitious lieutenant governor, Jon Husted.

After some prayer and singing, the center's Christian Engagement Ambassador introduced Husted, asking him to "share with us about faith and intersecting faith with government." Husted, a youthful fifty-seven-year-old, spoke intently about the prayer meetings that he leads in the governor's office each month. "We bring appointed officials and elected officials together to talk about our faith in our work, in our service, and how it can strengthen us and make us better," he said. The power of prayer, Husted suggested, could even supply political victories: "When we do that, great things happen—like advancing school choice so that *every* child in Ohio has a chance to go to the school of their choice." The audience started applauding before he finished his sentence.

The center had played a key role in bringing about one of the most dramatic expansions of private-school vouchers in the country, making it possible for all Ohio families—even the richest among them—to receive public money to pay for their children's tuition. In the mid-nineteen-nineties, Ohio became the second state to offer vouchers, but in those days they were available only in Cleveland and were billed as a way for disadvantaged children to escape struggling schools. Now the benefits extend to more than a hundred and fifty thousand students across the state, costing taxpayers nearly a billion dollars, the vast majority of which goes to the Catholic and evangelical institutions that dominate the private-school landscape there.

What happened in Ohio was a stark illustration of a development that has often gone unnoticed, perhaps because it is largely taking place away from blue-state media hubs. In the past few years, school vouchers have become universal in a dozen states, including Florida, Arizona, and North Carolina. Proponents are pushing to add Texas, Pennsylvania, Tennessee, and others

—and, with Donald Trump returning to the White House, they will likely have federal support.

The risks of universal vouchers are quickly coming to light. An initiative that was promoted for years as a civil-rights cause—helping poor kids in troubled schools—is threatening to become a nationwide money grab. Many private schools are raising tuition rates to take advantage of the new funding, and new schools are being founded to capitalize on it. With private schools urging all their students' families to apply, the money is flowing mostly to parents who are already able to afford tuition and to kids who are already enrolled in private schools. When vouchers do draw students away from public districts, they threaten to exacerbate declining enrollment, forcing underpopulated schools to close. More immediately, the cost of the programs is soaring, putting pressure on public-school finances even as private schools prosper. In Arizona, voucher expenditures are hundreds of millions of dollars more than predicted, leaving an enormous shortfall in the state budget. States that provide funds to families for homeschooling or education-related expenses are contending with reports that the money is being used to cover such unusual purchases as kayaks, video-game consoles, and horseback-riding lessons.

The voucher movement has been aided by a handful of billionaire advocates; it was also enabled, during the pandemic, by the backlash to extended school closures. (Private schools often reopened considerably faster than public schools.) Yet much of the public, even in conservative states, remains ambivalent about vouchers: voters in Nebraska and Kentucky just rejected them in ballot referendums.

How, then, has the movement managed to triumph? The campaign in Ohio provides an object lesson—a model that voucher advocates have deployed elsewhere. Its details are recorded in a trove of private correspondence, much of it previously unpublished, that the movement's leaders in Ohio sent to one another. The letters reveal a strategy to start with targeted programs that placed needy kids in parochial schools, then fight to expand the benefits to far richer families—a decades-long effort by a network of politicians, church officials, and activists, all united by a conviction that the separation of church and state is illegitimate. As one of the movement's

progenitors put it, “Government does a lousy job of substituting for religion.”

In the early nineteen-nineties, Ohio’s Catholic bishops faced a problem. For more than a century, religious education had been deeply entrenched in the state; in Cleveland, the parochial system was one of the largest in the country. For decades, though, the Church’s urban schools had been losing students to suburban flight. To keep up enrollment, many were admitting more Black students, often from non-Catholic families. But these families typically could not afford to pay much, which put a strain on church budgets.

Catholic leaders elsewhere faced the same challenge, but Ohio’s bishops had an advantage. The new Republican governor, George Voinovich, was a devout Catholic who went to Mass multiple times a week, an expression of a faith that was inherited from his Slovenian American mother and deepened by the loss of his nine-year-old daughter, who was struck by a van that ran a red light. An unpretentious Midwesterner who loved fishing in Lake Erie, Voinovich had worked his way up from state legislator to mayor of Cleveland before becoming governor, in 1991.

In office, Voinovich corresponded frequently with the state’s most prominent bishops, in Cleveland, Columbus, and Cincinnati. Their letters, which are collected in Voinovich’s papers at Ohio University, show a close and collaborative relationship. The bishops wrote to thank Voinovich for the regular donations that he and his wife made to the Church, which ranged as high as two thousand dollars. They traded get-well wishes and condolence notes. “The last two times I’ve seen you you looked a little tired,” Voinovich once wrote to Anthony Pilla, the bishop of Cleveland. “Please take care of yourself.”

Most of all, they strategized about increasing state funding for Catholic schools. As a legislator, Voinovich had worked to launch a set of programs that helped private schools pay for administration, special education, transportation, and other services. His support for these expenditures, which by the early nineties amounted to more than a hundred million dollars, stood in contrast with his aggressive efforts to cut the rest of the budget. At one point, he banned peanuts and other snacks from official state flights.

Legislators passed around a story about seeing him pluck a penny out of a urinal.

Cartoon by Robert Leighton

But Voinovich saw spending on parochial schools as fundamentally different, driven by his belief in the value of a Catholic upbringing. “If we could reconstitute the family and get everyone into Church, about 60% of the problems we are confronted with would go away,” he wrote to James Griffin, the bishop of Columbus. “I can assure you that the money you spend to deal with all the problems confronting the community is much better spent than the way government would spend it.”

Soon after Voinovich became governor, he and the bishops began discussing another way to fund Catholic schools: vouchers. The notion of publicly funded subsidies for private schools wasn’t totally new. After courts ordered school integration in the South, in the nineteen-fifties, some municipalities helped finance “segregation academies” for white students. At around the same time, the economist Milton Friedman argued that education should be subject to market forces, in part by paying parents to send their children to a school of their choosing. But no city or state had funded a true voucher initiative.

For the state government, there was an obvious risk to funding Catholic schools; the Ohio constitution says that “no preference shall be given, by law, to any religious society.” Voinovich and his aides worried not only

about political repercussions but also about the potential for legal challenges from groups like the A.C.L.U. In April, 1991, Voinovich intimated to Pilla that he was recruiting proxies who could obscure their alliance. “We are quietly lining up ‘heavy hitters’ in the business community and are trying to identify someone in the legislature who would be willing to become our advocate,” he wrote.

Voinovich had an ideal partner in David Brennan, a well-connected local businessman. A towering presence at six feet five (not counting his customary cowboy hat), Brennan had attended Catholic school in Akron before earning degrees in accounting and law, and made a fortune forming corporations for doctors seeking tax benefits. When Voinovich ran for governor, Brennan was a major fund-raiser for the campaign. Now he started cultivating allies, donating heavily to a Republican from the Cincinnati suburbs who was a promising sponsor of voucher legislation, as reported by the Akron *Beacon Journal*, which covered the early voucher push.

In May, 1991, Voinovich and Brennan met to discuss creating a commission on school choice, which Brennan would chair. Soon afterward, the bishops provided eighteen suggestions for possible members. Six of them ended up on the commission—with no mention of the fact that they had been selected by the Church.

As word of the commission spread, it raised concerns. The following spring, an executive at Procter & Gamble, one of the state’s largest employers, urged Voinovich to couch “this sensitive issue” in a broader effort at school reform. “Vouchers on their own could lead to unnecessary divisiveness,” he wrote. The head of the Ohio teachers’ union warned that unilateral action “could explode any chance at building a statewide consensus.” Voinovich responded that he was prepared for discord: “I am confident that whatever recommendations they come back with, it will be difficult for the Ohio Federation of Teachers to support.”

The commission was moving fast. Brennan “is doing an outstanding job,” Voinovich wrote to Pilla. “He is on a mission from God.” Voinovich and Brennan took care to disarm political objections. One briefing document argued that any plan the commission produced “must be substantially tilted

in favor of low income parents and children" and must require private schools to administer the same proficiency tests as public schools. By year's end, the commission produced its recommendation: Ohio should create a voucher pilot program.

Representative C. J. Prentiss monitored the commission's work with foreboding. Elected to the Ohio House in 1991, Prentiss had distinguished herself as a leading defender of public education and was steeped in the struggle for school integration. Her father had belonged to the Congress of Racial Equality, and after Prentiss graduated from Cleveland's Marshall High School—where she was one of six Black students—she attended the 1963 March on Washington. Later, she joined local battles against school segregation, during which she met Michael Charney, a white teacher and union activist who became her third husband. She taught for a while in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights and served on the State Board of Education. In 1993, she and other Black officials in Cleveland condemned Voinovich's plan. "It is difficult to see how subsidizing private schools will improve public education," she said. "Private schools have selective entrance requirements, serve only private purposes, and are not accountable to the public."

Brennan deflected the criticism, noting that the plan was still provisional: "We believe when the education-choice bill reaches the final stages, these fine legislators will feel differently than they do today." In fact, he and Voinovich knew that it would be tough to secure backing for a stand-alone voucher bill; school-board members, teachers, and administrators were already sending letters to legislators to object. In May, 1994, Voinovich contacted Brennan to strategize about how to slip a voucher pilot into the next state budget. "We are going to have to crawl before we walk," he wrote. "I believe if we can *really* get it underway in one or two districts during my second term, we will have accomplished more than what [has] been accomplished thus far."

A few weeks later, Voinovich's assistant for education policy, Tom Needles, sent him a strategy brief on a forthcoming lunch with the bishops. "The Catholic Conference will continue to maintain a low profile in terms of its formal position on voucher legislation," Needles wrote. "At the same time,

the Conference recognizes that parent organizations in each diocese will play a very active role in lobbying for its passage." On the last day of January, 1995, voucher proponents paid for six buses to carry some three hundred children and parents from Cleveland to the capitol, in order to lobby legislators. As parents walked from office to office in the statehouse, one declared, "The public schools are preparing Black children for prison, the welfare office, or the graveyard. As a Black parent, that's unacceptable."

Prentiss and a state senator from Cleveland decided to address the throng. With the parents visibly angry, she knew better than to dismiss concerns about their children's schooling. "There is a crisis," she acknowledged. "The question before us is, how do we improve the public schools?"

The bishops, though, were far more organized, with efforts unfolding parish by parish across the state; a list in Voinovich's papers records hundreds of phone calls and letters to legislators, making the case for vouchers and inviting them to visit local parish schools. Voinovich urged them to do still more. "I really need your help and would appreciate being kept informed as to what is being done so I can convey that to the leadership in both the House and Senate," he wrote to Daniel Pilarczyk, the archbishop of Cincinnati, in February, 1995. The next month, Pilarczyk responded with another list of the Church's actions, including some twenty thousand letters sent to legislators.

Two weeks later, Voinovich let Pilarczyk know that the House had not only increased funding for Catholic schools but also authorized a "limited scholarship program in the City of Cleveland." The program would start small, with several thousand vouchers worth about twenty-two hundred dollars apiece. Yet Voinovich recognized that it was a "significant pilot project." At the time, the only other city that allowed private-school vouchers was Milwaukee, and the initiative there had initially barred religious schools from participating. Cleveland's program, in contrast, had been designed from the start to benefit Catholic schools.

In June, the budget won final approval. Six bishops wrote Voinovich to express their gratitude. "Everything we asked you to do was included in your budget," they told him. "Without your leadership and gentle nudging of legislative leaders, none of this would have been possible."

Prentiss and Charney quickly grasped the pilot's import. "This is the beginning of the end for public education," he told her, only half joking. Prentiss resolved to monitor the program to make sure that the money was spent as intended. After one voucher recipient, an Islamic school, was found to have housed students in unsafe buildings, she successfully sponsored a bill requiring schools that received vouchers to meet the same minimum standards as public schools.

Meanwhile, Prentiss kept pushing for public-school reforms: all-day kindergarten, smaller classes, mentorships for at-risk boys. She and Charney were encouraged by test results showing that kids in public schools were performing at least as well as those with vouchers at Catholic schools.

In 1998, Voinovich was elected to the United States Senate; Needles, his aide, went to work as a lobbyist for Brennan. And the push for vouchers entered a new phase, as an aggressive generation of proponents took up a battle in the courts.

In both Ohio and Wisconsin, opponents, led by teachers' unions, were challenging the programs on the ground that they violated the separation of church and state. The Wisconsin Supreme Court upheld vouchers; a federal appeals court in Ohio ruled against them.

The U.S. Supreme Court took up a First Amendment challenge to vouchers, based on one of the Ohio cases, in February, 2002. Robert Chanin, a lawyer for the National Education Association, told the Court, "Under the Cleveland voucher program, millions of dollars in unrestricted public funds are transferred each year from the state treasury into the general coffers of sectarian private schools, and the money is used by those schools to provide an educational program in which the sectarian and the secular are interwoven." Chanin noted that virtually all the students in the voucher program were attending religious schools, rather than secular private schools.

But Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, the likely swing vote in the case, interrupted to pick up on a point made by a state attorney who'd defended the vouchers. In evaluating Cleveland's choice program, shouldn't the

Court consider not only private schools but also other options available to students, such as public magnet schools and charter schools?

The question caught Chanin off guard. The issue was the constitutionality of private-school vouchers, yet O'Connor was evoking public-school options. The state pressed its advantage, with its lawyer stressing the limited scope of the pilot: "It didn't take too much money away from the public schools, but gave enough for a limited program that is targeted to the most needy, to the poorest of the poor."

On June 27, 2002, the Court announced that it had ruled, 5–4, in favor of the Ohio program, arguing that it was "part of a broader undertaking by the State to enhance the educational options of Cleveland's school children." Clint Bolick, a leading lawyer on the pro-voucher side, declared on the Supreme Court plaza, "This was the Super Bowl of school choice, and the children won." Later, he and others gathered at the office of the Institute for Justice, a conservative organization, and toasted with Dom Pérignon.

Prentiss was on vacation with Charney in Washington State when she got word of the ruling. "PBS NewsHour" invited her to come to a studio in Vancouver and record a response, but she was too upset to think about what she would say on camera. "I'm not going to be the one," she told Charney. "Let them get a lawyer."

After the Supreme Court ruling, the momentum in seeking alternatives to traditional public schools shifted to charter schools—publicly funded institutions that are administered separately from school districts. Many Democrats had championed charters in the nineties as a more palatable way to offer school choice, and Republicans had adopted the idea, too; Brennan, the chairman of Voinovich's school-choice commission, launched a for-profit charter-school venture.

In 2005, with charters threatening to cut into parochial-school enrollment, Ohio's Catholic bishops secured a crucial expansion of vouchers beyond Cleveland: a new statewide program called EdChoice, which offered vouchers to students assigned to schools that were judged to be failing, many of them in Columbus and Cincinnati.

Prentiss stayed in the legislature until 2006, becoming the second Black woman to serve as Senate minority leader. Up until the end, she led the resistance to vouchers. As she left the legislature, though, an impassioned advocate for vouchers came in: a Republican representative named Matt Huffman.

“Behold as I create problems in our relationship out of thin air.”
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Huffman was a lawyer from Lima, a small industrial city in western Ohio. Like Prentiss, he had grown up among activists, but with different political aims. His father, a lawyer and a county prosecutor, took a case against a local cinema that was showing “obscene” movies all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court; his mother co-founded one of the state’s first pregnancy-crisis centers after abortion was legalized.

Huffman was the fifth of nine children, all of whom went to Catholic schools. This was possible, he said later, because the parish schools were so affordable in those days. But, as tuition climbed (partly to cover the salaries of lay teachers who replaced nuns), the student body skewed wealthier. “The middle class was pretty much shut out of alternatives in education,” he told the Columbus *Dispatch*, in 2022.

One of Huffman’s brothers became the principal of a Catholic elementary school. Huffman, after following his father into law, served as a fund-raiser for Lima Central Catholic High. He also got involved in local politics, rising to president of the city council. In 2000, he endorsed a young former Ohio State wrestling coach named Jim Jordan as he ran for the state Senate.

Jordan, who is now one of the most stridently conservative members of the U.S. House of Representatives, later returned the favor by backing Huffman's campaign for the state legislature.

By this point, school choice was becoming Huffman's overriding priority. In Lima, he participated in a standing gin-rummy game with the Reverend David Ross, a local Catholic priest, and Leo Hawk, the owner of a metal-forming company, who, in Ross's recollection, repeatedly pressed Huffman on the issue. "Leo Hawk was very influential in terms of trying to inculcate him with 'Let the parents decide where to spend their tax dollars,' " Ross told me. "Leo was very forceful in those gatherings." (Hawk could not be reached for comment.)

During Huffman's first four years in the legislature, the governor was a Democrat, and the focus was on protecting existing vouchers. But after the Republican John Kasich took office, in 2011, Huffman proposed a significant expansion: making vouchers available to middle-class Ohio families, too, regardless of whether they were in a failing district. "This is starting down the path of looking at funding education in a fundamentally different way," he said.

The proposal met with impassioned resistance. Opponents pointed to a report in the *Plain Dealer* which showed that voucher students had performed worse than students at the public schools that they would have attended. Among the critics were public-school administrators in Lima, where hundreds of students were already receiving vouchers because a few local schools were rated as failing. The exodus of students resulted in a loss of hundreds of thousands of dollars in state revenue. As Lima's school superintendent at the time, Karel Oxley, explained to me: even if a class lost students, the school still had to pay for their classroom and teacher. To complicate matters, the students who left tended to be motivated kids from stable families, while special-needs students stayed. This made it harder for public schools to improve their poor test scores. "You have to have your A-team to help the school be as good as possible, but the A-team moves over to the other school," Oxley, who also served as president of the state superintendents' association, said. "It's almost impossible to catch up."

Oxley is herself Catholic, and consults for a Catholic school in retirement, but she testified against vouchers at a committee hearing around this time. She recalled that Huffman was adamant. “There was nothing I could have said that would have allowed him to see that he might be stripping resources from the greater community,” she told me. “He said, ‘You pay taxes, I pay taxes. Why can’t my taxes go toward my children’s school?’ I said, ‘Because you chose that private school.’ He said, ‘That doesn’t make sense, Karel. My taxes should pay for my child’s education.’ ” (Huffman did not respond to requests for comment.)

Huffman settled for a partial victory: in 2013, the state allowed EdChoice vouchers for families with incomes up to twice the poverty line in any district. It was a step forward, but Huffman wanted the program to be available to wealthier families, and it would take another ally to help him realize his full ambition.

Phil Burress was always candid about what had brought him to Citizens for Community Values: he was a former pornography addict. Burress had fought the addiction from the age of fourteen, until he finally swore it off, at thirty-eight. “I became a Christian that day,” he told me. From then on, he said, he was a “better father and husband” and “started speaking out about things that are wrong.” His background gave him insight into the enemy. “You have to look at your communities through the eyes of a pornographer and stay ahead of them,” he once told reporters.

Burress, a former organizer with the Brotherhood of Railway and Airline Clerks, joined Citizens for Community Values in 1983. By then, the organization, which started as a Cincinnati prayer group, had devoted itself to fighting pornography and strip clubs, including various enterprises belonging to Larry Flynt, who launched his Hustler brand in Ohio. In 1990, it gained national prominence by leading the opposition to an exhibit of Robert Mapplethorpe photographs at Cincinnati’s Contemporary Arts Center. Not long afterward, Burress took over as president. “We are not some radical, right-wing, fundamental bunch of Bible-thumping nuts out there yelling and screaming,” Burress said at the time. “We do our homework.”

The group grew under Burress—by 1997, it claimed to have twenty-five thousand supporters—and started taking on nationwide causes, such as pressuring hotels to stop offering pay-per-view porn. In 2004, it led a successful petition drive for an amendment banning same-sex marriage in Ohio, a factor in George W. Bush's narrow win over John Kerry there. "I was thinking, No way we can get that many signatures," Lori Viars, a conservative activist in the Cincinnati exurbs, told me. "But we ended up doing it."

The victory attracted more funding, which the group used to hire full-time lobbyists in Columbus. Its top issues were abortion, same-sex marriage, gay rights, and, increasingly, school choice. Though the members were mostly evangelical, not Catholic, they shared the conviction that the public should pay for kids to attend religious schools. Still, Burress told me, the group struggled to persuade legislators to expand voucher access. "We could not get any traction whatsoever," he said. What changed matters was "electing the right people to office."

In 2017, Matt Huffman arrived in the state Senate. He had served the maximum eight years in the House and, like many other Ohio legislators, simply ran for the other chamber. In the Senate, school choice remained his primary cause. That year, he sponsored a bill to expand eligibility for vouchers to families that made as much as four times the poverty level. Catholic leaders were thrilled. "I don't think I've ever seen a legislator who did more for school choice," a former employee of the Catholic Conference of Ohio, the Church's public-policy arm, said. "He's just been a rock."

Huffman still faced resistance from public-school officials, but he now had influential assistance from Citizens for Community Values. In 2016, Burress was succeeded by a new director, Aaron Baer, who signalled a more expansive mission. Baer was a twenty-nine-year-old graduate of Ohio University, a hip-hop enthusiast raised by a single parent. "This is a Christian conservative movement for the next generation," he told the *Dispatch*. "We talk about poverty, human trafficking, opioids, while still talking about marriage." The organization moved its headquarters to Columbus and gave itself a forthright new name: the Center for Christian

Virtue. Burress welcomed the change. “I was glad to see them admit that without God we’re nothing,” he told me.

Baer and Huffman were unlikely allies. Huffman liked to do impersonations and had a profane streak; he was once forced to apologize for making an off-color joke at an office party. But on vouchers they were effective partners, with Baer far more willing to advocate in public than the bishops were. In the next couple of years, Baer fought to get the state to define “failing” schools as broadly as possible, and called out suburban districts, many of which opposed vouchers, when they resisted accepting students from struggling city schools.

By early 2020, Huffman was still trying to make the case for a major voucher expansion. That January, he met with a few dozen public-school officials in western Ohio. Craig Kupferberg, the superintendent for Allen County, which includes Lima, told me that he’d raised his hand and asked Huffman, “Have you put anything in the bill to stop the David Dukes of the world from starting up their own private schools and having our tax dollars fund their hateful ideology?” Kupferberg recalled that Huffman had looked at him “like I was from outer space” and said, “What stops homeschooling parents from doing any of that?” (Never mind that vouchers weren’t going to homeschooling families.) Then Huffman embarked on a lengthy complaint about how many people viewed Catholicism as a cult.

Huffman’s proposal stalled again that term. But, two months later, the pandemic arrived and schools closed. After nearly a year, about a third of Ohio’s six hundred and nine districts still hadn’t returned to full in-person instruction. The holdouts included many of the largest districts, Cleveland and Columbus among them.

The state’s parochial schools, in contrast, had mostly reopened after a few months. The Catholic Conference of Ohio highlighted students’ educational gains in the legislature. “A lot of legislators appreciated what we did for children, because a lot of legislators were frustrated, too,” the former conference employee said. “We were sort of a beacon in the *Covid* era.” It helped proponents that many legislators had their own children in Catholic schools. Although Catholics account for only about seventeen per cent of

the state's population, they constitute more than half of the Senate and a third of the House.

As the pandemic wore on, school closures inspired similar outrage in other states. They "sparked a parent revolution, because families saw that school systems didn't care about them all that much," Corey DeAngelis, a leading voucher proponent, said on "The Megyn Kelly Show," last May. "This is the silver lining of the pandemic."

Many parents were alarmed by virtual instruction. It was not just that lessons conducted by Zoom seemed frustratingly inadequate; they also offered a glimpse of what their children were being taught, which in some families caused consternation over a perceived progressive agenda. Viars, the Cincinnati-area activist, noticed a surge of interest in Christian schools. "The books being pushed on these little kids were so objectionable," she said. "It was really sexually explicit material for little kids. We heard that a lot: 'No, these kids should not be seeing any of this.' "

Cartoon by Liza Donnelly

In May, 2021, two Republican representatives in Ohio introduced a "backpack bill," which would give every family voucher money to spend as they saw fit: seventy-five hundred dollars for each high-school student and fifty-five hundred for each younger one. At a press conference announcing the bill, Baer stood beside its sponsors. "In the pandemic, we saw the need to have innovative and different learning environments," he said. "You had some families who, because their local public schools decided not to open

for in-person education, they were forced into an online environment that wasn't ideal for them."

The bill went a step further than Huffman had before; whereas he had pushed for vouchers for all but the wealthiest families, the backpack bill included everyone. It was a bold move, but proponents had a new advantage: earlier that year, Huffman's Republican colleagues had elected him president of the Senate. In that role, not only was he able to push for vouchers—he could also block efforts to reform Ohio's redistricting system, which had produced maps heavily slanted toward the G.O.P. By 2022, the Senate had twenty-five Republicans and eight Democrats; the House was split sixty-four to thirty-five. "We can kind of do what we want," Huffman told the *Dispatch*.

Yet Huffman and his allies decided not to advance the backpack bill through regular legislative channels, which would require stand-alone votes in both chambers. Opposition lingered, even within their own party: some rural Republicans were conscious that there were few private schools in their districts, and so their constituents' tax dollars would go toward vouchers used mostly by wealthy suburbanites. And, if more private schools did open in rural areas, that would drain enrollment from public schools that often served as centers of the community.

Instead, Huffman and his counterparts used a maneuver that would have been familiar to George Voinovich: they slipped an expansion of vouchers into the budget, a twelve-hundred-page document that they sent to Governor Mike DeWine just before the deadline. Families with incomes of up to four hundred and fifty per cent of the poverty level would qualify for full payments: $8,407 for high-school students and $6,165 for younger ones. These sums came close to covering tuition at many Catholic schools, and far exceeded what many public districts received in per-capita funds from the state. Even families making more than that income threshold, which was $135,000 for a family of four, would qualify for some funding. "Every student in Ohio will be eligible for a scholarship worth at least ten per cent of the maximum scholarship, regardless of income," Huffman's office said.

More than thirty years after Voinovich and the bishops proposed vouchers as a solution for underprivileged children in a single city, public subsidies for private-school tuition were now universal in Ohio, covering tens of thousands of families. “We’re going to have the money to pay for it,” Huffman said afterward. “I hope more people take advantage of that if they want to.”

C. J. Prentiss died last April, at eighty-two. She had spent her retirement with Charney in a cottage on Lake Erie, in Ashtabula County. In her final years, declining health kept her from engaging much in the battle over public education. But she did have a confrontation with Huffman when she returned to Columbus for a Senate reunion in 2022. Several speakers had been chosen for the event, and when Prentiss saw that they were all white she asked Huffman about it. According to Charney, Huffman responded that he didn’t have enough time to line up others. “Don’t lie to me,” Prentiss said, and walked away.

That same year, a coalition of school districts, now numbering more than two hundred, filed suit against the voucher expansion. The suit alleged that the program exacerbated racial segregation, by essentially allowing private schools to select their own students. (Ninety per cent of the new voucher recipients are white, in a state where only about two-thirds of students are.) The suit also alleged that the vouchers violated two principles of the state constitution: a bar against religious control of public-school funds and a promise of an adequate education for all. A judge denied the state’s motion to dismiss the case; a trial is expected in the coming months.

Among the districts that joined the suit is the one in Lima, Huffman’s home town. Virtually all the students enrolled in Catholic schools there now receive vouchers. Enrollment at these and other parochial schools has not increased dramatically; as is true across the state, they have limited capacity, so they accept only those students they prefer. This undermines the narrative that vouchers allow families to escape their public school. But public schools still suffer. Kupferberg, the superintendent, estimates that in his county the voucher expansion is costing schools millions of dollars a year. Federal pandemic-relief aid has helped mitigate the damage, but that is coming to an end. “We’re starting to feel the impact,” Kupferberg said.

Meanwhile, some private schools are raising tuition, knowing that vouchers allow families to pay more. In Centerville, south of Columbus, the principal of Incarnation Catholic School told parents last year that it would no longer offer a discount for families that had multiple students enrolled there. “Our parishioner tuition rate is nowhere near the true cost to educate,” she wrote. “This increased revenue will allow us to increase teacher and staff salaries, address deferred maintenance, and hire additional staff.”

Huffman and his allies are pushing for more. Huffman (who has now moved back to the House, and was recently elected speaker) inserted funding for new construction at private schools into the last state budget, with an eye toward creating private-school options in rural areas. Also on the table is legislation to create education-savings accounts for families with children in unregulated private schools that now can’t receive vouchers.

For these coming fights, the Center for Christian Virtue is stronger than ever. The organization has assembled a network of dozens of religious schools, which pay the center five dollars per enrolled student, up to three thousand dollars per school, to lobby on their behalf. In effect, the state’s religious schools can now use some of the public money they receive to advocate for the flow of funding to increase.

Between 2020 and 2022, the center’s revenue more than tripled, to $4.2 million. It used some of the money to purchase two buildings opposite the statehouse—one previously owned by the *Dispatch*—for a total of $2.35 million, giving it space to accommodate a staff that has grown to twenty. (The Center for Christian Virtue did not respond to a request for comment.)

In early October, the center held a policy conference, called the Essential Summit, at the Greater Columbus Convention Center. A main topic of discussion was Christian education, with sessions led by the executive director of the Center for Biblical Integration at Liberty University, the college founded by the Reverend Jerry Falwell. One session would address the question “How should we plan for teaching knowing that humans are inherently corrupt?” Another asked, “Why do Christian educators have the most dignifying approach to all humans?”

Huffman was slated to join a discussion with the president of Hillsdale College, a small Christian school in Michigan that has become a powerful incubator of conservativism. Also in attendance was Kevin Roberts, the president of the Heritage Foundation, which produced the policy blueprint for the second Trump Administration. The plan, called Project 2025, includes a strong endorsement of vouchers, and Roberts's presence was an affirmation of Ohio's role as a model for the school-choice movement. In Florida, the number of voucher recipients approached half a million this school year, up seventy-four per cent. (The state distributes the same voucher—about eight thousand dollars—regardless of income.) In Texas, Governor Greg Abbott helped to defeat nearly a dozen anti-voucher Republicans in state legislative primaries last year. He had ten million dollars in campaign funding from Jeff Yass, a Pennsylvania hedge-fund billionaire who has made expanding vouchers his central policy goal.

At the convention center, conference staff turned me away, even though I had paid to register. I hung around as attendees emerged from the morning session, their tote bags filled with brochures for Christian schools, investing advice, and health coverage. Many of the event's discussions were aimed at religious schools that were now supported with public funds. But, as I was about to approach Roberts, security guards blocked the path and told me to leave. ♦

Alec MacGillis, a reporter for ProPublica, is the author of "Fulfillment: America in the Shadow of Amazon."

Shouts & Murmurs

- **Welcome to Our First/Final Book Club**
  By Zoe Pearl | Since reading isn’t our strong suit, let’s skip talking about the book that was recommended by a hot movie star and just eat brunch.

Shouts & Murmurs

Welcome to Our First/Final Book Club

By Zoe Pearl

January 13, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

Thank you, everyone, for coming to our first/final book-club meeting. Apologies for how long it's taken us to settle on a date, but in between work, kids, and the pretense of joining adult recreational sports leagues, it seems that we all have incredibly busy schedules. After months of deliberation and hundreds of messages in the group chat, the third Tuesday of the month, from 4:27 *P.M.* to 5:36 *P.M.* (non-gibbous moon), seems to be the only time that works for everyone.

Despite the hours of our lives lost to logistical planning, I'm so glad we're doing this book club and strengthening our bonds as friends by convening monthly to enrich our minds. Books are so great. They're like watching a movie with subtitles, except Billie Eilish doesn't record an original song for them, and there are no hot people to look at, unless you want to go through the effort of imagining them in your brain.

I'm particularly excited for us to discuss this month's inaugural/terminal book. A hot person who is in movies—which, as we have established, are like books that went to the gym and got buff—recommended this book, and

I implicitly trust anyone in the public eye with her own tequila brand! Plus, the book has a little silver badge on it, so you know we're about to dig into a literary prize hog.

I feel like I've been talking a lot. Does anyone want to jump in and share what they thought of this month's read, or enumerate its various themes? No? O.K., I'll be honest. I've had a pretty busy month—what with trying to find a new coffee table on Facebook Marketplace and interminably reckoning with my own mortality—and did not get a chance to read the book, so maybe I shouldn't be the one to lead the discussion. Maybe someone else who read the book could—

Oh, O.K. None of us read the book? Well, at least we're all on the same page! Ha-ha, book-club humor. I'm sure we can cobble together some sort of discussion. Danielle told me that she skimmed the Wikipedia page before falling down a rabbit hole of unsolved air-traffic accidents. And Sasha listened to an audio recording of an entirely different book, one that was actually less a story and more a series of loosely related smut scenes featuring a tortured but deeply empathetic tatted-up centaur with the stamina of a stallion and the emotional intelligence of a man. It was written by a middle-aged woman? Interesting. And, Janine . . . you thought this was just a brunch? Read the group chat for once, Janine! Though clearly reading isn't one of our strong suits, and, now that you mention brunch, there is a frittata place I've been wanting to try.

No, wait. I think we're getting off topic here, because the topic is books. Books are awesome. They're like scrolling mindlessly on your phone, except instead of spending two hours in a dissociative state you keep reading the same sentence over and over again because you actually have to pay attention to the words or you'll forget what's happening. Maybe we should table this discussion for now, and try again next month, when we'll inevitably make a few superficial attempts at rescheduling before allowing our book club to die a quiet death, and redirecting the group chat to more realistic goals, like finally planning that girls' trip to Cancún. ♦

Zoe Pearl has contributed humor writing to The New Yorker since 2017.

Fiction

- **“Ming”**
  By Han Ong | He has won the lottery of fellowships—think of it that way and he’ll never be bothered about it again.

Fiction

Ming

By Han Ong

January 12, 2025

Illustration by Haley Jiang

Thadeus had never offered to take Johnny Mac out for a meal before. This is new, Johnny Mac says, grinning. For twenty-five years, Johnny Mac worked as a tenant-rights lawyer. He is a fount of varied and surprising knowledge.

Thadeus orders a burger, fries, and a Coke, just like Johnny Mac.

Remember around 2015, 2016, when I was poet-in-residence at N.Y.U. Langone? Thadeus asks. The cancer ward. A section of the cancer ward.

Johnny Mac smiles. Not firsthand, but I've heard from the others. This is Thad with the hundred and one stories about cancer!

What others? Who've you been talking to?

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

Ed? Johnny Mac says. Lidell?

Ed is dead now—has been dead for three years. Lidell, who knows where he is. He disappeared from the meetings around 2018. Rumor has it that he took classes in coding and is now working for Google out in California.

What could they have said? I never told them much.

They were just wording-to-the-wise, since you're not a ray of sunshine, even without cancer—*Don't let Thad bring up the cancer ward*. So what happened in '15, '16?

Thadeus ignores this news about his unwelcome talk. I'm getting a Ming vase. I'm *supposed* to be getting a Ming vase.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Han Ong read "Ming."

Johnny Mac understands that Thadeus has skipped some steps in the story. Good on you, he says experimentally. Not really my style, but great, I guess?

I think you missed the part about the Ming vase.

My dentist has two in his reception room? Then Johnny Mac, with a changed look in his eyes: You're telling me . . . ?

Yup, Thadeus says. It's the real deal. You might know people, right?

Appraisers?

Lawyers whose field of specialty is inheritance tax. Plus, yes, appraisers.

Johnny Mac has put down his burger. Taxes would be the estate's responsibility. Your concern should be insuring the vase.

O.K. At any rate, I don't want to just get someone off Google.

Of course not. So backtrack a little. How is this related to the cancer ward?

My job was to talk to patients who were willing to talk to me, and to write poems, a book, about my year in the cancer ward. I made a friend of this guest professor of Arabic studies at N.Y.U. He was having nodules removed from his colon. Mostly, we talked about poetry. It helped that Philip Levine was a favorite of both of ours. Did I say we were friends? I wouldn't even go that far. He was in his seventies, from another time and place—Egypt. Went to Berkeley for his master's, then his Ph.D. His family had died, or he'd let the connections die. I wouldn't say that our talks were formal, but almost. Courtly. I knew he was wealthy because he always had a tea service brought to him by an old Iranian butler around two in the afternoon. He stayed a couple of weeks, and each afternoon the tea was different. Persimmon. Elderflower. Chrysanthemum. An aesthete and a—what do you call someone used to good living? Fuck. Now I'm not gonna be happy until I think of the word.

Johnny Mac, intervening: *Anyway* . . . He knows how Thadeus can get. Obsessive-compulsive, in surprising ways.

Right, anyway. He passed six months ago? And I was just contacted by the estate lawyer. From an inside pocket of his jacket, he takes a sheaf of printouts.

Johnny Mac examines them. Whistles. But what does he know from Ming vases? From vases, period? Is that a dragon? he says. Superfluously, because it’s breathing fire from its nostrils.

I did a little research, and the important thing is the number of claws on the dragon. Only the imperial court was allowed to represent a dragon with five claws. If you were a commoner, you had to make do with three.

Cartoon by Ben Chase

What are you saying?

If that’s a vase from the imperial court, then the payday is so much bigger.

Johnny Mac rests the papers next to his plate. There is no family?

I don’t know. A page of the will with the relevant clause was e-mailed to me. So I’m privy to only partial information.

Because if there’s a family—that’s where the trouble will come from.

Thadeus is no fool. He harbors the same fear. But still he asks, What trouble?

A Ming vase—and you get it just like that? You’re a not-even-friend. What family member is going to allow you to get away with a Ming vase? What

does the clause in the will say?

To Poet 1, I leave my Ming, located on the third shelf of the central bookcase in the library of my home in Whittier, California.

Poet 1? Johnny Mac smiles. This is getting interesting.

There is a notebook with references, where I'm identified as Poet 1.

So there are Poets 2, 3, 4?

Thadeus says he can't be sure, but if there's a Poet 1 it must follow that there's a Poet 2, at least.

And you have a copy of the page in the notebook that identifies you as Poet 1?

They're sending it. Any day now.

How long did they say the whole process is going to take?

Two weeks and I get the vase. Thadeus waits the slightest of beats before smiling. If there's no family.

Two days later, a correction is e-mailed. He is not, after all, Poet 1. A scan of the page in the notebook, uncreased, shows him to be Poet 2. And Poet 2 gets not the Ming vase but a celadon cup, also Chinese. A green object instead of a blue-and-white one. But what kind of green is it? Not the green of a traffic light. Nor the green of a bell pepper. This is what Thadeus loves: a test of his store of poetic similes, even if, these days, his poetry-writing is notional. Also, he loves asking questions: What does the color signify?

Farouk el-Masry, formerly of the Institute of Arabic Studies of America, formerly of Whittier College and N.Y.U., loved two things in addition to Arabic studies (although, it occurs to Thadeus, love may not have entered into el-Masry's relationship with Arabic studies): poetry and Chinese antiquities, which he'd started collecting when he worked for a dealer in Chinese art and antiquities, in San Francisco, to pay for his college-related expenses. With this older Chinese man, he travelled all over the United

States, visiting collectors who had fallen on hard times and were looking to sell their most valuable pieces through private channels; he was also taken to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the mainland, at a time when the Chinese were indifferent to the trove of ancient treasures gathering dust on the shelves of families and institutions. All this Thadeus learned while sitting at the patient's bedside. As tea was poured, blown on, then sipped, gingerly. El-Masry never interfered with how Thadeus held the cup or raised it to his lips. In hindsight, Thadeus is sure that there was an inadvertent flouting of etiquette on his part. The Egyptian's frequent smiles must have been a way of suppressing instruction.

As for poetry, el-Masry's taste ran to the less rarefied, with the aforementioned Philip Levine and his valorization of the working class as the epitome of the form.

So here's the kicker: the celadon cup that el-Masry has bequeathed to Poet 2, notwithstanding its much humbler appearance (and its tiny size), could be more valuable than the Ming vase.

Thadeus is careful not to communicate disappointment to the estate lawyer.

Poet 1 is Yasir al-Hadid. Who is Yasir al-Hadid? He is, it seems, the resident professor of poetry at the University of Cairo.

Google turns up one of his poems:

> In this world
> we are briefly together
> circling a finger of eternity
> before threading
> the eye of a thousand markets.

Google Images shows a young man with a head of enviable black curls (unlike the head of fifty-one-year-old Thadeus Wong).

Was he one of el-Masry's lovers? *The* one?

El-Masry had revealed nothing about his sexuality, and he held back from speaking of Cairo. He kept insisting that that part of his life was over. It had

been years since he'd made a return trip. His school friends were dead or as good as, having slipped into staid lives that made his own look willful and mysterious. Relatives—no mention. No mother or father, brothers or sisters. No cousins, aunts, uncles. He spoke of teachers, however, a handful of kind elders who had encouraged his book learning when he was a merchant's son with only the barest inkling of another way of life. He left for the West Coast of the United States, where he knew no one, planning to keep his head down for the four-plus years of his studies, then return to Cairo, where his new degrees would open doors to inner circles. The line established by his father and his father's father ended where he stood, a new pinpoint on an old map.

Berkeley, San Francisco—in light of the fact that el-Masry had no children, didn't bring up a wife, an ex-wife, or a girlfriend, was the choice of his first American home telling? The epicenter of gay life in America. Sexual freedom and experimentation. He was old enough to have lived through the height of the *AIDS* crisis, in one of its tragic centers. Perhaps this had contributed to his discretion?

Is there a Poet 3? If there is, he or she must exist on a different page.

Thadeus risks an e-mail to the estate administrator: Does Mr. el-Masry have an extensive collection of Chinese antiquities?

He receives a reply within the hour: Are you an expert?

No, asking out of curiosity.

Yes, comes the answer. Maybe three shelves full? Total of thirty pieces. Some very valuable—like your cup. Everything other than the Ming vase and your cup he's donating to the Asian Art Museum in Pasadena. He was, you may not be surprised to hear, very organized. So the curator has already come to take a look at what the museum is getting. By the way, you may receive an e-mail from him. To ask you to donate the cup to the Farouk el-Masry Collection. Any other questions?

No. Thank you so much for your time.

Like I said, you should receive the cup in ten days or so. Do make sure to be at home when they deliver.

One other question: Would it be O.K. to sell it? I mean, right away?

The cup will belong to you. My advice is to get insurance coverage for it while it remains in your possession. Otherwise, it is free for you to do with as you please. I hope you are happy with it, whatever you decide.

A world separates Ninth Avenue and Tenth in Chelsea. On Tenth is Thadeus's entire youth: the massive dance warehouses where he spent his poetry-gig and temp earnings, their ambisexual, multi-pharmaceutical denizens barely ambulatory.

Walking down Ninth one beautiful spring day, he had discovered St. Augustine's. By its front steps, he read an announcement for an upcoming sermon: "God's Love Embraces All." Below that announcement was another one, directing those who were interested to the basement of the building, where A.A. meetings were held every Tuesday and Friday night. There, he'd met Johnny Mac, Ed, Lidell. For convenience, St. Augustine's could be bettered—St. Peter's stands around the corner from his apartment, on the Upper West Side, and it also hosts meetings, in an adjacent building used for community engagement. But ultimately he didn't want to be a neighborhood familiar to his A.A. brethren.

Sometimes he seeks out other venues, basking in the comfort of a crowd of strangers, but Johnny Mac is his sponsor and St. Augustine's is Johnny Mac's redoubt.

Rita is one of the meetings' older members. Diabetic, needing a cane. Thadeus hates to say it, but when Rita speaks he has learned to tune her out, because she has a long story of parental absence and abuse that can get monotonous. If Rita has ever known joy, she doesn't admit to it. These days, her talk is of ungrateful children—yes, she was on drugs during their formative years, but can't they see that she's changed, how hard she's trying?

When she's done, Toto takes the baton. Hello, my name is Toto, and I'm an alcoholic.

Hello, Toto.

I am two hundred and six days sober. He is applauded. Toto is a longtime resident of the projects south of St. Augustine's. He works as a custodian at a nearby private school. Toto had been a janitor for the public-school system for thirty years, and the day he announced his big-time upgrade to the new institution there was much congratulating and backslapping. Now he talks about the culture of drinking among the wealthy male students, who meet on the High Line after class and knock back paper-bagged beers. He is offered beer sometimes. He refuses, moves along. Some days, he finds his refusal wobbling. Beer was his addiction of choice. At his worst, he would consume a six-pack in one sitting, before going back to the bodega for another, then another. Now his liver has been affected, and he's on medication for that, plus medication to treat the side effects of his liver medication. There is humor in his voice—at least he's earning more than he's ever earned before, with his new employer paying into his retirement fund, which he vows not to collect until he's at least seventy years old, if his liver holds out!

Hello, my name is Thad, and I'm an alcoholic.

Hello, Thad.

I don't know if this is something to raise here—

We welcome all kinds of contributions, the leader, Jeremy, says.

"I have you down for three nights and a lifetime of promotional e-mails."

Cartoon by Joseph Dottino and Alex Pearson

I’m going to inherit a little bit of money soon, Thadeus says. He’s not exactly lying: he sees the cup as a mere object of getting and spending. He waits for an interjection, humorous or playful-envious, which he doesn’t receive. I don’t think it’s going to be much. (Now he is lying.) But I’m worried that . . .

You’re worried that . . . , Jeremy says, encouraging him.

That once I have the resources, I’m going to fall back into my old ways. He is careful not to engage Johnny Mac’s gaze.

Are you saying that what drove you to drinking before was money?

No. Thadeus shakes his head.

So why worry now?

A drink to celebrate, to thank my benefactor, and before you know it . . .

There are other ways to celebrate and give thanks, Jeremy says.

Tell you what, says Chavez, a relative newcomer, who’s been attending for three months. Why don’t you take us all out for a drink when your money comes in?

Everyone laughs. And now that the expected levity has come, Thadeus feels oddly less at ease. But he’s still quick on the draw. Do I have your permission, Jeremy? he says, and that makes those so inclined laugh even more.

Rita says, Must have been someone you were close to, giving you that gift.

Yes is all he says. But something in Rita’s voice—a sagelike downbeat, an oracular mournfulness—makes him consider once more the strangeness of the situation. Ultimately, what was he to Farouk el-Masry that the man—a not quite friend—should leave him with this life-changing object?

El-Masry had been a handsome man, having kept a full head of hair and a trim physique. It had not been difficult to flirt with him, by paying close attention to what he said, and with lame jokes. Thadeus's conversations with him were not markedly different from those interactions with the other patients. He had to seduce these weary, guarded souls. To open each up so that, in the midst of existential fear, they could still put a little pollen of story into his notebook, which he carried from bedside to bedside almost as a protective talisman, and as a physical emblem of his profession.

I also keep a notebook, el-Masry had said once, smiling. Notebooks.

What do you write in them? Thadeus asked.

Notes to myself. Some lines that, if I died suddenly and hadn't told anyone about them, could be mistaken for poetry.

You're saying they're not?

What I write down always refers to something—in my life, in my thoughts. So my intention is never poetic.

Do you have one of these notebooks here with you?

I brought only one with me to New York, and it's in the drawer of the desk in my apartment. I can tell you the last line I wrote in it. Just two words: *Possible cancer?* I suppose, if you were so inclined, you could consider that a form of poetry.

What kind of life had el-Masry lived—in which small encounters such as those between him and Thadeus became fraught with meaning, and grateful acknowledgment was offered through the posthumous bequeathing of goods that in a normal life would have been left to family near and far, to true friends?

Odd and, yet, not so odd. These quick attachments—a writer's life is full of them. As for the gifts, though in this case extravagant, aren't those part of a writer's life as well? The fellowships that have provided so much of Thadeus's livelihood—what are they but a reliance on the good will of

strangers? With the celadon cup, he has won the lottery of fellowships—think of it that way and he'll never be bothered about it again.

The appraiser is from Hong Kong and has been living in New York for the past eight years.

He flips the cup upside down.

You have something special here, Alberto Lim-Chan finally pronounces.

Not knowing whether to begin with questions or to express his relief, Thadeus remains silent.

I believe what we're looking at is of equal or even greater value than the specimen held in the Farraday Collection at the British Museum.

If Alberto Lim-Chan is expecting a response, he is again frustrated.

Not that you need me to reiterate my bona fides every few seconds, he says, but understandably ours is an anxious profession, and given what we have here—a nod at the cup—I am going to try my best to impress you. Before you leave today, I want you to understand that I am the man most qualified for the job. For one, I speak Chinese. Even better, I *think* Chinese, I *know* the Chinese. And the buyer who will pay the highest price for this cup—once I authenticate it—is a Chinese national. Recent history tells us this. Patriotism, nationalism—a wealthy Chinese person wants to be seen to be enriching the nation with his expenditures. By bringing back to the fold a lost treasure from the storied past. A storied treasure from the lost past. Suddenly, with nearly all China's ancient sites trammelled by the rush to modernization, the Chinese have grown nostalgic for their history. Alberto Lim-Chan laughs. He's arrogant, his narration orotund, to say the least, but instead of being alienated Thadeus feels himself drawn to the shaved-headed dealer, a man, he's noticing not for the first time, handsome enough to be a news anchor or a movie star.

The first time Johnny Mac sees the cup, it's on a circular table at the center of Thadeus's living room, surrounded by a pile of books, a stack of papers, a vase of dried flowers, and several defunct laptops—the latest additions to a lifetime's worth of detritus. The apartment is very neat; the tower of books

on the round table has spines so exactly aligned that the whole thing resembles a sculpture. Clean, however, is another matter—dust bunnies proliferate around the feet of a couple of bookcases, and dirt and grit line the bottom edges of the front door and the bathroom door.

In their five years of knowing each other, this is the first time that Johnny Mac has been invited over to Thadeus's apartment—though that, apparently, had not been enough to move Thadeus's housekeeping hand. How long have you been here? Johnny Mac asks.

Twenty-one years, Thadeus says.

Finally, Johnny Mac moves to the table. Around the cup is a ring of open space.

It's Thadeus who has to encourage his friend to pick it up. Go ahead, he says, but Johnny Mac still says, May I?

It's the most insubstantial piece, the compelling green (darker than a scallion and lighter than a string bean—he's still trying to find an exact analogy) broken up into tiny cells by a crackle in the glaze, which Thadeus has learned is called crazing.

They haven't even discussed the object's value, but Johnny Mac cannot bear to hold it any longer, and he returns it to the table.

Partly to dispel the uncharacteristically nonplussed expression on his friend's face, Thadeus says, with some humor, There is no family.

What do you do with it all day? Johnny Mac asks.

You mean, is it out in the open like now? No. It came in a velvet bag. I leave it in its bag, and I put the bag out of sight, too. It goes into the closet with my socks. I figure all that cushioning is the best protection.

You're going to sell it?

Yes.

Have you gone to the appraiser?

Do you want to know how much he told me I could get?

Jesus fucking Christ—it's not even me and I don't think I can bear this!

Floor is twelve million. And ceiling is, *could be*, sixty.

The poem that he wrote about Farouk el-Masry is called "Room 9J, Bed 1" (nearly all the poems in his book have titles that refer to where their subjects lay):

> He speaks
> Cairo, Cairo
> disavowing
> his hands
> waving a dismissal
> that is negated
> by the longing in his voice
> His eagle eye
> doesn't miss the
> splotch of soup near the buttons
> of my shirt the first time
> I appear bedside.
> Oh Cairo, he says,
> that is firmly in the past.
> Let's talk of poetry,
> since you are a poet.
> Tell me, what would you
> call the poem with me
> as its subject. I don't want him
> to stop telling me things
> from the other end of his life
> keep going
> a few words for his boyhood
> a few for his father
> his mother
> at once obliging my

questions and trying to put
them to an end. But suddenly
there is a dog for which
he suspends protest and fills out
Cairo, Cairo.
Alive on its feet
and running toward you
as you come home
entering the gate
of the family name.

Only now, rereading, does it occur to him that the final phrase—*entering the gate of the family name*—could be a veiled reference to death. Certainly, if he'd wanted to, he could've gone much darker. El-Masry had furnished many ambiguous lines.

"If that's a pack of foxhounds and a group of elaborately dressed people on horseback, I'm not here." Cartoon by Mark Thompson

He doesn't know if el-Masry ever read the poem. A few months after the Egyptian left Langone and New York City, the correspondence between him and Thadeus died down, and Thadeus had been too shy to update him on his new book of poetry, which, although it got a starred review in *Kirkus*, had sunk like a stone. A *small* heartbreak. Not just his, he likes to think, but also that of an encircling group of storytellers, most deceased now, who live on in his sturdy, unfussy lines. Luckily for Thadeus, he has some semi-steady work as a substitute in the public-school system. If he gets eight calls a month, he can make his rent-stabilized rent. As a rule, he doesn't like to

work more than that. Part of the reason for this is so that he won't have the extra cash to be able to follow his devils, dormant until who knows when.

He's the kind of poet who sees all the lines in his head, rearranging them or replacing one word with another without a single keystroke, keeping in memory each poem's various versions. He has this kind of mind only for his compositions. For everything else, his recollection is a sometimes overwhelming welter. Some days, he understands that "daydreaming" is a kind word for what drinking did to his brain.

He has not written anything in going on three years.

The panic that sometimes grips him when he walks by the aptly named Dive Bar, close to his apartment, the lack of charity he feels toward the students on his subbing gigs, the lack of charity or, sometimes its obverse, the overwhelming love he experiences when in the company of his co-strugglers in the meetings—these are all proper subjects for his writing, but he has not committed any of them to lines. Not yet, he tells himself. Meaning someday, though not necessarily soon.

But maybe he likes being a poet who doesn't practice? Whose years of fallowness give the lie to the idea of a *minor* heartbreak. Each passing year of silence can only expand the scope of the heartbreak. Let high drama into his life: if falling down drunk is no longer available to him, let him be extravagantly heartbroken, let him wallow in his muteness.

And now this cup, sometimes sitting in the middle of his apartment, as if it were alive and required the sunlight of his attention. Would this cup—a perfect, self-contained poem, if he were so inclined to extend his rumination—obviate the need for further poetry?

My name is Thad, and I'm an alcoholic.

Hello, Thad.

It's been nine hundred and twenty-seven days since my last drink.

Murmured approval. Intimate affirmations. No one is looking at him, but their bodies are held at attention. As if each person were contending with his

or her own private Thadeus, conjured by his nearby voice, barely above a whisper. So nearly erotic, these encounters, the mood too easily broken by an alteration in tone or volume, by a joke at the wrong time or a sudden shifting in the seats, which, in this environment, would register almost as an earthquake. Thadeus is following the news of someone's relapse, so he is speaking into a hush, a little reverent, a lot shocked. Everyone is waiting on Thadeus to boost the group energy, the group spirit.

The money that I talked about inheriting? Thadeus says. It's going to be much less than expected. Which is a relief, because, for sure, I won't be able to spend my way back into my former life.

But you told us, didn't you, that drinking and money don't go together?

I know myself, Thadeus says. How lazy I am, how lazy I get. With money, the shortcut to feeling better will always be there.

I agree, Chavez says. Didn't the philosopher say, *Know thyself*? Good on you, brother.

But we can't forever be running away from the things of life because of fear, right? The speaker is a skinny white man. A hard drinker by his teens. Down to sleeping on the streets in his twenties. He has come through all that with his youthful visage intact, his voice still high and fluty, optimistic. He adds, And money is a thing of the world that we have to live with, whether we want to or not, right?

You have inverted the usual predicament, Jeremy says to Thadeus.

How so? Johnny Mac says.

The usual situation is that more money equals good, less money equals bad. Thad is telling us that the more he has, the higher the chances of his unhappiness.

That's because he's a perverse *motherfucker*, Johnny Mac says. And everyone laughs—but it feels like a caress.

And how is the writing going? a young woman asks.

I’m . . . stewing, Thadeus says.

Stewing—is that a good word or maybe not? the young woman, who is called Rita S.—to distinguish her from the older Rita (Rita Y.)—asks.

It’s judgment-neutral, Thadeus says, smiling.

Time is the master of us all, Jeremy says, and two or three people nod.

It’s a no-brainer: above and beyond the money to be made by giving up the cup, he will no longer have to contend with things like the insurance, which was always far too adult for his mind to wrap around, and not even close to affordable for him.

But what if, as he’s becoming increasingly more sure each day, he doesn’t want to give the cup up?

For starters, how do you solve the problem of insurance? How do you reduce the object’s valuation, so as to get a correspondingly lower insurance premium, an amount that, say, four or five extra subbing days a month should cover?

You get an expert to declare that, contrary to what the estate has claimed, the object is merely a replica, or *in the school of*, and that therefore the cost of coverage should be, at most, in the low thousands.

It takes only a few minutes for Alberto Lim-Chan’s sweetness to fall away once he understands how serious Thadeus is.

But this is obscene, Alberto Lim-Chan says. You could make millions. Fuck *could. Will. Will* make millions. You and I both. Why don’t you just come out and say it? You’ve found someone else to sell it for you. What did they tell you about me? The affair? That was nothing. A momentary blip. I shouldn’t have to keep paying for a small mistake! And it has nothing to do with this part of my life. I’m good. I’m the best. You’re not going to do better. What have they promised you? Have they agreed to a cut in the commission? I’ll better it—I did not think that you would be so underhanded, to demand a discount by going behind my back. Please. I have someone lined up. He’s been a client since Hong Kong—a dozen years! I

can talk him up to *seventy*. And I know that he won't buy through another intermediary. I am like a son to him! He won't consent to a sale without my hand in it.

I want to keep the cup.

That's insane.

Not to me.

But why? Can you even afford the insurance on it?

That's what I've come to talk to you about. Then Thadeus explains what he wants from the appraiser.

My credibility—*my entire livelihood*—rests on my track record. If word of this got out, I'd be the laughingstock of the entire profession, Alberto Lim-Chan says.

But how can you be entirely sure that you're correct? I looked up the cottage industry of fakes—how close to the originals they've become. Yours is an anxious profession—you said so yourself.

I was not referring to my expertise. In that, I have total certainty.

Total? Thadeus decides to end the conversation. If you won't do it, I can find someone else who will express doubts about the cup, without threatening his credibility.

Before Thadeus crosses the threshold, Alberto Lim-Chan responds with the saddest entreaty: Tell me what I can do.

The man Thadeus finds is a white retired professor of Chinese antiquity, living in a ramshackle cottage in rural upstate New York. There is alcohol on his breath at eleven in the morning. Also, the man has a glassy aspect that suggests he's pulled back from the world since his retirement, in addition to becoming an alcoholic. A functional drunk. Because, to his credit, he takes his time looking at the cup. And your man, your original man, said that he was sure about the authenticity?

He said he’d be willing to sell it as an authentic piece.

And the papers? Let’s see them.

The provenance documents are also carefully studied. These are copies? he says.

The originals are not in the best condition, so I didn’t want to risk bringing them.

Your man here—the new appraiser puts his finger on a Chinese name on one of the transaction records, a conductor of Chinese relics from the mainland to buyers in the West during the nineteen-twenties, who had sold the cup to the man whose family sold it to Farouk el-Masry—he’s famous for having knowingly passed on some fakes to buyers in Europe. So that’s what we’ll focus on.

So you’ll attest to the insurance people that you have doubts?

I’ll do that.

Cartoon by Maddie Dai

But Alberto Lim-Chan has a last card to play. All I request is for you to see me before you make a final decision, he says. Face to face with Thadeus, he asks, Do you have the stamina to be the cup’s lifelong custodian?

Put this way, of course, the question goes right to the heart of Thadeus's sporadic qualms about adulthood.

Alberto Lim-Chan continues, Give me a time frame. Something reasonable, during which I promise I'll cover the insurance. And after which, for the right to be the cup's exclusive seller, I guarantee you an extra one million on top of your share of the sales proceeds.

When will Thadeus be ready to relinquish "living with" the cup? This odd but not unpleasant affliction that involves his need to have the teacup close by—and, occasionally, out in the open, so that he can indulge a "festival of witness"—how soon before it runs its course? His longest continuous stretch of drunkenness lasted two years, so that's the figure he gives to the appraiser.

You'll sell it in two years? Alberto Lim-Chan asks.

Yes.

I'll need you to sign a contract.

The green is transfixing. It reminds Thadeus of the urinal cakes that he used to love trying to melt with his piss in the men's room of Alice Tully Hall, where he worked as an usher for a few years. Also, the cup's sheen and hue recall the tiles of an underground swimming pool in a wealthy client's home, during Thadeus's period of employment as a private cater waiter—the years of his heaviest drinking.

At the ninety-nine-cent store, he buys several five-packs of plastic figures, made in China. Each small bag costs him a dollar-fifty, and he ends up spending around thirty dollars. The folded cardboard label that seals the tops of the packages calls these "Happy Toys." On offer is an assortment of a hundred different figures, only a tiny fraction of which are illustrated on the cardboard label. There are several young boys, some of them badly painted—white, brown, and a sort of red that might be one of the paints used in making the brown. There are four kinds of dogs—a dachshund, a poodle, a Border collie, and a German shepherd, whose head seems to be molting on one side. There are three horses, which is just the same horse painted three ways—black, brown, white. And the adults come as various professionals—

cop, nurse, priest, young man (office worker?), young woman (librarian?), construction worker, farmer, teacher (with telltale ruler in hand), male and female students (holding books), doctor, carpenter.

On the round table in Thadeus's living room, a priest looks up at a Border collie sitting atop the overturned celadon cup—a creature of springtime astride a hill, surveying the view. On the other side of the cup, a sniper, hugging the burlap tablecloth with his prone body, prepares to take out the unwitting dog. Thadeus snaps a photograph with his phone.

A young white woman and a Black boy face a green cave, which is the cup made to stand on its side, on a brace made from an unfolded paper clip, placed out of sight of the lens.

Thadeus writes a poem for the woman and child transfixed by the cave mouth.

> The word that opens this door
> does not begin with an O, so
> change the shape of your mouth.

He goes back to the ninety-nine-cent store for a flashlight, to provide better lighting when he works late into the night.

Another shot: the cup is a Jacuzzi (you can see a waterline) in which the doctor and the cop are steeping.

He posts these pictures to his Instagram account, which has zero followers. It's so that he can have someplace to store his photographs, a digital flip book.

A doctor stands atop a horse, next to a dachshund atop another horse, next to the librarian lying down on a third horse. The horses are gathered around the watering hole of the green cup. Basking in one another's company. Showing off their burdens.

A horse's head is sticking out from underneath the rim of the overturned cup, not entirely swallowed. Also, the very same fate for: the priest and the

doctor, together; the librarian, solo; and all of the kids, each one visible only as an outstretched arm peeking from beneath the upside-down cup.

A nurse is balancing the cup on her head (a Photoshop effect, instead of a practical one), like a villager hefting a basket to, or from, market. Another burden, lightly borne.

On a blank screen, he writes another poem:

> Hello, my name is Thad
> and I'm an alcoholic
> but I'm all right
> right now.

The poem comes first, unlike the one inspired by the two figures confronting the cave mouth, and to illustrate it he arrays every single figure—man, woman, child, dog, horse—in ring after concentric ring facing the cup. They stare at it with their crudely painted expressions, which evoke drunkenness —or a kind of melting adoration.

He takes a look at the photograph. There has to be a better image.

He trains the flashlight on the cup. At first, a full spotlight, and then only a fraction of the cup is illuminated, the other half of the ring of light falling on a group of the huddled figures.

Yes. Much better.

And then it's the poem's turn to be improved.

> Hello, my name is Thad
> my listeners nod
> and nod again
> grasses in the wind
> and I nod back, also grass, and I say,
> I'm all right, right now.
> This is our story.
> We are all all right,
> right now.

In this story,
green means stop.

Another year and six months to go before his two years with the cup are up. ♦

Han Ong is a playwright and a novelist. His novels are "Fixer Chao" and "The Disinherited."

The Critics

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A Critic at Large

Why Zora Neale Hurston Was Obsessed with the Jews

Her long-unpublished novel was the culmination of a years-long fascination. What does it reveal about her fraught views on civil rights?

By Louis Menand

January 13, 2025

During Hurston's lifetime, at least three major publishers passed on "The Life of Herod the Great," and after she died the manuscript was partially burned by workers cleaning out her house.Photograph by Carl Van Vechten / Carl Van Vechten Trust / Beinecke Library, Yale

Zora Neale Hurston was a philosemite. She believed that the Jews had been victims of stereotyping that started with Moses and that was promoted by the Bible and fed to children in Sunday school. Among other things, it

produced the fiction of the Eternal Jew, a type unchanged since the time of the Pharaohs.

In fact, Hurston thought, the Jews had evolved, just like everyone else. And they had come to believe, long before other people did, in liberty, individualism, and the rights that define liberal democracies. The Jews were Americans thousands of years before there was an America.

The story of the Jews was extremely important to Hurston, as important as her mission, far better known, to preserve and to celebrate the style, speech, and folklore of the African diaspora—the culture of what she called "the Negro farthest down." That mission yielded two works of cultural anthropology, "Mules and Men" (1935) and "Tell My Horse" (1938), and the novel on which her reputation is built, "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (1937).

What We're Reading

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But Hurston devoted a big portion of her literary career—which stretched from 1921, when she published her first short story in a Howard University literary magazine, to 1960, when she died—to trying to write a history of the Jews. This meant, essentially, rewriting the Bible. It was a colossal ambition, and it is striking, although maybe not surprising, how little attention the effort has received in the critical literature on Hurston, of which there are now shelves full. Between 1975, when she was "rediscovered" by Alice Walker, and 2010, more than four hundred doctoral dissertations were written on Hurston. "Their Eyes Were Watching God" has sold more than a million copies, and Oprah Winfrey produced a film adaptation. In Hurston's lifetime, the most any of her books earned in royalties was $943.75.

Hurston was a grapho-compulsive. In addition to four published novels and three works of nonfiction, which include an autobiography, "Dust Tracks on a Road" (1942), she wrote short stories, poems, plays, essays, reviews, and articles. She also staged concerts and dance performances. By the time she died, she had published more books than any Black woman in history.

And she was a tireless correspondent, possibly because for much of her life, despite three somewhat mysterious marriages, she lived alone. An excellent edition of the correspondence, edited by Carla Kaplan, contains more than five hundred letters, and, since Hurston was not shy about writing to people she had never met (she once asked Winston Churchill to contribute an introduction to one of her books; he politely declined, citing poor health), it is believed that there may be hundreds more letters still out there, no one knows where.

Like most freelance writers, she had a fairly high kill rate. Some pieces were rejected or didn't work out or for some other reason never appeared in print; her autobiography was expurgated by her publisher; and she wrote some or all of at least five novels that were turned down. Only one of these, "The Life of Herod the Great," survived in typescript—the others appear to be missing completely. "Herod" has now been published by Amistad in a volume edited by Deborah Plant, an independent scholar. Plant is also the author of a critical biography of Hurston, published in 2007, and the editor of another Hurston manuscript, "Barracoon: The Story of the Last 'Black Cargo,' " which was published in 2018.

Hurston spent something like fifteen years researching and writing "Herod." She called it her "great obsession." This was far more time than she spent on any other book project. She wrote "Their Eyes Were Watching God," for example, in seven weeks, while she was doing field work in Haiti. The "Herod" typescript was partially burned when, after Hurston's death, workers who were cleaning out her house set fire to a trunk full of papers. An acquaintance driving past saw the flames, grabbed a hose (Hurston was a famous gardener), and put out the fire.

What we have of "Herod" is therefore far from a complete work. The final chapters in the Amistad edition are fragmentary, and the book ends abruptly, ten years before Herod's death. Whether this is because those pages were

damaged by fire and water or simply because Hurston hadn't finished yet is unclear. She did write three prefaces and four introductions; Plant prints what she calls "synthesized versions" of these. In general, the editorial apparatus is fairly minimal.

Hurston's papers are housed at the University of Florida, in Gainesville, and, before this new edition, the "Herod" manuscript was read there by Hurston scholars. Their reports did not make a trip to Gainesville seem urgent. Hurston's first biographer, Robert Hemenway, wrote, "Zora's manuscript suffers from poor characterization, pedantic scholarship, and inconsistent style; the whole performance touches the heart by revealing a talent in ruins." He said it would have been "a minor work."

Hemenway was a sympathetic biographer. An even more sympathetic biographer, Valerie Boyd, refrained from critical commentary on "Herod" altogether in her book, "Wrapped in Rainbows." Virginia Lynn Moylan, in "Zora Neale Hurston's Final Decade," described the writing of "Herod," which was Hurston's chief preoccupation in those years, and even wrote something about Hurston's views on the Jews. But she, too, declined to say much about the novel itself.

"Herod" was turned down by Hurston's publisher, Scribner's, in 1955. Her editor there, Burroughs Mitchell, known mainly for being the man who rejected three novels by Zora Neale Hurston, explained that the book "does not seem to us to accomplish its intention. I mean to say that it does not vividly recreate the man and his time. . . . There is a wealth of fine material here but somehow it has failed to flow in a clear narrative stream. We think the book would prove difficult reading for the layman."

Hurston, characteristically, took this in stride. She was accustomed to adversity. Her field work was supported for a few years in the late nineteen-twenties and early thirties by a white patron and by grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, but she lived mainly on her writing. It was her good fortune to be the sort of person whom other people enjoy helping, but she disliked receiving unreciprocated gifts and did not depend on them. She took low-level jobs when she ran out of funds—she once worked as a maid—and sometimes she had to pawn her typewriter to buy food. For many

years, she lived on a houseboat. None of her books sold more than five thousand copies in her lifetime.

When Mitchell's rejection letter came, Hurston was living in Eau Gallie, a tiny town in Florida, in a one-room cabin that she rented for five dollars a week. It was a long way from the Harlem of the nineteen-twenties, where she had cut a flamboyant figure among what she liked to call (although the term was probably not her coinage) the Niggerati. But she'd been born in Alabama and had grown up in Eatonville, Florida, an all-Black town—making her one of very few members of the Harlem Renaissance who was from the American South—and she was a Floridian at heart. She was content in Eau Gallie. "Naturally, I am sorry that you found Herod the Great disappointing," she replied to Mitchell, "but do not feel concerned about the refusal upon me. I am my old self and can take it easily."

She continued working on the book. In 1958, it was turned down by another house, David McKay, the publisher of Fodor's travel guides and Ace Comics. In 1959, she wrote to Harper & Brothers to ask "if you would have any interest in the book I am laboring upon at present—a life of Herod the Great. One reason I approach you is because you will realize that any publisher who offers a life of Herod as it really was, and naturally different from the groundless legends which have been built up around his name has to have courage." Harper & Brothers was Richard Wright's publisher—as the reference to "courage" was intended to remind the recipients. But they passed on "Herod." This was Hurston's last extant letter.

It's fair to publish an unfinished book, but it feels a little unfair to judge it. Maybe what we have is not the final version. But, based on what we do have, Hurston's biographers were not wrong: her voice is missing. There is no poetry in "Herod." Instead, we are walked stiffly through the career of the man the Romans treated as the king of the client state of Judea, which he governed from 40 B.C.E. until his death, thirty-six years later—an impressive run at a time when one held on to power by preëmptively killing one's rivals, something the historical Herod was quite good at.

And that is, of course, how most people know him today. In the Gospel of Matthew, it is said that, after Herod, the King of the Jews, learned of the birth of a *new* King of the Jews, he ordered the slaughter of all male

children under two years of age in Bethlehem—the Massacre of the Innocents, a scene that became iconic in Western art. (The Herod in the Bible who beheads John the Baptist to please his stepdaughter Salome and who hands Jesus over to Pontius Pilate was Herod Antipas, Herod the Great's son. He's the bad Herod.)

"I love cardio day!"
Cartoon by Lonnie Millsap

Hurston told a friend that her interest in Herod the Great began when she learned that scholars had doubts about the story in Matthew. It is inconsistent with the account of Jesus' birth in the other Gospels, and is probably what is known as a "fulfillment citation," something inserted to validate a prophecy in the Hebrew Bible—in this case, from Jeremiah. It is also prefigured (another Biblical device) by Pharaoh's order, in Exodus, to kill all male babies born to Hebrew mothers.

So Hurston started reading ancient sources, notably the Jewish historian Josephus, who is our main source of information about Herod. (Herod was a member of the Edomites, a Semitic people forcibly converted to Judaism in the second century B.C.E.) She suddenly saw "this man I had always thought of as nothing but a mean little butcher, as a highly cultivated, Hellenized non-Jew, the handsomest man of his time, the greatest soldier of Southwest Asia, and ablest administrator, generous both of spirit and materially, 'Herod the Over-Bold,' 'Herod of the sun-like splendor.' "

This is the Herod of “Herod,” a superhero of the Levant. He excels at everything, from man-to-man combat to interior design, an impossible combination of rectitude and swagger. When Cleopatra tries to seduce him, he refuses her. He’s a married man! When he has his wife executed, as the real Herod did, his reasoning is unassailable. When Cleopatra’s lover, that dissolute sensualist Mark Antony, sizes him up for a possible same-sex hookup, he can see right away that Herod is not that type. As Hurston describes the moment, “Antony was silently appraising Herod’s masculine perfection, his large, luminous eyes and superb lashes, his muscular limbs well developed by military use. But he did not sense that Herod’s mind would be capable of persuasion.”

The whole book is written like this, in a kind of illustrated-classics prose.

> The bandit wheeled and snarled at Herod, exposing his rotting front teeth. He cursed Herod roundly and coarsely, then suddenly gripping his heavy spear, hurled it. But it was a second too late. Herod’s own spear was on the way, it hit Hezekiah fairly in the chest and pinned him to the ground. “Oh, allow me to finish him, Herod,” one of Herod’s young officers begged. “He is finished,” Herod said confidently making his way towards where Hezekiah lay. “I have been practicing that throw since I was ten years old.”

The dialogue is theatrical:

> “My weaving-women have all but finished a new robe for you, beloved son. It is the blue of the Great Sea, shot with threads of gold.”
>
> “How generous and thoughtful of you, Mother. You keep my maternal love aglow at your thoughtfulness. Allow me to embrace you before I return to that tiresome citadel.”

Or:

> “Nicolaus!” Herod cried and heartily embraced the tall, spare-built Nicolaus. “Nicolaus, my classmate and friend of my bosom!”

> “Herod, owner of the fidelity of my right hand! What brings you to Damascus? Your glorious actions are filling the world with your fame.”

Some bits are unintentionally comic:

> “Those Barbarians shall never know the feel of a single Jewish woman’s body while I am alive.”

Hurston did acquire a tremendous amount of information about eastern Mediterranean politics in the first century B.C.E. It’s not known exactly where she got it. Moylan, in “Zora Neale Hurston’s Final Decade,” says that the writer became friendly with a white woman named Sara Lee Creech, who lived in Belle Glade, Florida, and who evidently had a family library where Hurston did some of the research for “Herod.” (Creech was one of the designers of Saralee, the first mass-produced realistic Black doll; Hurston advised on the project. It was sold at Sears.)

But, as Hurston’s editor at Scribner’s complained, the deluge of unfamiliar names and places can swamp the narrative:

> Riders from the north arrived on spent steeds to report that the Parthians had themselves invaded, led by Labienus and Pacorus with a tremendous host of troops. Labienus drove into Asia Minor and took Lydia and Ionia. Pacorus in Syria soon had Antioch and Apamia. The Roman legions in Apamia had been followers of Brutus who had been taken over by Antony. . . . Simultaneously, Barzapharnes, a Parthian satrap, drove into Galilee. Decidius Saxa, Antony’s legate, was defeated. . . .

What was Hurston trying to do? Could she have been imagining a movie deal? A number of her books had been considered by studios for adaptation. Warner Bros. looked at an advance copy of “Their Eyes Were Watching God.” And, for a couple of months in 1941, she had worked as a “story consultant” for Paramount. In 1951, she wrote to her agent to ask if she had an “in” with Cecil B. DeMille, whose “Samson and Delilah” had been the top-grossing movie of 1949. “I plan to try the *LIFE OF HEROD THE GREAT*, as a drama,” she wrote, “and it needs Hollywood. It is a great story,

really, and needs to be done. The man had everything good, bad and indifferent. Handsome, dashing, a great soldier, a great statesman, a great lover. He dared everything, and usually won." She wondered whether Orson Welles, with whom she had once worked in the Harlem unit of the Federal Theatre Project, a New Deal program, and who she understood was down on his luck, might collaborate. She worried a bit about his ego.

It was, after all, the era of the big-screen sword-and-sandal epic. "Samson and Delilah" was followed by "Quo Vadis" (1951), "The Robe" (1953), "The Ten Commandments" (1956), "Ben-Hur" (1959), and "Spartacus" (1960), all huge box-office hits adapted from popular works of historical fiction—an era that came to an end in 1963, when the Elizabeth Taylor–Richard Burton "Cleopatra" failed to clear its bloated budget, nearly wiping out Twentieth Century Fox.

The adventure-story format and corny dialogue in "Herod" would have been a perfect Technicolor fit. We can almost hear Charlton Heston chewing up that line about the bodies of Jewish women. If "Herod" had been made into a movie, our judgment of it would probably be very different. We could regard the novel as basically a screenplay or a storyboard, deliberately simplified, and criticisms about poor characterization and pedantic scholarship would be beside the point.

But, as Hurston must have understood on some level, there was little chance that Hollywood would touch her book, because the key move in her revision of Biblical history was the denial of the divinity of Jesus. "Christianity," as she explained in a letter to the writer and editor Max Eastman, "was a movement totally within the Jewish people *NOT A SUDDEN AND MIRACULOUS HAPPENING AS IS TOLD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT*." Eastman was not Jewish. Cecil B. DeMille was. He was not going to direct a movie that questioned the Christ story.

Hurston's father, John, was a preacher, so she had listened to riffs on Biblical passages growing up, and she collected Black sermons in her work as a cultural anthropologist. She herself began signifying on the Bible from the beginning of her career. In 1926, she wrote a comic one-act play, recasting the story of Noah's curse of Ham—verses once popularly believed to explain the origins of Black people (although there is nothing in them

about skin color). She called her play “The First One.” In 1934, she composed a parable-like piece, “The Fire and the Cloud,” in which Moses, preparing his tomb on Mt. Nebo, has a conversation with a lizard. (It’s a little like a Geico commercial.) And her third novel, “Moses, Man of the Mountain,” published in 1939, is a rewriting of Exodus.

Exodus was important to Black people for obvious reasons: it’s a kind of civil-rights story. Martin Luther King, Jr., alluded to it in his last speech, comparing himself to Moses (“I’ve been to the mountaintop”), and many spirituals (W. E. B. Du Bois called them “sorrow songs,” which Hurston said was “tomfoolery”) adapt its language (“Let my people go”). Hurston’s novel is therefore usually read as an allegory of Emancipation, the flight from Egypt as an escape from the bondage of slavery.

This was certainly one of Hurston’s intentions. She has her Hebrew characters speak in Southern dialect, for instance, and her Moses is a conjure man, a character who draws on traditions outside the Bible, like hoodoo. But she had another intention, too. In her version of Exodus, Moses is not an Israelite. He is an Egyptian nobleman who invents monotheism and imposes it on his Hebrew slaves. “Moses did not care a fig for those Hebrew people,” she explained to one correspondent. “Moses had worked out an idea for a theocratic government, and the Hebrews were just the available laboratory material.”

In her book, the Hebrews resent Moses and the forty years in the wilderness he subjects them to. They are constantly disobeying him and subverting his authority. “Didn’t I always say we was better off in slavery than we would be wandering all over the wilderness following after some stray man that nobody don’t know nothing about?” one character complains. “I told you all a long time ago that we had enough gods in Egypt without messing with some fool religion that nobody don’t know nothing about but Moses.”

This parallels the argument of Sigmund Freud’s “Moses and Monotheism,” which, uncannily, came out the same year as Hurston’s novel. Freud, too, proposed that Moses was an Egyptian prince who invented monotheism (or stole it from Akhenaten). This was not an entirely original theory, and although Freud and Hurston could hardly have known each other’s work, they may have drawn on some of the same scholarly sources. In Freud’s

rendition of the Exodus story, the Israelites get so fed up with Moses that they kill him. Hurston doesn't go that far.

"Moses, Man of the Mountain" was a rehearsal for a chapter in a much bigger book that Hurston turned to after publishing her autobiography: a history of the Jews. The first surviving mention of this project is in a letter written in 1945 to a friend from her Harlem days, Carl Van Vechten. "I want to write the story of the 3000 years struggle of the Jewish people for democracy and the rights of man," she told him. "Beginning with Sinai, and on to the final destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman emperor Titus . . . there was one long and continuous struggle of the people against the arbitrary rule of the priesthood." The book was to be called "Under Fire and Cloud." A few years later, probably in 1947, the year she moved to Scribner's from her old publisher, Lippincott, she sent her editor a twenty-page proposal for a book called "Just Like Us." The subtitle is "An Analysis of the Hebrews and the Modern Jews as They Were and Are as Against Our Traditional Conceptions."

Hurston had expected to work with Maxwell Perkins at Scribner's. Perkins was already legendary as the editor of Hemingway and Fitzgerald, and he and Hurston met twice in New York. But he died prematurely, of pneumonia, a few months later—creating one of the great what-ifs in literary history. Perkins may have been the intended recipient of the book proposal. There is no mention of it in Hurston's correspondence with Mitchell, the editor who replaced him.

The story of the Jews, Hurston says in her pitch, "is much less a religious creed than a most important human document of social struggle and growth. . . . They were fighting and dying in swarms for the things in our own Bill of Rights thousands of years before the discovery of America, and so looked at without the veil of theology, can be said to have been the very first Americans." Her outline for the book has nine chapters, beginning with Abraham ("the hen-pecked star-gazer") and including David, Solomon, Herod, Jesus, the destruction of the Temple by the Romans, and the Jewish diaspora. It ends with a chapter called "Summing Up for the Jews and Us."

In Hurston's account, Herod and Jesus Hellenized Judaism. They transformed it from a regime of prohibitions—traditionally, there are six

hundred and thirteen Mosaic laws in the Pentateuch—into an ethics of brotherhood and equality. Their enemy was not the Romans but the rabbis. Both men were condemned by the Sanhedrin. “To say that the Jews killed Christ is an infinitely worse crime than the Crucifixion,” Hurston says. “He was executed because they loved Him, not hated Him.” Christianity grew naturally out of the Jewish experience. An immaculate conception was not necessary.

Part of the Jewish stereotype is quarrelsomeness and a tendency to question authority, but, in Hurston’s view, that is precisely what makes the Jews “like us.” It is “the talk-back characteristics of the Americans and all democracies,” as she put it. What priests called the Jews’ wickedness “merely consisted in insisting on having something to say about the disposal of their lives, irregardless of who their ruler might be, or how sacred he might consider himself.” The more you study the Jews, she wrote, “the more you realize that they were just like us, hell bent for the rights of man and brash about it.” This remarkable document has never been published, but it is the key to understanding Hurston’s “obsession” with Herod. In her interpretation of history, Herod is the hinge between Old Testament Judaism and what became Christianity.

Two things about “Just Like Us” stand out. The first is that it scarcely refers to race or gender. Hurston is not saying that she identifies with Jews as a Black person who has suffered from stereotyping and discrimination, and she is not saying that she understands them as a woman who has been subordinated in a patriarchal society. She is saying that she identifies with Jews as an American. The “us” in her title is Americans.

The second thing that stands out is how personal the document is. The brash, self-determining, self-reliant figure Hurston conjures up as the prototype of the Jew is Hurston herself, a woman who would not let others tell her how to live. What has made this personality trait complicated for contemporary readers of Hurston is that she did not mean that white people could not tell her how to live. White people were not her problem. She believed that she understood the degrees of their racism and their hypocrisy perfectly. She knew how to deal with them. The people whose guidance she resisted were the friends of Black people, the liberals. Her rabbis were the

race leaders of the N.A.A.C.P. Her Sanhedrin was the Supreme Court of the United States.

Hurston thought that Northern liberals assigned Black people a role, and she refused to play it. “I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it,” she wrote in 1928, a sentiment that she repeated throughout her life. She sometimes signed letters to white friends “Your pickaninny.” She saw no point in complaining about slavery. “Slavery,” she said, “is the price I paid for civilization.”

She regarded the N.A.A.C.P. as an organization of Northern liberals, like Du Bois, who was the editor of its journal, *The Crisis*, and Alain Locke, the Harlem Renaissance’s impresario—people who believed that, as Hurston described it, “any Negro who graduated from a white school automatically became a national leader and as such could give opinions on anything at all in which the word Negro occurred.”

Most of these self-appointed race leaders, she felt, knew nothing about the experience of Southern Blacks—the experience she had tried to teach them about in “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” a book that prominent Black writers like Locke and Richard Wright dismissed as unserious, “folklore fiction.” The N.A.A.C.P. “will remain a self-constituted dictatorship so long as it does not ask and receive a mandate from the entire Negro population of the United States,” she wrote, in an essay that remained unpublished until 2022.

As for the Supreme Court, she saw the decision in Brown v. Board of Education as a top-down order telling people how to live. “How much satisfaction can I get from a court order for somebody to associate with me who does not wish me near them?” she wrote in a letter published in the Orlando *Sentinel*. Brown was a trial balloon, she suggested: “If it goes off fairly well, a precedent has been established. Govt by fiat can replace the Constitution.” It was an opinion shared by a lot of white Southerners.

Hurston wrote the *Sentinel* letter the same week she learned that Scribner’s was rejecting the Herod book. She may have been feeling a little feisty. But the letter is not anomalous. In the nineteen-fifties, she worked on behalf of

segregationist politicians, whom she supported for other reasons, notably their anti-Communism.

Hurston was opposed to discrimination. She had Black friends and white friends. She seems to have shared the view of many whites that the races lived separately because they preferred things that way. If that was so, then why the need for the enormous stack of state and municipal laws mandating segregation?

Somehow, the fact that Jim Crow was itself a top-down, de-jure affair—Black people were not given a choice where to attend school or to sit on the bus—failed to register with Hurston. The Herod book doesn't make her attitude about segregation less myopic and self-centered. But it helps us understand a little better where it came from. ♦

Louis Menand is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His books include "The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War," released in 2021, and "The Metaphysical Club," which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for history.

Books

Briefly Noted

“Rosarita,” “Gabriel’s Moon,” “Embers of the Hands,” and “Mothers and Sons.”

January 13, 2025

Rosarita, *by Anita Desai (Scribner)*. In this hushed, exacting novel, a woman from Delhi resettles in San Miguel de Allende, where she is forced to reckon with her past by an older stranger who claims to have known her late mother. The story follows the transplant as she skeptically trails her mysterious new guide across the supposed sites of her mother’s youth in a foreign land. Throughout their journey, the past’s influence on the present grows ever more pervasive, and the woman’s failure to escape her upbringing emerges as a failure to truly know it. The more she discovers of her mother’s life, the more haunting its opacity becomes.

Gabriel's Moon, *by William Boyd (Atlantic Monthly)*. The narrator of Boyd's novel, a le Carré-esque spy thriller, is Gabriel Dax, an acclaimed travel writer and occasional political reporter. While on assignment in Léopoldville, a stroke of luck gets Dax an interview with Patrice Lumumba—the last interview the Prime Minister will ever give—after which Dax suddenly finds himself an unwitting player in the scheme to cover up Western involvement in the leader's death. Well known for his thoughtful fictional treatments of British history, Boyd combines measured twists with a trenchant reconsideration of the legacy of Cold War-era interventionism.

What We're Reading

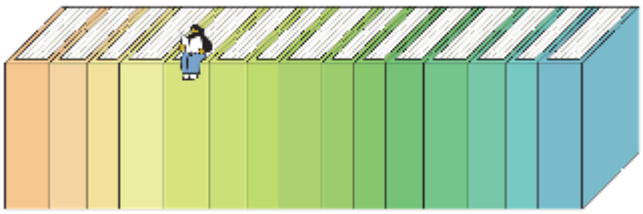

Illustration by Rose Wong

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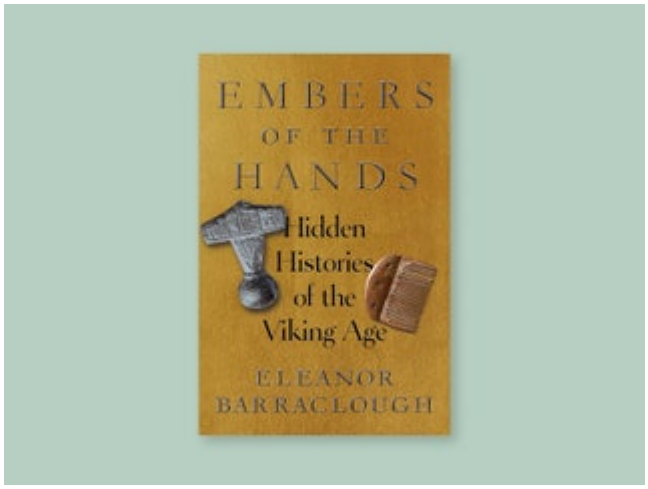
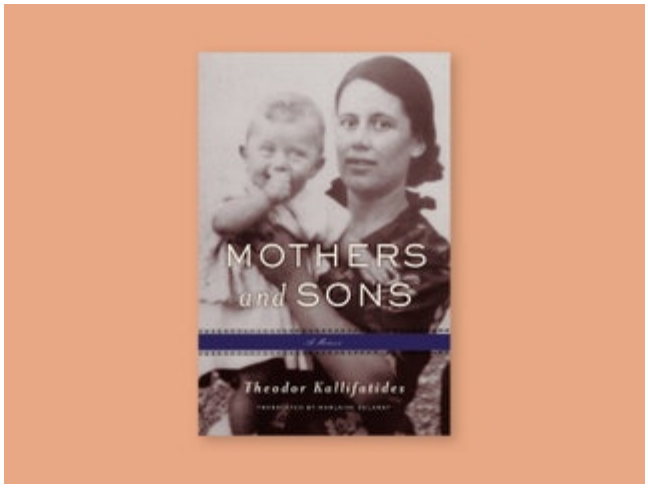


Embers of the Hands, *by Eleanor Barraclough (Norton)*. This lively history of the Viking Age—which lasted from roughly 750 to 1100 C.E.—moves beyond tales of seafaring warriors to capture everyday people: women, children, merchants, healers, walrus hunters. Given the scant evidence of these histories in the written record, Barraclough seeks them instead in archeological artifacts, from a rune stick found in the rubble of a tavern in Norway reading "*GYDA SAYS THAT YOU SHOULD GO HOME*" to an amber figurine of a swaddled baby found in Denmark. If each individual artifact reveals relatively little, the enormous array Barraclough assembles—from Scandinavia, Western Europe, Newfoundland, and trading posts as far east as present-day Russia—adds depth to the traditional portrait of Viking culture.



Mothers and Sons, *by Theodor Kallifatides, translated from the Swedish by Marlaine Delargy (Other Press)*. "When I was little I thought I would

die before my mother, according to the principle that the tree outlives its fruit”: so begins this wise and gently funny memoir, in which Kallifatides, a Greek writer who has spent his adult life in Sweden, visits his ninety-two-year-old mother in Athens. His account enfolds many characters, including his brother (“the man who dreamed of affixing windshield wipers to his TV so that he could spit at the screen when he was watching football”), but its heart is conversations between Kallifatides and his mother. “Watching your world fade away while you are still living in it isn’t easy,” Kallifatides observes, yet he praises her “gift of being able to let the small elements of joy defeat the great sorrows.”

Books

Does One Emotion Rule All Our Ethical Judgments?

When prehistoric predators abounded, the ability to perceive harm helped our ancestors survive. Some researchers wonder whether it fuels our greatest fights today.

By Elizabeth Kolbert

January 13, 2025

“If you want to know what someone sees as wrong,” the moral psychologist Kurt Gray maintains, “your best bet is to figure out what they see as harmful.”Illustration by Ben Hickey

On November 28, 1924, Raymond A. Dart, a professor at the University of Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg, was getting ready to attend a friend’s wedding when a pair of South African Railways workers staggered up his

driveway with two large crates. The crates contained fossils that had been found at a limestone quarry some two hundred miles to the southwest, in the town of Taung. Although the wedding was being held in his own home—and his wife begged him to leave the boxes alone—Dart tore off the stiff collar he was wearing and rushed to find some tools. When he levered off the lid of the second crate, he later recalled, “a thrill of excitement” shot through him. At the top of the pile was a rock that appeared to be a cast of a skull’s interior. Dart, who taught anatomy, guessed that the skull had belonged to a primate, but it seemed too big for a baboon or a chimpanzee. Further rummaging yielded a second chunk of rock that seemed to fit right in front of the first, like a face.

Dart was pulled away from his investigations by the groom, but as soon as the wedding was over he returned to the specimens. Using one of his wife’s knitting needles, he chipped away at the second rock until he had exposed the creature’s chin, jaws, and eye sockets. The teeth, which appeared to have belonged to a child, were decidedly human-looking. More significantly, the opening for the spinal cord was positioned in such a way that it seemed the creature must have walked upright.

In a paper published in *Nature* just a few months after the wedding, Dart announced that he had discovered an “extinct race of apes.” He called the creature *Australopithecus africanus* and proposed that Africa must have been the place where our “troglodytic forefathers” evolved.

What We’re Reading

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In the nineteen-twenties, the prevailing theory—strongly influenced by racial prejudice—was that humans had evolved in either Europe or Asia. The pro-Europe crowd pointed to a set of remarkably humanlike fossils that

had been unearthed in 1912 in Piltdown, a town south of London. Dart's announcement rubbed the scientific establishment the wrong way. One of his British colleagues labelled it "preposterous."

In the next few decades, as more *Australopithecus* fossils were uncovered in Africa—and as the "Piltdown Man" was revealed to be an elaborate fraud—Dart was vindicated. In the meantime, he had moved on. The limestone deposit that had yielded the Taung Child, as the original *Australopithecus* became known, also contained the remains of all sorts of other creatures, including baboons, turtles, and hyraxes. In another limestone deposit, in Makapansgat, northeast of Pretoria, *Australopithecus* fossils had been found among a great jumble of animal remains. From these and other bits of evidence, Dart concluded that *Australopithecus* had been a ferocious hunter who had wielded animal bones as clubs.

"Man's predecessors differed from living apes in being confirmed killers," he wrote. They were "carnivorous creatures that seized living quarries by violence, battered them to death, tore apart their broken bodies, dismembered them limb from limb, slaking their ravenous thirst with the hot blood of victims."

Dart's account of the "predatory transition from ape to man" was profoundly influential. This time around, though, his theory was wrong. The Taung Child, scientists now believe, lived around three million years ago. It was killed by a bird of prey, as were the animals it was found with. The bones in Makapansgat were left behind by large carnivores, like hyenas and leopards, who were also happy to consume an *Australopithecus* or two if given the opportunity. Instead of being dauntless predators, our ancestors, it seems, were more likely prey. They spent much of their time—and their increasing brain power—trying not to become dinner.

What does all this have to do with life today, when big cats are headed toward extinction and meat comes on Styrofoam trays? According to Kurt Gray, the director of the Deepest Beliefs Lab, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, the answer is everything. In "Outraged: Why We Fight About Morality and Politics and How to Find Common Ground" (Pantheon), Gray argues that the most pressing problems of contemporary society can be traced to the Taung Child. "It is easy to think that we have

transcended our animal nature because we wear performance fabrics and prompt artificial intelligence to help with our ‘knowledge work,’ ” he writes. In fact, “all our thoughts and feelings arise from a mind that evolved eons ago.”

Gray describes himself as a moral psychologist. In contrast to moral philosophers, who search for abstract principles of right and wrong, moral psychologists are interested in the empirical matter of people’s perceptions. Gray writes, “We put aside questions of how we *should* make moral judgments to examine how people *do* make more moral judgments.”

For the past couple of decades, moral psychology has been dominated by what’s known as moral-foundations theory, or M.F.T. According to M.F.T., people reach ethical decisions on the basis of mental structures, or “modules,” that evolution has wired into our brains. These modules—there are at least five of them—involve feelings like empathy for the vulnerable, resentment of cheaters, respect for authority, regard for sanctity, and anger at betrayal. The reason people often arrive at different judgments is that their modules have developed differently, either for individual or for cultural reasons. Liberals have come to rely almost exclusively on their fairness and empathy modules, allowing the others to atrophy. Conservatives, by contrast, tend to keep all their modules up and running.

If you find this theory implausible, you’re not alone. It has been criticized on a wide range of grounds, including that it is unsupported by neuroscience. Gray, for his part, wants to sweep aside moral-foundations theory, plural, and replace it with moral-foundation theory, singular. Our ethical judgments, he suggests, are governed not by a complex of modules but by one overriding emotion. Untold generations of cowering have written fear into our genes, rendering us hypersensitive to threats of harm.

“If you want to know what someone sees as *wrong*, your best bet is to figure out what they see as *harmful*,” Gray writes at one point. At another point: “All people share a harm-based moral mind.” At still another: “Harm is the master key of morality.”

If people all have the same ethical equipment, why are ethical questions so divisive? Gray’s answer is that different people fear differently. “Moral

disagreements can still arise even if we all share a harm-based moral mind, because liberals and conservatives disagree about who is especially vulnerable to victimization," he writes.

Consider abortion. There are (at least) two parties who could suffer from terminating—or not terminating—a pregnancy. According to Gray, progressives focus on "the harm suffered by women lacking access to medical care," and therefore come out in favor of abortion rights. Conservatives focus on "the harm suffered by fetuses," and therefore support abortion restrictions. Arguments over immigration are based on similar differences in what Gray calls "assumptions of vulnerability": "Progressives focus on the suffering of innocent children fleeing war, while conservatives highlight victims murdered by drug smugglers." And so on down the list of hot-button issues: "Liberals emphasize how trans women are vulnerable victims, while conservatives emphasize how they could be threatening to other women." As long as there's a perception of harm, there's a potential for outrage, because fear and moral indignation are inextricably linked. Indeed, Gray argues, the safer we've become from physical danger, the more hazards we see lurking out there.

"Millions of years of being hunted have made us preoccupied with danger," he writes. "But without saber-toothed cats to fear, we fret about elections, arguments in group texts, and decisions at PTA meetings."

Two key figures in "Outraged" are a pair of college-aged siblings known only by their first names, Mark and Julie. One summer, while vacationing together in France, the two decide that it would be fun to have sex with each other. Julie is already on the pill; Mark, to be extra careful, puts on a condom. The sex is indeed enjoyable, but the siblings agree that once is enough. They resolve to keep the experience a secret, and this brings them even closer together.

Julie and Mark are characters dreamed up by Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist who was one of the original architects of moral-foundations theory. Haidt concocted their dalliance as a test. Would people who read about their incestuous encounter label it morally wrong, even when it was made clear that neither sibling suffered as a result of it? And, if they did condemn the coupling, how would they explain this?

At the time that Haidt invented the siblings, he was teaching at the University of Virginia. He recruited students there to respond to Mark and Julie's story, along with a macabre tale featuring a vegetarian named Jennifer. One day, Jennifer, who is working in a pathology lab, is asked to incinerate a fresh cadaver. Dismayed to see so much perfectly good flesh going to waste, she cuts a chunk from the body before burning it; then, once she gets home, she cooks the chunk and eats it. Four-fifths of the students surveyed found Mark and Julie's conduct immoral, while in Jennifer's case the proportion rose to six-sevenths. As for how they had arrived at their judgments, the students could rarely offer a coherent account.

"I don't think it's accepted," one student said in response to the Mark-and-Julie episode. "That's pretty much it." From this, and similarly strong but inarticulate reactions, Haidt concluded that the students had arrived at their judgments impulsively. "Moral reasoning was mostly just a post hoc search," he wrote.

Haidt's cheerfully incestuous siblings pose a serious challenge to Gray. If people consistently deem certain actions to be wrong, even when those actions cause no injury, then it would seem that harm can't be the "master key."

Gray responds to this challenge with experiments of his own. One involves participants who were instructed to shoot each other with toy guns. In another, participants were quizzed about scenarios of the Mark-and-Julie variety. (Among the scenarios was the case of a man who made love to a grocery-store chicken.) Gray claims that his results confirm the primacy of harm. Haidt may have told the students that no one was hurt by Mark and Julie's tryst, but, Gray concludes, this assurance didn't convince them. The same impulse that made them condemn the siblings' hookup made them certain that harm had been done. Perhaps shame would haunt the pair in the future, or their families would eventually find out and be devastated, or society at large would fall apart because everyone would start sleeping with their siblings.

"People's intuitive minds simply cannot believe that harmless wrongs are harmless," Gray writes. "The more harmful something intuitively seems, the more immoral it seems."

“Outraged” was written at a time of extreme political polarization, and it is coming out just days before the polarizer-in-chief, Donald J. Trump, is set to be inaugurated. The book’s tantalizing promise, as its subtitle announces, is that it will help us “find common ground.” Gray tries to make good on this with a section on the do’s and don’ts of “bridging moral divides.”

He starts with the don’ts. A big one is: Don’t imagine that facts are convincing. Gray cites a study from 2021 in which researchers argued with strangers about gun control. Half the time, the researchers tried to bolster their case with facts. The rest of the time, they offered stories, one of which involved a relative who had been wounded by a stray bullet. (The relative, though made up, was presented as real.) The encounters were taped, so that the conversations could later be analyzed. Strangers who were offered anecdotes were, it turned out, much more willing to engage with the researchers than those offered data were. The group that got stories also treated their interlocutors with more respect.

“Sharing personal experiences instead of facts improved cross partisan perceptions by about 0.7 to 0.9 on a 7-point scale,” Gray writes, trotting out statistics to argue against trotting out statistics. “This may not seem like a giant effect, but it’s actually quite substantial.” Gray’s takeaway from this is that the best way to reach across a moral divide is with a narrative, preferably one that features suffering: “Respect is easiest to build with harm-based storytelling.”

Gray presents this finding as a cause for optimism. The reverse case could easily be made. In outraged America, stories of victimhood are legion. Trump in particular loves to share “harm-based” tales—the less true, the better. A typical example is the fiction the President-elect recounted, in September, about the immigrant community in Springfield, Ohio: “They’re eating the dogs, the people that came in. They’re eating the cats. . . . They’re eating the pets of the people that live there.”

If more harm-based storytelling isn’t the answer, what is? To the extent that the research presented in “Outraged” is persuasive, it suggests that there may not be one. The essential—and most compelling—claim of moral psychology is that people make ethical judgments on the basis of intuition rather than reason. We have, it could be argued, been surprisingly good at

muddling through modern times with the impulses we inherited from our "troglodytic forefathers." But there have been close calls, and some of these occurred before the advent of nuclear weapons, climate change, artificial intelligence, and Truth Social. The great question of our era—and it is a question—is whether the mismatch is finally catching up to us. ♦

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."

On Television

The New Season of “Severance” Is All Work and No Play

The sci-fi series was hailed as a dark, timely satire of office life—but its return is bogged down by abstract ethical conundrums and rote emotional ones.

By Inkoo Kang

January 10, 2025

Adam Scott’s Mark Scout is known as “Mark S.” at Lumon, where severed staff are so cut off from their nonworking selves that they seldom even learn their own surnames.Illustration by Simon Bailly

The sci-fi series “Severance” styles itself as a tidy allegory for the misery of the modern office drone. Most of the employees on the “severed” floor of the secretive biotech firm Lumon have undergone a procedure that separates their work selves (the “innies”) from their at-home selves (the “outies”), so that the outies haven’t the slightest clue what the innies do all day, and vice versa. But the innies have no idea what they do all day, either; they spend their shifts grouping numbers into categories on a computer screen, to

uncertain effect. (Could they be killing people? Maybe!) When the innies clock out, around five, their consciousness shuts down; their next memory is of the following morning, at the dawn of a new workday.

The Apple TV+ show, created by Dan Erickson and directed in large part by Ben Stiller, premièred in 2022, and its off-kilter satire of office inanities swiftly cemented its place in the Zeitgeist. (Marx's theory of alienation has never been taken so literally.) Adam Scott's Mark Scout—known as "Mark S." at Lumon, where severed employees are so cut off from their nonworking selves that they seldom even learn their own surnames—gets to his desk through a maze of unsettlingly featureless, subterranean hallways. Mark's outie is a former history professor who is so devastated by the sudden death of his wife that "every day feels like a year"; deleting half of his waking hours seems like the only bearable solution. His innie shares a vast, mostly empty office with three colleagues: the paternal old-timer Irving (John Turturro), the faux curmudgeon Dylan (Zach Cherry), and the alarmed newbie Helly (Britt Lower). Two years into the gig, Mark still isn't sure how many other employees are stationed on their floor, though he does eventually discover that one room is occupied by a herd of goats. The culture at Lumon is not just cartoonishly discreet—it's downright cultlike. When Mark asks one of his bosses, the unsevered Ms. Cobel (Patricia Arquette), what the century-old company does, she invokes its founder, Kier Eagan, screaming, "We serve Kier!" The rank and file recite a different Kier koan to one another: "Let not weakness live in your veins." Beyond the HQ's walls, the year and the region are also unclear, but the weather suggests the dead of winter.

Glum atmospherics can only get you so far. I'll confess to being a "Severance" skeptic from the start: while others hailed the first season as original and timely in its anti-work ethos, I found it intolerably slow, and soon wrote it off as the latest puzzle-box show to overestimate both my investment and my patience (hello, "Westworld"). Its retrofuturistic setting and high-concept approach held a surface-level appeal, but the incessant twists simply led to more questions, and to a growing suspicion that the writers wouldn't be able to tie it all together. I was never quite convinced by Mark as a character; his grief over the loss of his wife registers as a cheap plot device rather than as a meaningful wound, no matter how often

“Severance” returns to the sight of him alone in his darkened, sparsely furnished home. And, despite the series’s rich thematic potential, its social commentary pales in comparison to sharper, more vivid critiques of capitalism’s excesses, from the nihilistic comedy series “Corporate” and the pitch-black caricature of “The Boys” to Boots Riley’s anarchically imaginative “Sorry to Bother You.” The Season 1 finale, in which the innies seize a brief opportunity to commandeer their outies’ bodies and blow the whistle on their employers, culminates in two startling revelations: that Mark’s wife is alive, and that Helly’s outie is the Lumon scion Helena Eagan, who severed herself as a P.R. stunt to demonstrate the safety of the procedure. But, after three years off, “Severance” ’s return inspired a TV critic’s version of the Sunday scaries. I dreaded having to sit on my couch watching Mark sit on *his* couch.

For better and for worse, Season 2 feels more cinematic than its predecessor. Bloomberg reported that its ten episodes cost upward of twenty million dollars apiece, which would make it one of the priciest TV shows ever produced. Based on the lavish visuals (and on the accounts of rewrites and reshoots), it’s a believable figure, though Stiller told my colleague Rachel Syme that “any numbers out there are totally inaccurate.” The result is expansive and aesthetically ambitious: the encroachment of the surreal reaches Lynchian proportions while new subplots take the ensemble—and the audience—farther and farther from the nondescript office they’ve known.

But, if the show’s canvas has grown broader, the characters themselves have been reduced to mere archetypes. Mark is roused from his Season 1 passivity through his anointment as the series’ chosen one, set up for action-based heroics that seem at odds with his prior status as a white-collar Everyman; the portentous assertions from on high that *only he* can complete a file prove unintentionally silly. His wife becomes the damsel to rescue, and the once spiky Helly, who surprised Mark’s innie with a kiss last season, falls into place as her wistful romantic rival. This sanding down robs the show of its human stakes, which are undercut further by a seeming inability to make its “deaths” and disappearances stick. Being fired from Lumon means the end of an innie’s life, and a resignation is tantamount to

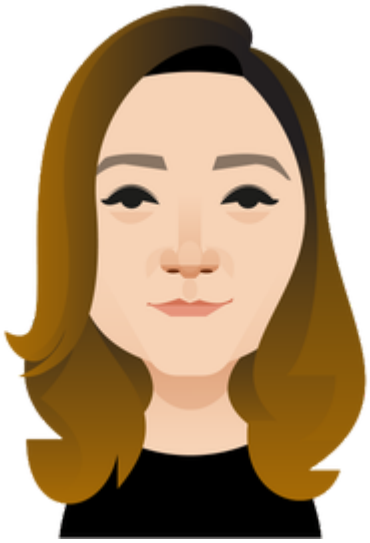
suicide—but “Severance” is, ironically, too softhearted to conclude almost any of the workers’ stories.

In the end, the series’ most persuasive character arc is one that’s more mundane, and thus more relatable. Season 2 reveals that Dylan’s outie is a family man in urgent need of a steady income who’d been unable to hold down a job until Lumon came along. His relationship with his wife, Gretchen (Merritt Wever)—clearly affectionate, but full of small disappointments—is at once understated and evocative. (His attempts to find other employment also capture the sometimes degrading absurdities of the job search, as when a hiring manager at a door manufacturer peppers him with such questions as “How old were you when you knew you loved doors?” and “If you could be any kind of door, what would it be?”) Yet the humor and texture that enliven his story line are frustratingly absent elsewhere.

The second season opens with Lumon’s efforts to lure Mark, Dylan, and their colleagues back to work, post-rebellion, with the promise of “kindness reforms”—meagre perks that might remind some viewers of their own companies’ paltry return-to-office incentives. But the writers now seem less interested in poking fun at real-life corporate culture than in mining the tension between innies and outies. Early in the series, Mark is approached by a former co-worker who has been “reintegrated”; though Helena insists to Helly that “I am a person, you are not,” it quickly becomes apparent that the divide isn’t as clean as Lumon had promised. The issue of what these two halves owe each other becomes the fulcrum of the new season—a dilemma that’s more intellectually stimulating than it is genuinely affecting.

On some level, every job requires renting out one’s body and brain; to do so for unknown purposes and with no memory of what’s occurred is a “Black Mirror”-esque extreme that sets the mind racing to explore all its dark and varied possibilities. The first season considered other use cases, including that of a slimy legislator who dispels his reluctant wife’s doubts about a third baby by severing her from the experience of childbirth. The incident implied that lawmakers were complicit in the development and deployment of Lumon’s technology, which is controversial among the general public. It was also horrific enough to be memorable. But the second season seems to

pull back from such bleakness, losing itself in abstract ethical conundrums and rote emotional ones. It's far from a dissection of work and life as we know them; the incisions are only skin deep. ♦



Inkoo Kang, a staff writer, has been a television critic for The New Yorker since 2022.

Poems

- **“Sisters”**
  By Lee Upton | “I must have been breathing, of course, / although I no longer had sisters.”
- **“Prayer”**
  By Larry Levis | “I know / That everything I look out upon will vanish.”

Poems

Sisters

By Lee Upton

January 13, 2025

The summer at the drop-off, the summer
when the boat floated to shore
with no one on it, the summer
a stranger on the street
spat in my face,
every summer when
my sisters were my comfort,
my sisters to whom I confessed
my regrets. My sister who would
say: Just breathe, just as
my other sister
would say: Just listen.
I listened for them both,
and when I answered the phone
the call didn’t come
from either of them and
I was on the floor
like someone trying to find safety
away from smoke.
I must have been breathing, of course,
although I no longer had sisters.
And now my sisters are at the airport
with no one to calm them or claim them,
and they are alone with strangers,
and no remedy occurs to me,
to take an Uber, to call a taxi—
and I am walking in what might be

the wrong direction
with others like me,
and I am hoping that
if there's a form of
consciousness after life
it's not like this—
our panicked running,
unaware of even
the simplest solution,
that is, I have to hope
death isn't too much like life,
for I've left my sisters alone
and they are waiting for me,
and I am walking as fast as I can
while they are waiting and waiting,
and I will
never, never, never get there
even if I had died first.

Lee Upton is the author of the novel "Tabitha, Get Up" and the poetry collection "The Day Every Day Is."

Poems

Prayer

By Larry Levis

January 13, 2025

When I look out of this upstairs window I notice my mother
Walking out—actually reeling slightly by now in her old age with
Her pure white hair beneath the twin colonnades of fading palm fronds,
A homemade sail. She tacks slowly as a boat in a light wind, from one side
Of the gravel driveway to the other, & I could almost believe
The scene is Mediterranean, for there are still two unshattered, antique
French teacups on this sill, but my mother has no rudder, no keel,
And no idea of how far out at sea she is. She is just going out
To get the mail—which is at the end of a half-mile walk through
Palms, cypresses, & orange trees. In Italy, outside the little hill towns
Such as Montone, a row of cypresses always meant a cemetery
And the resurrection of the dead. This is the San Joaquin Valley & they
Don't mean anything here—though my father is dead, & though my wife & son live
East of two mountain ranges, & out of my hearing. She knows it's too late for this,
And possibly she even knows she is about to vanish soon
And leave only the palms behind her. No one's home, & still
My mother is determined to get this ounce of exercise, this walk. She is,
I think, almost as friendless at this moment as I am friendless.
From the way she lists, I even suspect that she must be part wind
Herself by now. And now I notice that the faded khaki of the palm fronds
Above her is the exact shade of my father's shirts, & by now
I am remembering her hair against his chest on the day he had to go
Into the hospital. He had to go somewhere because he had to die
Of Parkinson's disease—something he accomplished with difficulty
And without his usual contempt for style. Though he was always & at once

humble &
Uncompromised before others. Even such as You. Though You must remember him
At least as well as I do. Think hard, Lord, because I love
The way she weaves from one side of this driveway to the other.
I love her simple determination to continue. And I keep watching her
Weave this way slowly & then that way until I think I might even be able
To save my own son from this final disorder of loss. I know
That everything I look out upon will vanish, & I know it is only
The simple juxtaposition of two colors—her white hair against
The dead, fading, & blankly swaying palm fronds. But I have
Always been astonished at any sort of permanence, & so, Thank You.
Before everything I look out upon has vanished: Thank You.

—Larry Levis (1946-96)

This is drawn from "Swirl & Vortex: Collected Poems of Larry Levis."
Larry Levis, who died in 1996, was an award-winning poet. His volume of collected poems, edited by David St. John, is "Swirl & Vortex" (2026).

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the January 20, 2025, magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Tuesday, January 7, 2025**
  By Paolo Pasco | A moderately challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, January 7, 2025

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Paolo Pasco

January 7, 2025

Paolo Pasco, a games editor at LinkedIn, won the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in 2024. He is the author of "Crossword Puzzles for Kids."