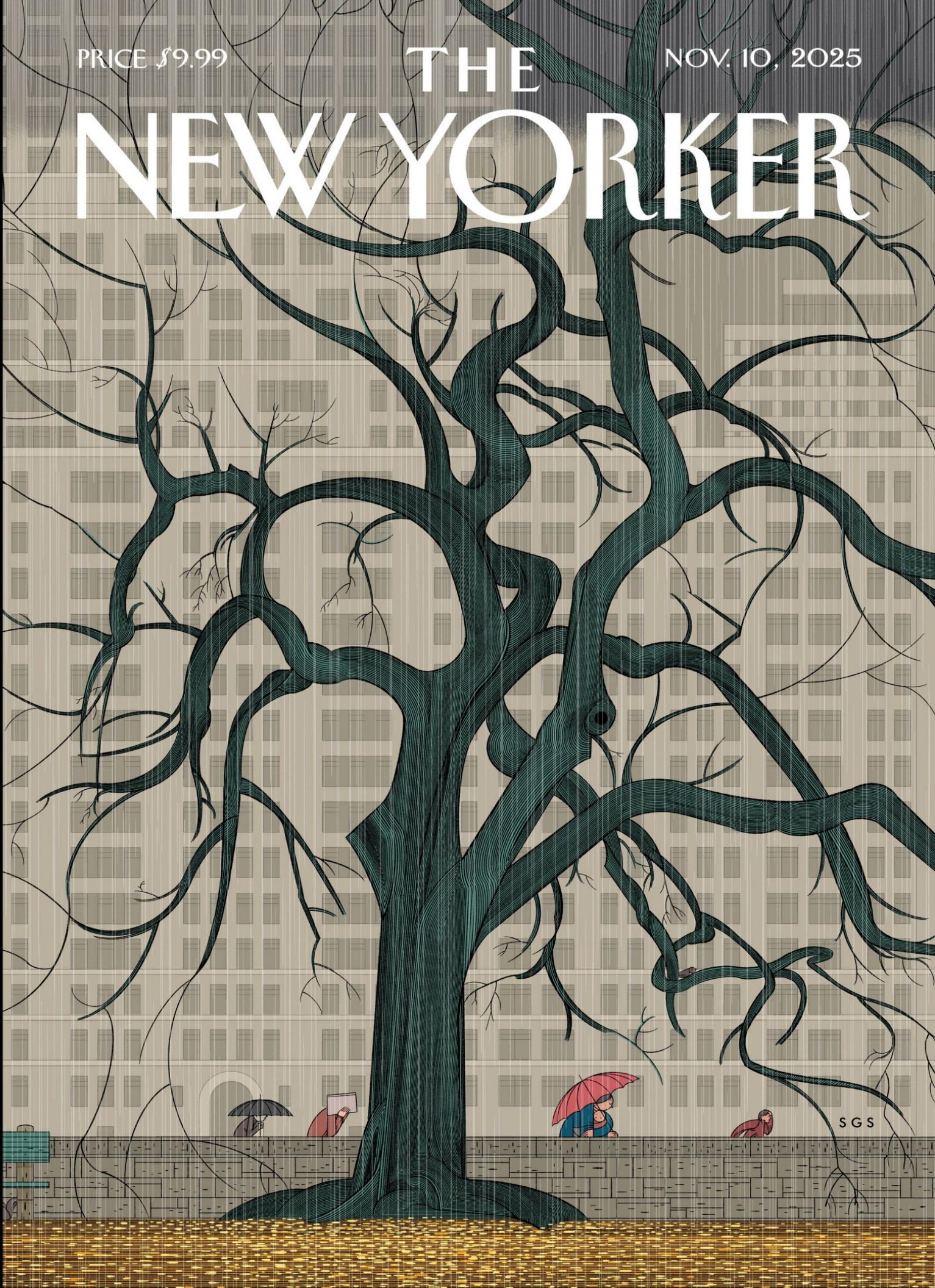


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Goings On

- **Winter Culture Previews**

What's happening this season in music, movies, television, dance, art, and theatre.

[Goings On](#)

Winter Culture Preview

What we're watching, listening to, and doing this season.

By [Shauna Lyon](#), [Inkoo Kang](#), [Jillian Steinhauer](#), [Helen Shaw](#), [Richard Brody](#), [Marina Harsa](#), [Sheldon Pearce](#), and

[Fergus McIntosh](#)

October 31, 2025



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

With November comes the onset of 4 P.M. darkness, not to mention the cold—but venues across the city this winter will emanate light and heat. If you’re in the mood for romance, the cozy season has plenty to offer, including Bradley Cooper’s movie “Is This Thing On?,” set in the world of standup comedy; the lush crooning of the alt-country star Brandi Carlile; TV’s favorite housewives, the real ones of Salt Lake City; and, on the creepier side, Tracy Letts’s edgy thriller “Bug,” on Broadway, starring his wife, Carrie Coon, as a lonely waitress. Alvin Ailey brings several new pieces to its annual City Center encampment, plus a revival by the great Judith Jamison; the Met Opera promises epic drama in “Porgy and Bess” (set in nineteen-twenties Charleston) and “Andrea Chénier” (French Revolution-era Paris); and, in the art world, Helen Frankenthaler, Joan Mitchell, and Louise Bourgeois, along with the sculptor Carol Bove and the painter Ceija Stojka, all get their day in the sun.

New Yorker subscribers enjoy access to our full seasonal cultural previews directly in their inbox. Thank you for your support.—*Shauna Lyon*

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Television



“Game of Thrones” Prequel, Women’s Worlds

For the past six years, winter television has belonged to **“The Real Housewives of Salt Lake City,”** which has revitalized the long-running reality franchise through creative insults, explorations of religious trauma, and the gloriously demented fashions of women who insist on wearing high heels in the snow. (Season 6 is currently under way; John Oliver, the host of HBO’s “Last Week Tonight,” recently said of “R.H.O.S.L.C.” “I don’t know if there’s a funnier show on TV, and I work for a comedy show.”) Unsurprisingly, then, “Salt Lake” has inspired bandwagoners. The similarly premised—though far less satisfying—**“The Secret Lives of Mormon Wives”** returns to Hulu for its third season on Nov. 13, and a more dedicated look at spiritual abuse will be undertaken by Bravo’s **“Surviving Mormonism with Heather Gay”** (Nov. 11), to be hosted by the “R.H.O.S.L.C.” star.

On the scripted side, there will be no shortage of formidable mothers this season. Claire Danes headlines **“The Beast in Me”** (Netflix; Nov. 13), playing a woman who lost her only child to a car accident and finds herself drawn to a sharklike businessman (Matthew Rhys), who intuits the dark impulses that she harbors toward the young man whom she blames for her son’s death. Danes’s character is a kindred spirit to Sarah Snook’s panicked mother in Peacock’s **“All Her Fault”** (Nov. 6), a thriller in which a young

boy's disappearance casts suspicion on the various women in his life. Motherhood gets yet more complicated in Kurt Sutter's Western drama "**The Abandons**" (Dec. 4), which finds a woman (Lena Headey) in eighteen-fifties Oregon creating a makeshift family with four orphans and fending off attempts by a mining heiress (Gillian Anderson) to take their land.

Solidarity is a recurring theme. In BritBox's "**Riot Women**" (Jan. 14), from the "Happy Valley" creator Sally Wainwright, a group of menopause-aged women fight against the invisibility common to their demographic by forming a rock band. A more glamorous sort of sisterhood emerges in "**All's Fair**" (Nov. 4), Ryan Murphy's campy legal drama on Hulu—starring Glenn Close, Naomi Watts, and, uh, Kim Kardashian—about unhappy wives and the female divorce lawyers committed to getting them all that they deserve.

Notably, the male-centric fare in the next few months skews historic. Michael Shannon and Matthew Macfadyen square off, as President James Garfield and his grandiose assassin, Charles Guiteau, respectively, in Netflix's "**Death by Lightning**" (Nov. 6). The Revolutionary War gets the Ken Burns treatment with PBS's "**The American Revolution**," a six-part, twelve-hour documentary to début on Nov. 16. And the new year will bring another "Game of Thrones" prequel: the humbly titled "**A Knight of the Seven Kingdoms**" (Jan. 18). Peter Claffey stars in the HBO drama as the lowborn Ser Duncan the Tall, who gains a squire in a Targaryen prince. A trailer for the series hints at a more lighthearted tale, but, in Westeros, it's all fun and games until someone loses an appendage in some horrific fashion.—*Inkoo Kang*

Art



Mozart's Treasures, Indigenous Painting

This season, several storied institutions are looking toward fashion for a winter pick-me-up. The Hispanic Society leads the way with “**Spanish Style: Fashion Illuminated, 1550-1700**” (opens Nov. 6), which uses garments, illuminated manuscripts, funerary sculptures, and more, to examine the relationship between clothing and power in early modern Spain. The Frick Collection offers a complement with “**Gainsborough: The Fashion of Portraiture**” (Feb. 12), taking viewers to eighteenth-century England to consider Thomas Gainsborough’s sensitive portraits through a social, materialist lens. And the Metropolitan Museum of Art digs into a collection mainstay—nineteenth-century Western Europe—for evidence of “**Fanmania**” (Dec. 11), a craze for handheld fans that artists of the time embraced.

If you can’t get enough of European history on the cusp of modernity, the Morgan Library & Museum has “**Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart: Treasures from the Mozarteum Foundation of Salzburg**” (March 13). The exhibition, a collaboration with the organization that stewards Mozart’s legacy, contextualizes the composer in his day and age through his own instruments, letters, and possessions—all of which are coming to New York for the first time. If you prefer musical vibes to close study, check out Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum’s “**Art of Noise**” (Dec. 12; although, as of this writing, the museum is closed because of the federal-government shutdown). The show is a grab bag of sonic design, from Haight-Ashbury concert posters to early jukeboxes to custom listening rooms.

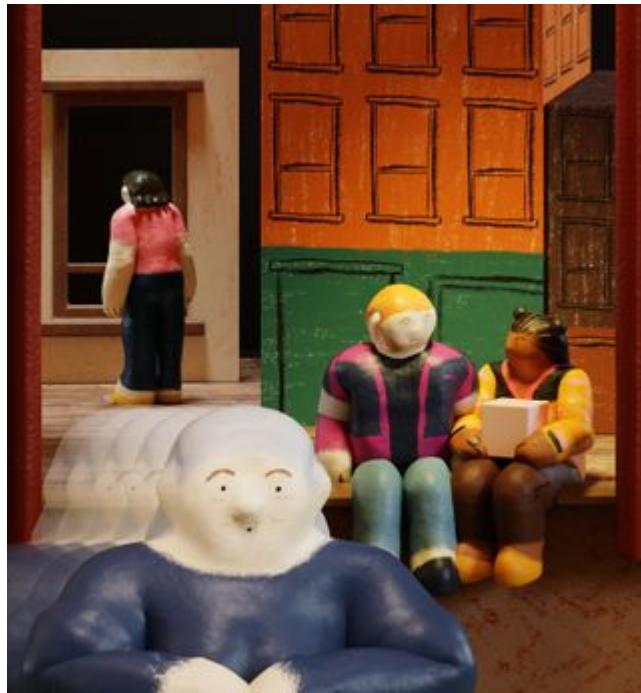
In the realm of contemporary art, two museums continue to shine a long-overdue spotlight on Indigenous artists. “**Clearly Indigenous: Native Visions Reimagined in Glass**,” at the National Museum of the American

Indian (Nov. 15, although as of this writing, the museum is also closed because of the federal-government shutdown), surveys the ways that Native artists have made the medium their own—a story that begins, surprisingly, with the kitschy populist Dale Chihuly. Grey Art Museum mounts “**Irrititja Kuwarri Tjungu: Contemporary Aboriginal Painting from the Australian Desert**” (Jan. 22), which gathers a hundred and thirty-four cosmic and meditative works by the members of Papunya Tula Artists, Australia’s first Aboriginal art coöperative, founded in 1971.

Meanwhile, four of contemporary art’s grandes dames are getting solo presentations, the biggest of which is “**Helen Frankenthaler: A Grand Sweep,**” at the Museum of Modern Art (Nov. 18). Curiously, this mini-survey is happening in the museum’s vast atrium, where it may be hard to appreciate the nuances of Frankenthaler’s saturated abstractions. David Zwirner celebrates one of her Abstract Expressionist peers with “**To Define a Feeling: Joan Mitchell, 1960-1965**” (Nov. 6), which focusses on a period when Mitchell began concentrating color in her canvases more centrally, inspired by her time on the Mediterranean. In nearby Chelsea galleries, Hauser & Wirth presents late, psychologically charged abstract works by Louise Bourgeois in “**Gathering Wool**” (Nov. 6), and Pace shows a late, lighthearted Agnes Martin series, with “**Innocent Love**” (Nov. 7).

After giving its current Rashid Johnson exhibition a very long run, the Guggenheim brings in **Carol Bove** (March 5), whose scrap-metal sculptures should punctuate the rotunda playfully. But the honor of most timely exhibition of the season goes to the Drawing Center’s “**Ceija Stojka: Making Visible**” (Feb. 20). The self-taught Stojka began making art when she was nearly sixty, channelling her Roma upbringing and her experience surviving the Holocaust. The exhibition gathers her paintings and drawings alongside archival material to tell a story that’s at once sobering and inspiring.—*Jillian Steinhauer*

The Theatre



British Romance, Carrie Coon in “Bug”

Winter falls softly on Broadway; and so only a few shows are tiptoeing in after the autumn rush. The two-person British musical **“Two Strangers (Carry a Cake Across New York)”** (Longacre; begins previews Nov. 1), written by Jim Barne and Kit Buchan, hops across the pond hoping to make a romantic splash; the great June Squibb appears in Jordan Harrison’s 2014 wistful sci-fi drama **“Marjorie Prime”** (Hayes; Nov. 20); the short-story writer Simon Rich’s anthology show **“All Out: Comedy About Ambition”** features a rotating suite of big-name comedians (Nederlander; Dec. 12); and the revival of **“Bug,”** Tracy Letts’s 1996 thriller, stars Namir Smallwood and the incredible Carrie Coon, who is scratching her theatre itch after too long away (Friedman; Dec. 17).

Off Broadway, beloved actors appear in familiar tales: Michael Urie plays the deposed **“Richard II”** (Astor Place Theatre; in previews, opens Nov. 10), in Craig Baldwin’s Shakespeare adaptation, and the playwright Alex Lin modernizes a different Shakespeare tragedy for **“Laowang: A Chinatown King Lear”** (59E59; Nov. 1), featuring the tremendous Wai Ching Ho as a restaurateur in a succession crisis. Nicholas Braun and the two-time Tony Award winner Kara Young star in Rajiv Joseph’s 2012 toxic-relationship drama, **“Gruesome Playground Injuries”** (Lucille Lortel;

Nov. 7); Lucas Hnath's version of Molière's "**Tartuffe**" features beaucoup Tony awardees, including Matthew Broderick and Francis Jue (New York Theatre Workshop; Nov. 28); and the five-time Oscar nominee Michelle Williams sails into Eugene O'Neill's toughest romance, the 1921 "**Anna Christie**" (St. Ann's Warehouse; Nov. 25).

To beat the winter chill, try hot-hot-hot innovation among the experimental vanguard: Else Went's "**Initiative**," a five-hour marathon about teen-age life, plays from Nov. 4 at the Public; Hannah Kallenbach's "**Mikey Maus in Fantasmich**" satirizes a certain squeaky icon at the Brick from Nov. 7; Philip Venables and Ted Huffman's musicalization of Larry Mitchell's 1977 novel "**The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions**" (Park Avenue Armory; Dec. 2) comes to New York; and the gonzo troupe Das Besties début their dance-theatre exploration of addiction, "**Das Rauschgift**" (Box of Moonlight; Dec. 4). Festivals including **Under the Radar** (Jan. 7-25), **Prototype** (Jan. 7-18), and the **Exponential Festival** (Jan. 5-Feb. 8) also light up the new year—all three are embarrassments of riches.

In 2026, our theatre-makers look at politics, if obliquely: Shakespeare's coup-adjacent drama "**The Tragedy of Coriolanus**" may feel disturbingly relevant (Polonsky Shakespeare Center; Feb. 1); Lauren Yee débuts "**Mother Russia**" (Signature; Feb. 3), a spy dramedy about post-Soviet intra-Russian surveillance; Wallace Shawn reunites with his "My Dinner with André" companion, André Gregory, who directs Shawn's play "**What We Did Before Our Moth Days**," about love and middle-class values, starring Hope Davis and John Early (Greenwich House; Feb. 4); and the playwright Anna Ziegler takes on Sophocles' classic with "**Antigone (This play I read in high school)**," starring Tony Shalhoub as Creon and Celia Keenan-Bolger as Chorus (Public; Feb. 26).

Early March sees two star vehicles drive onto Broadway: John Lithgow plays an embattled Roald Dahl in the West End import "**Giant**," by Mark Rosenblatt (Music Box; March 11), and two of the tough-talking sweethearts from "The Bear," Jon Bernthal and Ebon Moss-Bachrach, team up for "**Dog Day Afternoon**," a Stephen Adly Guirgis adaptation of the Sidney Lumet film about a 1972 bank robbery (August Wilson; March 10).

At this point, the Broadway schedule goes berserk, because millions of plays must open before the Tony deadline in late April—in this and other ways, Guirgis’s thriller will serve as the spring season’s starting gun.—
Helen Shaw

Movies



A Shakespeare Tale, a Ping-Pong Champ

There will be music in the frosty air, starting with songs by Stephen Schwartz in “**Wicked: For Good**” (Nov. 24), the sequel to last year’s “Wicked: Part One,” both directed by Jon M. Chu. Cynthia Erivo returns as Elphaba—now called the Wicked Witch of the West—and Ariana Grande reprises her role as Glinda, now Glinda the Good. “**Merrily We Roll Along**” (Dec. 5), directed by Maria Friedman, a film of the Tony-winning 2023 Broadway production of Stephen Sondheim’s 1981 musical, about three friends’ interlinked destinies—seen in reverse over the course of twenty years—stars Daniel Radcliffe, Lindsay Mendez, and Jonathan Groff. In Óliver Laxe’s “**Sirāt**” (Nov. 17), a Spanish man (Sergi López), accompanied by his young son (Bruno Núñez Arjona), searches the Moroccan desert for his daughter, who disappeared while attending a rave there; the movie features a techno score by Kangding Ray. Mona Fastvold’s bio-pic “**The Testament of Ann Lee**” (Dec. 25), which she co-wrote with Brady Corbet, stars Amanda Seyfried as the titular Shaker evangelist, who, in 1774, emigrated from Manchester, England, to New York; the drama features choreography by Celia Rowlson-Hall and music by Daniel Blumberg, based on Shaker hymns.

Real-life artists and their famous work get their time in the spotlight. The title character of “**Hamnet**” (Nov. 27), Chloé Zhao’s adaptation of a novel

by Maggie O'Farrell, is the son of William Shakespeare (Paul Mescal) and his wife, Agnes (Jessie Buckley); the drama involves the boy's death and Shakespeare's writing of "Hamlet," in response. Craig Brewer's "**Song Sung Blue**" (Dec. 25) is a bio-pic, based on a 2008 documentary of the same title, about Mike and Claire Sardina (Hugh Jackman and Kate Hudson), who performed as a Neil Diamond tribute band called Lightning & Thunder.

Political fantasy embraces a wide range of emotions this season. In Kleber Mendonça Filho's "**The Secret Agent**" (Nov. 26), which is set in Brazil, mainly in 1977, when the country was a dictatorship, Wagner Moura stars as a scientist who's hunted by the regime's paramilitaries and is aided by an underground resistance network. Toni Servillo stars in Paolo Sorrentino's "**La Grazia**" (Dec. 5), as a President of Italy whose major decisions just before leaving office include whether to sign a bill allowing euthanasia. "**Ella McCay**" (Dec. 12), directed by James L. Brooks, stars Emma Mackey as a lieutenant governor who ascends to the governorship while dealing with family problems; Jamie Lee Curtis and Woody Harrelson co-star. In Park Chan-wook's satirical comedy "**No Other Choice**" (Dec. 25), based on a novel by Donald E. Westlake, an unemployed executive (Lee Byung-hun) whose job applications are turned down decides to kill off his competitors.

Romance is, as ever, a cinematic energizer, as in "**Is This Thing On?**" (Dec. 19), a comedic drama directed by Bradley Cooper, in which Laura Dern and Will Arnett play a newly separated couple who remain emotionally connected; in a supporting role, Cooper plays their friend. "**Marty Supreme**" (Dec. 25), Josh Safdie's first film since "Uncut Gems," shares that movie's frenetic energy, in a period drama, set in 1952, about a Ping-Pong hustler (Timothée Chalamet) who sustains relationships with two women (Odessa A'zion and Gwyneth Paltrow) while pursuing a world championship. Jodie Foster stars in Rebecca Zlotowski's melodrama "**A Private Life**" (Jan. 16), as a psychologist in Paris who reconnects with her ex-husband (Daniel Auteuil) in an effort to prove that a deceased client was murdered.—Richard Brody

Dance



Pam Tanowitz's **Pastoral**, Ailey Does Joni Mitchell

In the dreary month of January, summer makes a brief but welcome appearance via **Pam Tanowitz's "Pastoral"** (Rose Theatre; Jan. 11-13). It's a bucolic work, a peaceable kingdom of serene, sometimes quirky dances, set within a landscape of vibrantly colored fabric panels by the artist Sarah Crowner. Dancers move with bracing clarity as Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony wafts across Caroline Shaw's musical collage, which also suggests the buzzing of insects, bird calls, rain.

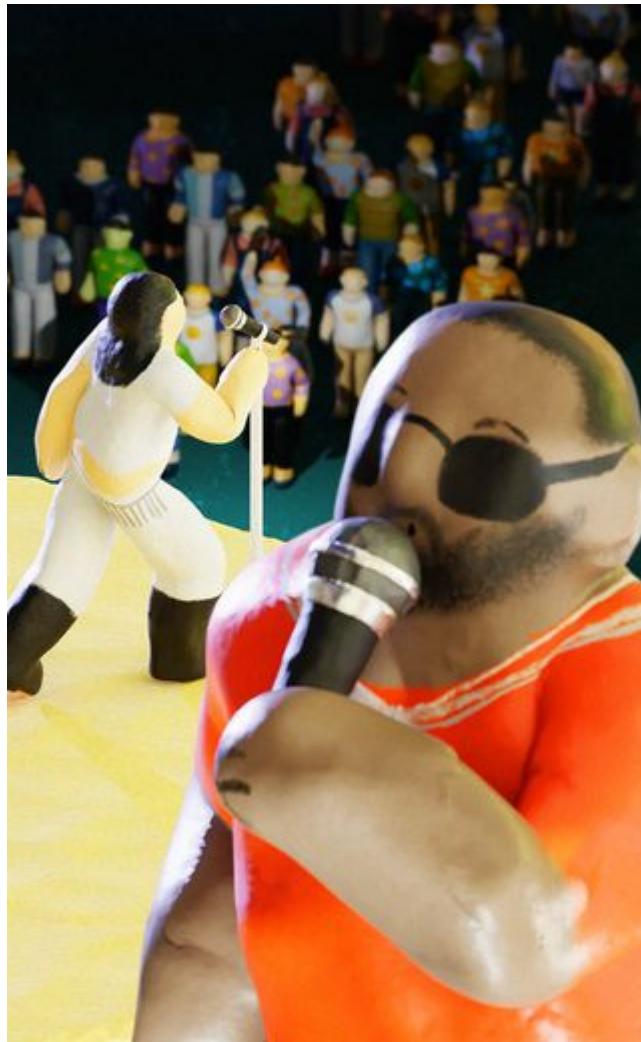
Balmy breezes blow through Maija García's new dance for **Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre** (New York City Center; Dec. 3-Jan. 4) as well. "Jazz Island" is the Cuban American choreographer's first collaboration with the Ailey dancers, after years of working on Broadway ("FELA!") and in movies ("BlacKkKlansman"). It draws its inspiration from a folktale about the Haitian vodou goddess of love, Erzuli, collected in a volume of stories by the late dancer Geoffrey Holder, "Black Gods, Green Islands." Alicia Graf Mack's first season as artistic director, abundant in new works, also includes the revival of Judith Jamison's poignant duet "A Case of You." This intimate dance is set to the eponymous Joni Mitchell song, in a soulful recording by Diana Krall.

Telephone noises and birdsong compete for attention in John Cage's musical setting for Merce Cunningham's cheeky "Travelogue," from 1977. The **Trisha Brown Dance Company** (BAM; Feb. 26-28) performs this witty, sometimes surreal dance—its first foray into the Cunningham

catalogue—alongside Brown’s “Set and Reset,” a cool, seductive work from 1983, rendered even cooler by the sonic backdrop of Laurie Anderson’s silvery vocal-and-electronic score “Longtime No See.” Both productions include memorable designs by Robert Rauschenberg: a video collage and scrims for “Set and Reset,” bicycle wheels and chairs for “Travelogue.”

Both of **New York City Ballet’s** resident choreographers, Justin Peck and Alexei Ratmansky, will produce new works for the winter season (David H. Koch Theatre; Jan. 20-March 1). After a period of focussing on contemporary music, Peck takes on Beethoven’s “Eroica”; and Ratmansky delves into satire in a new staging of the 1936 ballet “Le Roi Nu,” based on the Hans Christian Andersen folktale “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” The season also sees the return of much-loved works such as George Balanchine’s nostalgic “Diamonds” (keep an eye out for the dancer Mira Nadon). And, a rarity: Jerome Robbins’s quiet “Antique Epigraphs,” a dance for eight women set to enigmatic Debussy, which was inspired by a group of Roman statues, bronze with enamel eyes, housed in the Archeological Museum in Naples.—*Marina Harss*

Contemporary Music



Illustrations by Joanne Joo

Lorde, Clipse, Sudan Archives

There's a little something for everyone sprinkled across this winter's slate of shows in contemporary music. Those looking for ambience should catch the sound-design pioneer **Suzanne Ciani** at St. Ann & the Holy Trinity, where the accomplished composer will improvise on her modular synthesizer inside the grand cathedral (Dec. 6). The following week, the indie-pop instrumentalist **Jay Som** unwraps her first LP in six years, "Belong," at Warsaw (Dec. 11). The producer and performer **Cate Le Bon** leans into the latter of her musical skill sets at Irving Plaza, her amorphous indie rock dreamier than ever (Dec. 16). Anyone seeking tunes with more bite should try the post-punk band **Dry Cleaning**, who play Brooklyn Steel on Jan. 29. For something airier and more wistful, there's the haunted folk

of **Marissa Nadler**, which is as eerie and spectral as it is pretty (Le Poisson Rouge; Feb. 18).

'Tis also the season for dense, wordy rappers. On Dec. 1, the prodigy turned seasoned grand master **Earl Sweatshirt** brings the newfound wisdom of fatherhood to Terminal 5. At Elsewhere, three of indie rap's most underrated figures, the roistering oddball **\$ilkmoney**, the deadpan lyricist **Quelle Chris**, and the eccentric Virginian **Fly Anakin** join forces (Dec. 7). The duo **Clipse**, two brothers from only a bit further down the Virginia interstate, fresh off the runaway success of their comeback album, "Let God Sort Em Out," unload a metric ton of coke bars at Brooklyn Paramount, on Dec. 30.

In the new year, several R. & B. artists blossom into their pronounced, updated styles. The violinist Brittney Parks, performing as her experimental project **Sudan Archives**, unveils a new cybernated, dance-focussed album, "The BPM," at Webster Hall (Jan. 29). The singer **Mariah the Scientist** pulls apart smooth, beaming eighties touchstones for "Hearts Sold Separately" (Radio City Music Hall; Feb. 27). At Brooklyn Steel, **Amber Mark** occupies an even sunnier space with her soft-strummed release, "Pretty Idea" (March 4-5).

In February, progressionists of Americana take Manhattan, all with new albums in tow. On Feb. 13, the decorated alt-country singer-songwriter **Brandi Carlile** sets off on the Human Tour, supporting "Returning to Myself" at Madison Square Garden. On the 19th, the roots fusionist **Margo Price** revisits the sound of her early recordings for "Hard Headed Woman," at Webster Hall. On the 20th, **Jason Isbell** retreats into the acoustic world of "Foxes in the Snow," at Radio City Music Hall.

Meanwhile, the pop-music scene welcomes stars settling into their niches. At Hammerstein Ballroom, **Halsey** commemorates the tenth anniversary of their début album, "Badlands" (Dec. 13-15). On Dec. 16-17, **Lorde** stops by the city again for her Ultrasound World Tour, this time closing its American leg, at Barclays Center. And, at Brooklyn Paramount, **JADE**, a former member of the U.K. girl group Little Mix, is reborn as a solo star interrogating the very notion of showbiz (Feb. 19).—*Sheldon Pearce*

Classical Music



Tallis Scholars Mass, Star Pianists

England, the insult goes, is “a land without music.” Of course, where there are people, there is music—but it’s true that, for a century or two, English composers played mostly in the minor leagues. **New York Philharmonic**, conducted by Mirga Gražinytė-Tyla, at David Geffen Hall, showcases two works, both from 1910, that helped to change that. First, Vaughn Williams’s lambent “Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis,” programmed alongside the local première of John Williams’s Piano Concerto, played by Emanuel Ax, puts the sparse tonalities of the Reformation through a lush folk-inflected filter (Feb. 27-28, March 1 and 3). Then, Elgar’s fiendishly difficult Violin Concerto is played by Vilde Frang in concerts that also feature Schumann’s First Symphony and Weinberg’s Fifth (March 5-7).

With Christmas in the air, **the Tallis Scholars**, directed by Peter Philips, let a mass by the group’s namesake composer speak for itself in their annual advent at the Church of St. Mary the Virgin (Dec. 4). **Les Arts Florissants**, under William Christie, perform Charpentier’s “Pastorale de Noël” (BAM; Dec. 5-7). The **Skylark ensemble** and the **Clarion Choir** both sing at the Met Cloisters (Dec. 15 and 20). The **Chamber Music Society** leans into feel-good Baroque favorites, with Vivaldi’s “Four Seasons” (Dec. 6-7), Bach’s “Coffee” Cantata (Dec. 9), and Bach’s six Brandenburg Concertos (Dec. 12, 14, and 16). And the Metropolitan Opera marks the season with its annual hangover-friendly abridged **“Magic Flute”** (opens Dec. 11).

The tenor **Frederick Ballentine**, fresh from reviving his unctuous Sportin' Life in Gershwin's "Porgy and Bess," for the Met Opera (opens Dec. 2), explores Black and L.G.B.T.Q. experience in a recital at 92NY, accompanied by Kunal Lahiry (Feb. 3). Also at the Met Opera, the threat of the guillotine hangs over the buoyant aristocrats of Giordano's "Andrea Chénier" (opens Nov. 24). Massenet's "Manon," set under the ancien régime, shares a similarly torrid atmosphere: **Heartbeat Opera** presents a foreshortened adaptation at the Irondale Center (Jan. 27-Feb. 15).

In January, Carnegie Hall begins its semiquincentennial series "**United in Sound: America at 250.**" Some of the most interesting entries run over three nights at Zankel Hall. **Timo Andres** and **Aaron Diehl** play pieces of their own, plus Duke Ellington's "Tonk" (Jan. 28); the string quartet **Brooklyn Rider** dedicates its program, which includes a transcription of "The Times They Are a-Changin,' " to the ideal of democratic citizenship (Jan. 29). And on Jan. 30, **Davóne Tines** and the genre-bending early-music group **Ruckus** stretch the American songbook to include a Handel aria: "Why Do the Nations So Furiously Rage?"—*Fergus McIntosh*

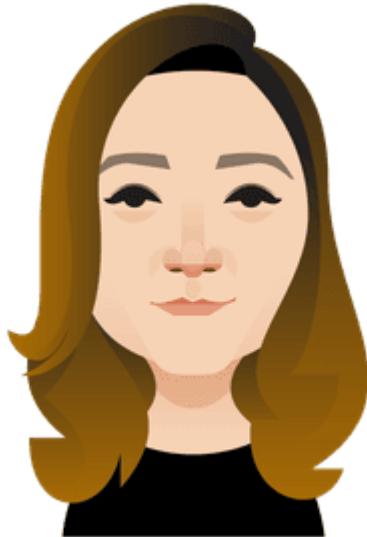
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P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- [Are engagement rings getting bigger?](#)
- [More on the braided essay debate](#)
- [Area parents ruin Halloween, again](#)



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



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The Talk of the Town

- **Voting Rights and Immigration Under Attack**

The President's goals were clear on the first day of his term, when he issued an executive order overruling the Fourteenth Amendment's birthright-citizenship clause.

- **Mobsters We Have Seen on High**

The jewel heist at the Louvre reminded Brooklynites of the time, in 1952, when two bejewelled crowns were swiped from a beloved local church—the one with a Mob boss on the ceiling.

- **Miss America Meets the Queen of Versailles**

Cassie Donegan dreams of making it to Broadway. After seeing the new musical “The Queen of Versailles,” she got some tips from an old pal, the “Wicked” alum Kristin Chenoweth.

- **The Remarkable Quotidian of Peter Hujar**

In 1974, the photographer described his day to a journalist: a shoot with Allen Ginsberg, a chat with Susan Sontag. The delayed result: “Peter Hujar’s Day,” a film by Ira Sachs.

- **Staten Island’s New Oyster Cult**

New York Harbor was once jammed with bivalves. Now the Billion Oyster Project seeds breakwaters with baby shellfish—not for eating but for purifying the local waters.

[Comment](#)

Voting Rights and Immigration Under Attack

The President's goals were clear on the first day of his term, when he issued an executive order overruling the Fourteenth Amendment's birthright-citizenship clause.

By [Jelani Cobb](#)

November 2, 2025

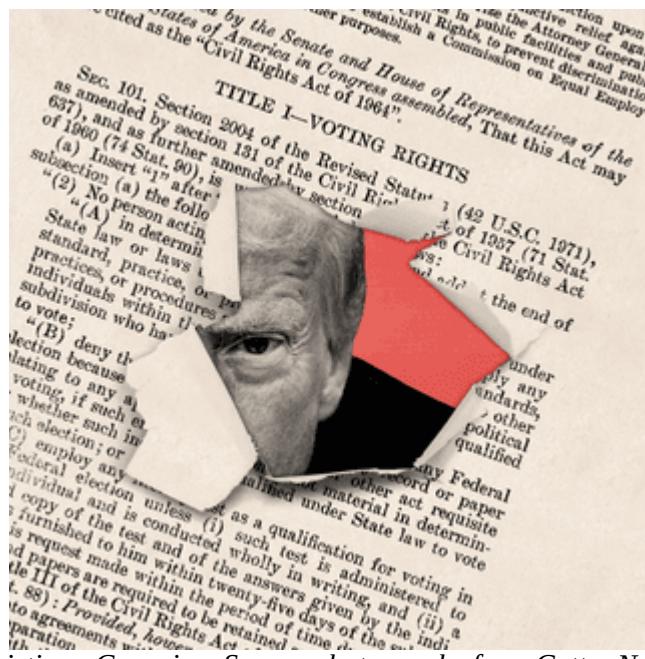


Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty; National Archives

Sixty years ago, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed two pieces of legislation that are, to a remarkable degree, animating forces in the most volatile aspects of the current political moment. In August, 1965, Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, a crowning achievement of the civil-rights movement which paved the way for the election of thousands of African Americans to political office in states where, previously, they were not even allowed to vote. Two months later, he signed the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, overturning the Immigration Act of 1924, which,

by way of eugenics, had sought to curate an immigrant stock of white Europeans. Taken together, the laws democratized the idea of who could be an American, and also which Americans could freely exercise their rights at the ballot box. The Trump Administration and its Republican allies are now engaged in a concerted effort to return the United States to the landscape that preceded them.

The G.O.P. under Donald Trump, like many reactionary nationalist movements, is disproportionately concerned with demographics. Trump's anti-immigrant crusade has reached a point where masked federal troops are snatching people from their homes—including an instantly infamous *ice* raid on Chicago's South Side that involved a Black Hawk helicopter—their cars, their workplaces, courthouses, and public streets. Further demonstrating the nature of the President's exclusionary vision, on Thursday the Administration announced that it will slash the number of refugees admitted to the U.S. next year to seventy-five hundred, with priority given to white Afrikaners. In addition, the Administration is insisting that universities accept fewer international students, recognizing that admission to such institutions is often the first step toward citizenship.

The President's goals were made plain on the first day of his second term, when he issued an executive order defying the Fourteenth Amendment's birthright-citizenship clause. The clause was written after the Civil War to affirm that emancipated native-born Black people were citizens, as was virtually anyone born in this country. But it has been targeted as a means of insuring that children born here without a parent who is either a citizen or a permanent resident are not automatically granted citizenship themselves. Courts blocked the executive order, so, in September, the Department of Justice asked the Supreme Court to take up the question of its legality. The attorneys general of twenty-four Republican-led states have urged the Court to act in Trump's favor.

At the same time, the President's desire to control which Americans' votes will count has been manifested in the battle over congressional maps. The maps are typically revised every ten years, after the census. But three states—Texas, Missouri, and North Carolina—have redrawn their maps at Trump's behest, creating potentially six more G.O.P.-held seats, and several

others, including Louisiana, have taken steps to do the same. This is a transparent attempt to move the goalposts ahead of the 2026 midterms, when a three-seat shift would give Democrats control of the House of Representatives.

In response, at least five states with Democratic majorities are considering redrawing their maps. To counter Texas's move, California put redistricting on its November ballot, which could give the Democrats five more seats, and voters appear set to approve the measure. In a perverse mirroring of a provision of the Voting Rights Act, the Justice Department is dispatching federal election monitors to some California districts.

But the potential impact of state efforts would likely pale in comparison with the one presented last month at the oral arguments in the Supreme Court case *Louisiana v. Callais*. In January, 2024, following court orders, Louisiana—which is allotted six seats in the House of Representatives, and where African Americans make up a third of the population—passed a map that created a second majority-Black district. In March, after a legal challenge, the state attorney general defended the map before the Supreme Court, asserting that it was consistent with Section 2 of the Voting Rights Act, which prohibits drawing districts in a way that minimizes minority voters' ability to elect their candidates of choice. (Strategically drawn districts were key in preventing African Americans from gaining political power prior to the civil-rights movement.) But a group identifying itself as “non-African American voters” has claimed that the protections enshrined in Section 2 are themselves discriminatory, in that they offer Black voters an entitlement not offered to non-Black voters. And Louisiana has effectively switched sides, arguing that the map it defended just last year should now be struck down.

Should the non-African American voters prevail, the ruling would set off a gerrymandering battle across the country. The case follows a Court ruling from last year, in *Alexander v. South Carolina State Conference of the N.A.A.C.P.*, which held that gerrymandering for partisan gain is permissible even when it diminishes the voting power of minority populations. In the oral arguments in *Louisiana v. Callais*, Janai Nelson, of the N.A.A.C.P. Legal Defense Fund, noted that referring to gerrymandering as partisan

rather than as racial offered a distinction without a difference, given that roughly ninety per cent of African Americans in Louisiana are Democrats. The Court's conservative majority appeared skeptical, but accepting the distinction ignores a crucial part of American political history; namely, that Black enfranchisement has always had partisan implications.

The Fifteenth Amendment, ratified in 1870, which gave Black men the right to vote, was driven by Republican considerations that the newly enfranchised population would offset the political power of Southern Democrats, who had just nearly succeeded in tearing the country apart. Those considerations were central to the extralegal and violent tactics that subsequently disenfranchised Black people throughout the South for most of the twentieth century. The concern was not simply that Black suffrage implied a civic equality among the races but that Black people were not likely to vote for the segregation-friendly Democrats who then held power throughout the region. President Johnson privately predicted that empowering Black voters would spark a mass migration of white Southern Democrats to the G.O.P., which is precisely what happened.

Estimates of the net partisan effect of the current efforts vary, but what seems clear is that striking down Section 2 will almost certainly result in a landscape in which minority voters, particularly African Americans in the South, wield less political power than they have at any point since 1965. And it would bring Trump closer to shaping a nation that would look very familiar to those Americans who risked their lives to enshrine the very rights that he is trying to upend. ♦



Jelani Cobb, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the dean of the Columbia Journalism School, is the author of “[*Three or More Is a Riot: Notes on How We Got Here, 2012-2025*](#),” among other books.

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[**Bling Dept.**](#)

Mobsters We Have Seen on High

The jewel heist at the Louvre reminded Brooklynites of the time, in 1952, when two bejewelled crowns were swiped from a beloved local church—the one with a Mob boss on the ceiling.

By [Susan Mulcahy](#)

November 3, 2025

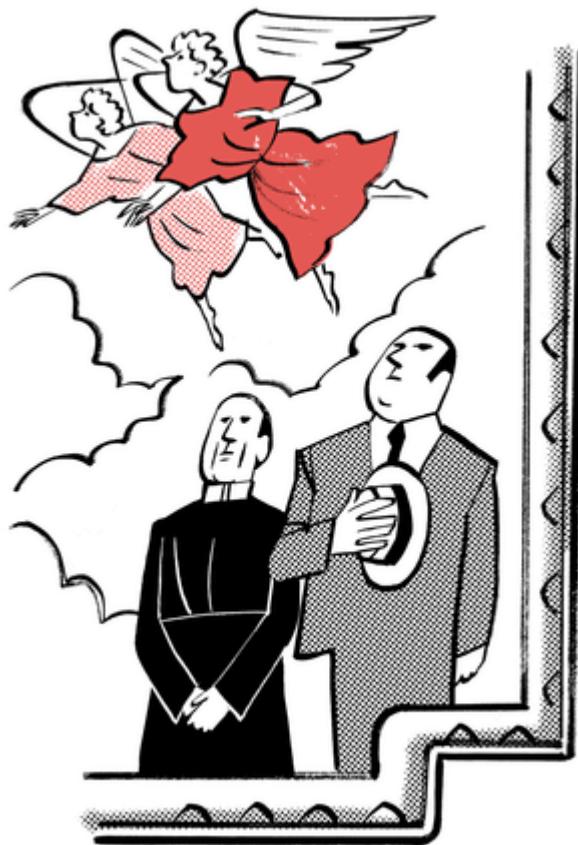


Illustration by João Fazenda

The theft of two tiaras and a crown, among other jewels, from the Louvre last month got some Brooklynites recalling the time, almost seventy-five years ago, when two gem-encrusted crowns were swiped right off the heads of the baby Jesus and his mother in an Italian Renaissance-style basilica in

Dyker Heights. The Louvre thieves dropped the crown as they fled; back in 1952, in Brooklyn, both stolen crowns were returned to the church, Regina Pacis (“Queen of Peace”), in a manila envelope, days after the body of Ralph (Bucky) Emmino, a known jewel thief, was found in Bath Beach, sleeping near the fishes.

It turned out that the wealthy supporter who'd helped raise money to build the church where the 18k.-gold crowns were displayed was likely the same guy who ordered the hit: Joseph Profaci, the “olive-oil king” and boss of the Mob clan that later became the [Colombo](#) family.

Not long ago, Profaci's sixty-five-year-old grandson and namesake travelled from his home in SoHo to visit the Brooklyn sanctuary, on a family fact-finding mission. The main item on the agenda: determine if his mobster grandfather is on the ceiling.



Detail of the ceiling mural of the Basilica of Regina Pacis, possibly depicting the mobster Joe Profaci with his fedora.

Among the church's many design flourishes is a series of overhead murals showing the usual suspects (saints, angels, Mary, a Pope), along with a group of civilians who look as if they wandered in from a Howard Hawks film, in nineteen-forties dresses and suits. The man at the far right, holding a fedora over his heart, is widely believed to be Joe Profaci.

The contemporary Joe Profaci, a Harvard-educated business attorney who works in the olive-oil trade, was two years old when his grandfather died, in 1962. “I'd heard that he was on the ceiling,” Profaci said. But his relatives

had always pooh-poohed the idea. He craned his neck to study the mural. “It doesn’t look like him,” he said. Still, local lore, including online discussion threads, insists that the wise guy looms above the pews. The ninety-two-year-old organized-crime reporter Nick Pileggi, a Bensonhurst native, said in a phone conversation that “more than one person” had told him that Profaci is up in the Regina Pacis clouds. “From my conversations with Mario Puzo when he was still writing ‘[The Godfather](#),’ ” he added, “Profaci was the closest to Vito Corleone, out of all the mobsters.”

The younger Profaci, slim and soft-spoken, had on a plaid shirt, tan jeans, and running shoes, and was accompanied by his wife, Beth Saidel, a writer. He made two laps around the church searching for other traces of his family. “I should probably kneel,” he said, passing the altar. He pointed up to a stained-glass window that contained the words “In memory of Salvatore and Rosalia Profaci,” the Mafia chief’s parents. Another window was a gift from Mrs. Joe Profaci’s brothers. Profaci is not a regular churchgoer, but his mother has the family covered. “She used to go to Mass every day,” Saidel said.

Congregants began to enter for a noon Mass. Asked about the legend of the mobster on the ceiling, one elderly parishioner replied, “All I know is, Cioffi is up there.”

Monsignor Angelo Cioffi was the priest who spearheaded the campaign to construct Regina Pacis back in the forties, with generous assistance from Joe Profaci. Along with encouraging parishioners to pledge money, Cioffi asked them to donate their jewelry, to be melted down and fashioned into a crown to be affixed to a painting of the Virgin on the altarpiece. Rings, bracelets, and brooches poured in, with enough diamonds, sapphires, and rubies to embellish two crowns—one for Mary and a smaller one for Jesus, who sat in her lap. Before the crowns were placed on the portrait, Cioffi flew them to Rome to be blessed by Pope Pius XII, which you’d think would offer protection for eternity. But just days after they went on display, in May, 1952, the crowns, insured for a hundred thousand dollars, disappeared. The thief had sawed through a bronze grille that protected the portrait and its bling.



The Mob boss and “olive-oil king” Joe Profaci.

Photograph from New York Daily News Archive / Getty

When the crowns reappeared—who would be dumb enough to rob a church linked to a Mob kingpin?—cheers erupted throughout Brooklyn. The actor Dom DeLuise, then a local teen, told the *Brooklyn Eagle*, “My mother had been to 10 o’clock mass. She burst into the house and cried out, ‘They’re home, they’re home.’” Later, an F.B.I. informant reported that Profaci had ordered the disposal of Emmino.

“I have no information about that,” Profaci’s grandson said, when asked about the incident. He said that he first learned of his family’s connection to the Mafia “in school, when ‘The Valachi Papers’ came out.” Peter Maas’s 1968 best-seller spilled the secrets of the Mob as recalled by a soldier in the Genovese crime family. Joe Profaci figures in the narrative.

Astonishingly, the crowns were stolen from Regina Pacis again, eleven years after Profaci died. (The F.B.I. told the *Daily News* that organized

crime helped recover them again.) The crowns are no longer on regular display, but they appeared on Mother's Day with police standing by.

"I don't think criminals should be romanticized," Profaci's grandson said. "Except for maybe Robin Hood." The question remained: Why do so many people think his grandfather is on the ceiling? He has no idea. "It's a guy in a fedora," he said. "Lots of guys were wearing fedoras then." ♦

Susan Mulcahy is a co-author, with Frank DiGiacomo, of "[Paper of Wreckage](#)," an oral history of the New York Post from 1976 to 2024.

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[**The Boards**](#)

Miss America Meets the Queen of Versailles

Cassie Donegan dreams of making it to Broadway. After seeing the new musical “The Queen of Versailles,” she got some tips from an old pal, the “Wicked” alum Kristin Chenoweth.

By [Dan Greene](#)

November 3, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

Doors open when you’re Miss America. For instance, did you know that the famously hundred-and-two-floor Empire State Building actually has a not so famous hundred-and-third? “There’s this little ladder to get up there, and

it was literally, like, a ledge,” Cassie Donegan, who was crowned Miss America in September, said the other day. “But it was really cool.”

Behind another such door: the velvet-seated V.I.P. lounge hidden in the St. James Theatre, in midtown, where Donegan was sipping a Diet Coke and sitting beside a bespoke Niki Lassiter handbag with a poofy pink strap. Or perhaps she’d have found another way in; the star of the night’s show, [Kristin Chenoweth](#), is a pal from musical-theatre circles. A few months ago, Chenoweth sent Donegan, who has starred in regional productions of “Legally Blonde” and “Carrie,” a video of herself offering encouragement before a competition. “She’d kill me for sharing this, but she had the flu and was just dying,” Donegan said. “I watched it on repeat before the Miss New York finals, and then again before Miss America.”

Chenoweth’s new musical, “The Queen of Versailles,” based on [Lauren Greenfield](#)’s 2012 documentary of the same name, tells the story of Jackie Siegel, a former Mrs. Florida winner who married a time-share magnate and set out to build the largest private home in the United States: a fourteen-bed, thirty-bath mansion, in Orlando, Florida, modelled on the Palace of Versailles. (Also part of the design: an observation deck to watch [Disney World](#)’s fireworks.) Then the 2008 financial crash hit. Construction halted, and things veered more toward “Grey Gardens.” By the end, Siegel’s husband was lambasting his family for leaving the lights on, lest the utility bill creep higher.

Donegan, who is twenty-eight, grew up in small-town Virginia, in a family that owned an assortment of local businesses—a tobacco farm, a mechanic shop, an electricity company. “I remember hearing the impacts of those financial fluctuations,” she said, of the aughts recession. “But I was eleven. I didn’t really log a lot of that.” She does not have Siegel’s residential ambitions. Donegan now lives in Sunnyside, Queens, in a garden-level one-bedroom that she shares with two dogs. “I got an incredible freaking deal,” she said. “And I have a leasing office, so, if there’s a problem, someone actually answers the phone.”



Cartoon by Frank Cotham

Showtime approached. Donegan, who wore a black dress with a crisscrossed neckline and a black bomber draped over her shoulders, made her way to an orchestra seat. Some two hours later, after Chenoweth, in a series of eye-popping ensembles and animal prints, sang of “American royalty” and “caviar dreams,” Donegan rose to join the standing ovation. Most of the audience filed out. Stephen Schwartz, the musical’s composer, and Winnie Holzman, Schwartz’s collaborator on “Wicked,” shook a few nearby hands.

Several minutes later, Chenoweth reappeared onstage, in a black Blondie sweatshirt and untied white sparkly sneakers. She rushed to hug Donegan, then gestured apologetically toward her own throat—vocal rest. “No, I get it—you just ran a marathon,” Donegan said. The two whispered their greetings, then scooted over to the set’s faux-marble staircase for a photo. Chenoweth cheerily waved over the rest of the cast for a group shot, and a handler produced Donegan’s Miss America sash and tiara. She tried to secure the tiara atop her strawberry-blond hair. “I don’t have any pins,” she said with a frown, then shrugged. “I’ll just balance it.” A cast member asked what Donegan had done for the pageant’s talent portion. “I sing,” she said, drawing a few oohs.

On the way out, as a staffer closed down the merch stand and the lobby bars’ slushy machines quietly hummed, Donegan brought up the lyric about caviar dreams. “So often we pray and hope and dream for things,” she said. “Then you wake up and you realize that day that you’re in the middle of what you hoped and prayed and dreamed for.” She considered her own

career. The goal, still, was to be on Broadway herself. In the meantime, things were pretty good. “I distinctly remember being in my bedroom in middle school and thinking that being a working, professional actor was so far away,” she said. “The reality is, I can pay my bills just being an actor, and that’s not a reality for a lot of people.”

The caviar could wait. “I won Miss America in a wardrobe that probably cost less than a thousand dollars in total,” she said. “You don’t have to be the Queen of Versailles to be the Queen of Versailles, you know?” ♦

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

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[The Pictures](#)

The Remarkable Quotidian of Peter Hujar

In 1974, the photographer described his day to a journalist: a shoot with Allen Ginsberg, a chat with Susan Sontag. The delayed result: “Peter Hujar’s Day,” a film by Ira Sachs.

By [Michael Schulman](#)

November 3, 2025



Illustration by João Fazenda

What happened to you yesterday? If your first thought is “not much,” consider the day that the photographer [Peter Hujar](#) had on December 18, 1974. At the time, Hujar’s friend Linda Rosenkrantz was working on a book about how people spend their time. She would ask her subjects to pick a

day, take notes, and then meet with her the next day and describe their activities into her tape recorder. She talked to her mother, her sister, her cleaning lady, her fourteen-year-old cousin, the artist Chuck Close, and Hujar, who came to her apartment, on East Ninety-fourth Street, and narrated his yesterday, from wake-up (he slept through his alarm) to bedtime. In between, he had chatted on the phone with [Susan Sontag](#), photographed a grumpy [Allen Ginsberg](#) for the *Times*, eaten Chinese takeout with the critic [Vince Aletti](#), and taken two naps.

Rosenkrantz abandoned the project, and the tape was lost. A few years after Hujar died, in 1987, of AIDS, Rosenkrantz moved to California. The transcripts moved with her, idling among her papers. In 2018, the [Morgan Library & Museum](#) was mounting a major Hujar exhibition, prompting Rosenkrantz to donate her transcript to the institution, which holds his collections. Within months, a graduate student read it there and alerted a friend who has an indie press. In 2021, it was published as “Peter Hujar’s Day,” a perfect time capsule of gritty old bohemian Manhattan, half a century ago. The filmmaker Ira Sachs came upon a copy, in a gay bookstore in Paris. “When I finished the last paragraph, I thought, Oh, I should make a movie with this material,” he said recently.

Sachs was visiting the Morgan, just before “Peter Hujar’s Day” screened at the [New York Film Festival](#), this fall. He was joined by Rosenkrantz, who is now ninety-one, with dyed-red hair cut into a bob with punkish bangs. In the film, [Ben Whishaw](#) and [Rebecca Hall](#) play Hujar and Rosenkrantz, and the script is drawn verbatim from the transcript. (Sachs re-created details from Rosenkrantz’s old apartment, down to her spider plants and grandfather clock.) “It’s an extremely rare window into an artist’s circular thinking, which I really relate to,” Sachs said. “You go from confidence to insecurity, to this hope to that discovery, round and round and round, and you hope that something comes out of that.”

They were led into a wood-panelled reading room with a marble fireplace, once the parlor of J. P. Morgan’s son’s town house. From across a table, Joel Smith, the Morgan’s curator of photography, slid over a manila folder containing twenty yellowed pages of single-spaced type—the transcript.

They flipped through. “How much of this tape is gone already?” Hujar wonders early on, worried about being “boring.”

“He was very conscious of the tape recorder,” Rosenkrantz recalled, in a Bronx accent. At one point, Hujar complains about a call from the artist Ed Baynard. (“He is totally insane.”) “Peter was always trying to get people off the phone,” Rosenkrantz said, smiling. “He tells these little white lies.”

Page 9: Hujar describes his portrait session with Ginsberg, who sat in a downtown doorway in the lotus position and started chanting. “I can’t interrupt God,” Hujar cracks. On page 15, Hujar considers his day so far:

Hujar: I’ve wasted another day. All I did is I spent two hours with Ginsberg—this takes a day?

Rosenkrantz: Well that’s why I’m doing this actually is to find out how people fill up their days because I feel like I don’t do anything all day.

At the Morgan, Rosenkrantz remarked that Hujar had picked an unusually eventful day. Sachs disagreed; any day of Hujar’s would have seemed extraordinary in his telling. They skipped to the last page and read aloud: Hujar describes playing his harpsichord before bed, then getting woken up by sex workers outside his window. He watches one of them fix her makeup in the mirror of a blue truck—“and then I went to bed and fell asleep.”

“Such a beautiful ending,” Sachs said. He asked Rosenkrantz, “Could you tell twenty pages of your day yesterday? Could you talk for that long?”

She gave it a shot. The day before, she’d woken up in Santa Monica, panicked over what to pack, been delayed at the airport, answered e-mails as she flew across America, landed at J.F.K., settled into the apartment she was borrowing, and stayed up, agitated, until two. “A lot of stress,” she said.

Sachs had spent the previous day shooting his next film, in Brooklyn. He didn’t want to say much more, except that he’d been fully engaged as an artist. As far as days went, he said, it was a “ten out of ten.” ♦



[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](#).”

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[Missing Mollusks Dept.](#)

Staten Island's New Oyster Cult

New York Harbor was once jammed with bivalves. Now the Billion Oyster Project seeds breakwaters with baby shellfish—not for eating but for purifying the local waters.

By [Ben McGrath](#)

November 3, 2025

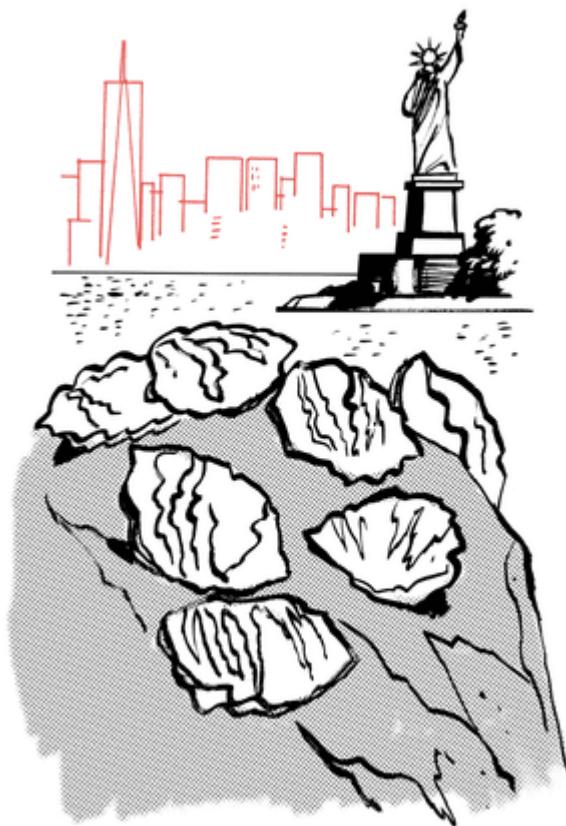


Illustration by João Fazenda

A fleet of kayaks left the south shore of Staten Island recently in search of oysters. Their destinations were a series of breakwaters a few hundred yards offshore. The breakwaters are essentially man-made islands of jagged rocks, intended to stave off beach erosion that's been ongoing for decades.

If it turns out they can host oyster reefs, too, all the better. Whales and dolphins have begun returning to [New York Harbor](#); why not oysters, which, in these parts, once numbered in the billions? Though unsafe to eat from city waters, oysters are among the most efficient purifying devices, each adult capable of filtering up to fifty gallons a day. Mike McCann, the director of science and research for the Billion Oyster Project, was in the bow of a two-seater, and explained, as he paddled, that the organization had already seeded one of the breakwaters with oyster larvae, to expedite the process. His mission on this day was to visit an unseeded one, in the hope of documenting what are known as “natural recruits”—baby oysters that might have migrated downriver from the Tappan Zee, say, like suburbanites recolonizing the city.

The man in the stern of McCann’s kayak, as it happened, had come down from the Tappan Zee himself, after having spent the morning unwittingly windsurfing over local oyster beds. Early indications, as the paddlers approached, were that the breakwaters had done an exceptional job, at least, of recruiting gulls and cormorants. They pulled around to the lee side of a so-called reef street, an arm of rocks extending perpendicularly from the central spine, and were joined by Pippa Brashear, the resilience principal at Scape, the landscape-architecture firm that led the design of the breakwaters. She noted that the individual rocks, each as heavy as a pyramid stone, had been carefully placed, rather than dumped, to maximize stability and to create the nooks and crannies favored by marine life: mussels, crabs, sponges. “Maybe a red-beard sponge,” McCann said, examining one specimen. “They make us feel like we live in the tropics. We actually have brightly colored wildlife in the harbor! It’s not just brown and olive.”

It was low tide and the rocks just above the waterline were slick, causing McCann to remark on the wisdom of New York State rules against trespassing on riprap. He spotted an oyster scar, the whitish stain left by a shell, like a ghost bicycle by the roadside. “It’s stressful for an oyster in the intertidal zone in New York City,” he said, speculating that a parasite might have killed this one in its infancy. The breakwater was only a year old. Then he found another possible culprit: an “oyster drill”—a small snail with shell-penetrating teeth and a proboscis for slurping mollusk meat. He

handed it to the windsurfer, who recalled childhood afternoons spent sending hermit crabs on “vacations,” but then thought better of airing out his old pitching arm on unsteady feet.

Seeking higher and drier ground, the windsurfer noticed a hard hat encrusted with barnacles. “Which union?” Brashear joked. McCann spied an errant pumpkin. Brashear found a golf ball. The windsurfer gazed north at the Gatsbyesque mansions on the shore and wondered if any of them belonged to a heavy hitter on the P.G.A. Tour. He was jolted out of his reverie by a whiff of guano in the breeze. An almost fluorescent sheen lined the crest of the breakwater. Holding noses, the oyster hunters climbed over to the far side, with a clear view of the Amboys and the mouth of the Raritan. “The old maps showed a lot of clam beds there,” Brashear said. “And they were farmed, actually, until a couple years ago. A lot of the clams that you’d get on Long Island, they’d grow them here. They can’t harvest them here, because the water’s not clean”—hence the need for more oysters—“so they take them out to Long Island for a while to cure.” A more typical suburban migration. The windsurfer made a mental note: beware of Long Island clams?

This side of the breakwater was lined with tide pools formed from ECOncrete, a composite cement that mimics natural rock formations. And here, at last, near some crabs locked in a coital embrace, was a fledgling oyster. McCann used a caliper to measure its breadth: forty-two millimetres. “Probably settled here in September of 2024,” he guessed. With any luck, barring parasites and hungry snails and weaponized Titleists, it would live another six or seven years—long enough to greet some neighbors. ♦



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

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When Nat transitioned, I learned that when someone you love changes, you change, too.

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ChatGPT does not have an inner life. Yet it seems to know what it's talking about.

- **The Runaway Monkeys Upending the Animal-Rights Movement**

“I wasn’t fooled by these walls of my body / but loved them touched.”

- **Joachim Trier Has Put Oslo on the Cinematic Map**

His new film, “Sentimental Value,” is another intimate character study set in the Norwegian capital. His approach to directing is as empathic as his films.

Personal History

Who My Child Was and Would Be

When Nat transitioned, I learned that when someone you love changes, you change, too.

By [James Marcus](#)

November 3, 2025

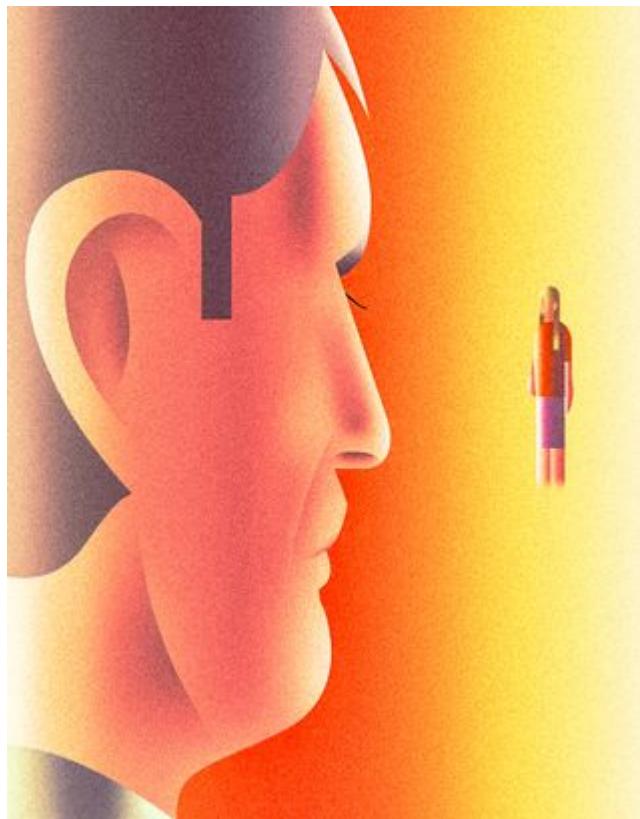


Illustration by Derek Abella

“What do I know about being a woman?” Nat said. “Sometimes I have to ask myself. The thing is, I don’t know shit about womanhood.”

It was December of 2019. For most of the previous decade, I had understood Nat as a gay man, his identity blurred only by the erosion of the old rules about sex and gender that had shaped my youth. Now my twenty-six-year-old son intended to become a woman. We were on FaceTime—I in

New York, Nat in Berlin. His hair was long, the light of the laptop whitening his eyes. He wore an orange tank top, silver necklaces, and dark nail polish, and sported a tattooed eye on his biceps that seemed to study me in return.

A few days earlier, Nat said, he had been hit hard by the idea that transition might be an affirmation, not an escape, as he had thought. “I wept buckets,” he said. “I never do that. I never cry.” He thought estrogen might open this well.

I wanted to protest—wasn’t the association of women and weeping a cliché we had spent decades dismantling?—but said nothing. I only looked and looked at him, sadly wondering if this version of Nat, with his faint stubble and familiar shape, was about to slip away.

As if reading my mind, Nat said, “I’m not sure where this ends up.” Whether he would follow up the hormone treatments with surgery was still an open question. He also intended to keep his current name, and lots of his current wardrobe. “I like the silhouette of my clothes,” he said. “I’m going to keep wearing them.”

I clung to that. Same name: good. Same sweaters and corduroys: also good. But the physical being would be transformed, and perhaps the soul, which didn’t go its separate way but was always a co-conspirator with the body. Each conversation, then, felt like a goodbye.

For many trans people, the misalignment is there from the start, a stark sense of having been born into the wrong body. That kind of clarity makes for a simpler story, a simpler diagnosis.

That wasn’t Nat’s story, or so his mother and I thought. He had been a funny, extroverted child, performing “Hit the Road Jack” on his bed, then a theatre kid who grew taller than his parents and, in high school, took on demanding roles. In “Fool for Love,” he was a smooth-talking seducer, and, in “Othello,” he was Roderigo, whose frustrated desire for Desdemona drives him to despair: *It is silliness to live when to live is torment.* These roles required an adult grasp of lust and jealousy and nihilism. They also

involved playing a raging heterosexual—a dramatic flex of the imaginative muscle.

During his sophomore year in high school, you see, Nat had come out. What emerged from the chrysalis of confusion was, it seemed, a young gay man, who went off to college at Oberlin, and then moved to Berlin, a queer Valhalla long before Christopher Isherwood. To all appearances, the riddle of identity had been posed and solved.

But it had not, as I discovered in November of 2019. Chatting on FaceTime one day, Nat mentioned that he was visiting a nearby L.G.B.T.Q.-aid organization to explore the feminine side of his personality. At first, I assumed it was identity tourism, a kind of dabbling in alternate selves. Then he made clear that he wanted to be changed utterly—to become a woman.

This came as a shock. To me, he was a man, a lovably androgynous person with a Y chromosome and a visible Adam's apple. Why did he want to become a woman? Nat tried to explain, and at first his wish seemed entangled with his periodic depressions—which were deeper and darker than I had realized. When lost in their depths, he told me, he felt absolutely hollow. “I don’t feel like I have any reason to live,” he said.

This was a painful exchange. Melancholy, we often believe, is an occupational hazard for creative people, and Nat, a poet, visual artist, translator, and d.j., certainly fits into that demographic. But “melancholy” is also a pretty word for depression.

Of course, depression, for many people on the brink of transitioning, can be a red herring. Friends and family will often counsel against making such a weighty decision in the midst of emotional turbulence, not grasping that a profound sense of misalignment is what is feeding the turbulence in the first place. I went down that road myself, urging Nat to tackle the depression first.

“I understand that you are responding to a deep impulse,” I wrote him in a long e-mail. “An impulse that deep and consistent should not be ignored. But what is it telling you? I don’t see how a regimen of hormones, or

smoother skin, or a redistribution of body fat, is going to ease the sort of disquiet that you were telling me about.”

I was fighting it. That’s obvious. In my e-mail, I cast the impulse to alter his body as naïve literalism—as if the body were just an industrial container for the interesting person inside.

Yet Nat had already begun to say goodbye to his old body. He had been struggling during those weeks with pneumonia. This meant long days at home, full of fatigue and shallow breathing. He binged “The Sopranos,” drank bone broth, took numerous baths. In the bath, he told me, he would study his body in the water, and recognized that he would be leaving it behind. He felt a kind of grief, he told me. But this didn’t change his mind—it was just the cost of changing, of sloughing off the old self.

I sensed myself tiptoeing through in our next few exchanges. I didn’t want to drive Nat away. I also didn’t want him to turn into a woman. It was that simple, which is to say, not simple at all.

For weeks, I felt an impending loss: the precious fact of having a son was about to be taken away. I wasn’t hung up on dynastic issues. Yet I think there’s something raw, some product of the primitive brain, that makes a father identify with a son. You *see* yourself in this other, beloved being. I was afraid of losing that.

The fear entered my dreams. One night, I was a woman, alone in an apartment, a stalker waiting outside the door. Myself-as-woman was both Nat and me: she vulnerable in transition, me powerless to stop it. I told Nat none of this. I could grieve for the son I was losing while preparing myself to have a daughter.

I meanwhile chose the crisis-management technique favored by most bookish people: books. I read Jan Morris’s “[Conundrum](#)” (1974), marvelling at the hypermasculine roles Morris had inhabited before transition—soldier, climber of Everest, political journalist, father. She had transitioned so long ago that the vaginoplasty was performed in a mysterious clinic in Casablanca. Yet her description of awakening in a dark

room after the procedure, the indecipherability of the space a metaphor for her slippery self, could have been written yesterday.

I also read Rachel E. Gross's "[Vagina Obscura](#)" (2022), with its portraits of the gynecologic surgeon Marci Bowers creating, with almost sculptural skill, vaginas attentive to pleasure. It left me wondering how long before the bespoke became indistinguishable from the "natural," and whether Nat, despite his hesitations, would someday alter himself that way, too.

Not long after my talk with Nat in December, I met a friend I'll call Ajay, a poet and a teacher, for dinner at a Lebanese restaurant. Over *kibbeh nayyeh*, raw meat served with onion and mint, I told him what was going on.

"So you were taken by surprise?" he asked.

"Absolutely. I'm very confused."

Ajay nodded. He had several trans students, he said—his best students. They were serious, precise in their language. "They're the only students with whom I can have a conversation about the soul," he insisted. "For the others, that's a narrow religious concept." For the trans students, it was an obvious way to talk about identity. They had already made the definitive discovery that the body was malleable, which suggested that some integral part of oneself was other than corporeal. "These people represent the next stage of evolution," Ajay said, not entirely serious but not quite kidding, either.

He knew that parents could go through an emotional wringer in the process. He mentioned one trans woman distressed that her parents had kept the relics of her boyhood—I imagined photos, toys, the odd Little League trophy. Did these souvenirs seem counterfeit to her, awful reminders of her long imprisonment in the wrong body?

Nat, meanwhile, was beginning a transformation of his own. Twice a day, he rubbed an estrogen gel on his arms and belly, which seeped into the bloodstream and began its slow, invisible work. "I've initiated this huge change," he told me. "And it all comes down to this transparent jelly on

your fingers. It's really drippy. But it's nice that there's no, well, *apparatus* between you and your body when you're applying it. It's tactile."

In January of 2020, I flew to Berlin with my girlfriend, Nina. We met Nat for dinner, my first glimpse of him since he had begun estrogen. I studied him carefully. I saw no dramatic change, not externally. His hair was lustrous, his skin had a pink glow, and he looked happy: all gender-neutral qualities. On the other hand, Nat was wearing a white ribbed sweater with a zipper, and when he unzipped it partway before dessert, we could see a black camisole underneath. So an inner transformation was under way. Or not, since I could pretty much imagine him wearing the camisole before any of this stuff happened. We didn't really discuss his transition. It was just *there*, like the low light and the good cheer and the bumper-car sound of German consonants colliding in the air.

During the week, we shared meals—trout and potatoes at his apartment, Chinese food one night when he confided his loneliness. He longed for a relationship but couldn't seem to meet the right person. "The worst people on earth still manage to find their opposite numbers," I said, with the exasperation of a parent who can see what the world is missing. "And you're *awesome*." Nat drooped over his plate, then rallied with a laugh at his fortune cookie, whose slip of paper read: *You have a great sense of humor and love a good time.*

One afternoon, as we were walking together, he mentioned that the estrogen gel was working. His skin was smoother, and, he added matter-of-factly, "My nipples are getting bigger."

I found myself asking, "Do you mean wider or more protruding?" I was genuinely curious.

"They're getting more conical," Nat said.

When we returned to his apartment, his roommate was watching a video about Buck Angel, the trans man and porn star who has sometimes argued that only those who medically transition should be referred to as trans. I could see the logic. Yet I also grasped how offensive the argument was to any number of self-defined trans people along the endlessly subdivided

spectrum of queerness. The trans community itself was as fissured as any other, full of arguments about purity and authenticity.

I had once met Angel in Los Angeles, as it happens. Online, this hugely divisive figure looked like a cartoon of masculinity, muscles bulging as he swung kettlebells. In person, he was smaller, unexpectedly sweet. With his bald head and meaty arms, he registered as a man, but also as somebody you couldn't pin down at once, or maybe at all.

We returned from Berlin on January 17, 2020. Three days later, the first U.S. COVID case was confirmed. Nat had scheduled a visit for March, but amid the viral mayhem that plan collapsed. To be honest, I thought it was safer for him to stay in Germany, a technocratic nation run by a fully functioning adult (and a quantum chemist). Yet I hated keeping him away. A year and a half would pass before we saw each other again.

Meanwhile, we lived on FaceTime. As the weeks passed, he didn't look especially female to me, but he said he felt blurry in the eyes of others. The gel was doing its work—its stealthy reconstruction of skin cells and follicles and mental states. Of course, it didn't banish the gusts of sadness that had always bedevilled Nat. You can feel as desolate in the new body as you did in the old one.

By May he was despondent. "I'm ashamed of my body," he said. With salons closed, he had tried waxing himself, leaving welts and acne. "I have these little-girl tits with hair on them!" he wailed. Then, softening: "Well, I'm going through a second puberty. What else can you expect? I've got the emotional life of a thirteen-year-old girl."

So the months went: a sequence of vignettes, like an epistolary novel. More and more, his friends noticed subtle changes. "Your skin is so soft," one said. Another told him he looked *strahlend*—radiant. Nat laughed and said, "There's a pink mist coming off me."

In August, I learned that Nat was now leaning toward female pronouns. "It's not really a policy," Nat said. "Just where I expect to end up. Some friends still use *he*, some use *they*. I'm open to anything at the moment."

The female pronoun wasn't the shocker it might have been, because Nat and his friends had often used it in a camp way. What seemed novel to me was the idea of using it sincerely, quietly, without the implicit mockery of gender categories.

That same morning, Nat had watched a video of three trans women being attacked in Los Angeles, the assailant egged on by bystanders. "I see my friends in that video," he said. "I see my friend Yves." To calm down, Nat told me, he preserved lemons. Later, he went out in tiny shorts and a ripped tank top that was practically backless: a declaration of change.

From here on, I will call Nat a woman. Some readers may wonder why I didn't from the start. It's because pronouns aren't only grammar; they're metaphysics. To retroactively call her *she* at every stage would erase the boy she once was—the son with shaving cream and Axe deodorant, the teen-ager I fitted with a blue prom suit. It would suggest that Nat's whole existence as a boy had been ersatz—a sad and constricted prelude to her real life.

This is exactly how some trans people *do* feel. They want nothing more than to sever the connection to an earlier era, during which the body was a prison of misalignment. I don't question the logic. But Nat hadn't yet changed her name. Nor, in my understanding, had she renounced her past as a boy, a teen-age male, a young man. Even if she had, there was the additional question of my relationship to that past, which was, after all, shared. It wasn't going away. There would be no airbrushing of the old photos, no silent emendation of the letters from summer camp. ("We crushed Camp Walt Whitman at softball!")

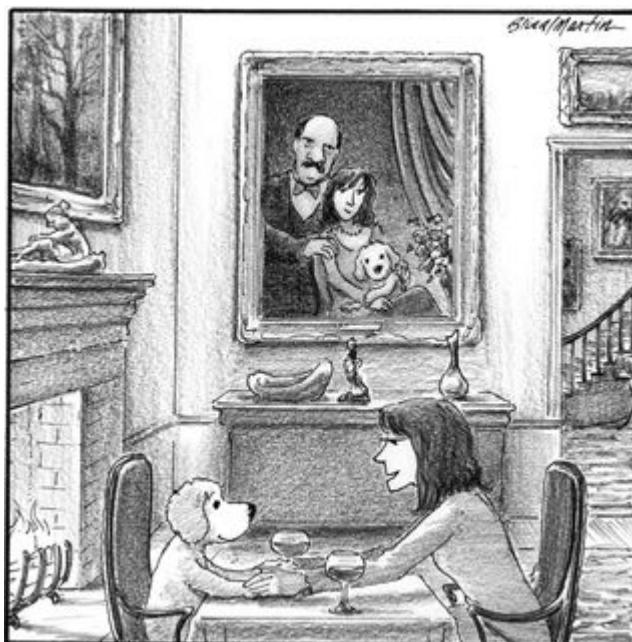
Of course, transformation works both ways. A change in the person you love changes you as well: a toddler's newfound independence, a teen's leaving home. There is a shift in what I can only call the emotional weather—air moister, light different, mornings oddly new. Part of you embraces the change. And part of you remains tethered to the past, stubbornly loyal to the older version of the person.

At one point, Nat mentioned a bookish inspiration of her own, Paul Preciado's "[Testo Junkie](#)," which she had read several years before.

Preciado's self-administered testosterone was less a bid to become a man than a total denial of whatever society wanted to make of him. Nat was fascinated by that refusal of categories. When I read the book, it seemed to clarify things: perhaps it wasn't womanhood that interested Nat, but an effort to elude the cast-iron confinements of gender identity?

Well, that turned out to be another red herring. In the end, she wanted exactly what she had once said she didn't know shit about: womanhood. More specifically, she wanted to be a woman with a man.

By late 2020, she had found one. He was a bisexual Danish guy named Christian, who had just moved from Copenhagen to Berlin. In comparison, she said, her earlier attempts at love felt flimsy—they were “a kind of device for feeling something, often at the cost of feeling nothing at all.” Now the temperature was lower, she told me, the pace more leisurely. They were in no hurry.



“Finally, we’re together. And I didn’t know you were so handy with a weapon.”
Cartoon by Harry Bliss and Steve Martin

By early 2021, Nat and Christian were still together, despite the inconveniences of lockdown. He was allergic to the cat she was minding, and would retreat to the bathroom for sneezing fits, then reëmerge, the cat creeping arthritically away to the other side of the apartment. Nat allowed

that their relationship was full of “emotional spasms.” She had also concluded, earlier on, that all meaningful persons might suddenly flicker in and out of your life—a lesson sadly conveyed by the collapse of my marriage when Nat was five. But now she was learning over and over that a loving person could stick around.

Had hormones unlocked that possibility? I wasn’t sure whether to credit biology, psychology, or some combination of the two. What I knew was that Nat had been modifying *me* since infancy. When my wife, Iris, went back to work six weeks after Nat’s birth, I became the primary caregiver—bumbling, unqualified, but transformed by the baby’s olfactory arsenal, which is released from its scalp. The effects on a man in the caregiving role are well documented. Testosterone ebbs, prolactin rises, the pink mist makes you what you are. Exhausted, often alarmed, I was happy. Now it was Nat’s turn. Happiness arrived amid the bleakness of *COVID*, compressed into domesticity: cooking, staying in, a few friends.

Just as Nat seemed settled, she scrambled the circuits again. She got married—and not to Christian, though she continued dating him. The marriage, to a German woman named Christina, was meant in part to stabilize her residency. I tried to discourage it, but Nat had made her choice.

They went to Copenhagen, where weddings are notoriously easy. “The Las Vegas of the E.U.,” Nat said. Over FaceTime the day before, Nina and I met Christina. She was smart, pretty, and fashionable. I wasn’t sure what to say to her. Nina stepped up very nicely: “Welcome to the family!”

The ceremony itself, in the Copenhagen city hall, was over in ten minutes: a vase of tulips, a bottle of sanitizer, vows read from a sheet of paper. Nat wore a slinky blue dress, which suited her willowy frame. Christina wore a more masculine outfit, a beige suit, with her hair slicked back. I sensed an affectionate parody or maybe a burlesque of the plaster couple on top of the wedding cake—a bit of anti-heteronormative performance art. But I knew my daughter: she could not recite vows and mean nothing by them.

The love here was not the kind that builds a household or makes plans for children. It was love as generosity, a declaration that even loose bonds

could count as family, whether the marriage lasted or not (and this one eventually foundered).

On June 11th, after a year and a half apart, I saw Nat in the flesh. Nina and I waited at J.F.K., half starved for her presence, unsure what to expect. Male, female, androgynously in between? Then she appeared, tall, long-haired, her nail polish blue, her voice reassuringly deep. I hugged her hard, grateful for solidity after so many pixels.

The next day, we went to the Union Square Greenmarket. Men glanced at her sideways, caught by her ambiguity; she enjoyed it, playfully tugging her wide-necked shirt off one shoulder. “How did *that* happen?” she said.

We filled our bags with herbs, tomatoes, peppers, garlic, scallions, strawberries, and rustic-looking asparagus (different lengths and curvy, as if nobody could manage the parallel lines). Nat talked a lot about how lucky she was to be dating Christian, especially while transitioning. “This is gold,” she said. “It’s amazing to have somebody who actually loves the flux you embody.”

Yet Nat also aired some concerns about how the hormones, plus the testosterone blocker she was now taking, were getting in the way of sexual intimacy. Part of it was the fact that her body was becoming softer, more rounded—more *feminine*—and therefore less of an ideal love object for Christian, who was still powerfully drawn to men.

“There are *things* I want to do with him,” she said. Suddenly, she removed her glasses and wiped her eyes. “Look at this,” she said. “I’m crying.” In a droll tone slightly at odds with the tears running down her face, she added, “The hormones are working.”

“Things will be O.K.,” I said, and gave her a hug.

Of course, I wasn’t sure how these hormonal complexities would sort themselves out. For that matter, I had never discussed my sex life with my own parents. Everything was changing so fast!

She explained that injections worked better than gel, but the Germans didn't sell estrogen in injectable form. So she found a woman in Ukraine who sold injectables for bitcoin. I immediately pictured a D.I.Y. setup in a Kyiv apartment, a chain-smoking woman making the equivalent of bathtub gin. But the package arrived, neat and effective. Wrong again.

By now, I had learned to distrust many of my reflexive judgments about Nat's transition. This meant unlearning all sorts of things I'd got wrong the first time around. Even the small things were telling. I mentioned earlier, for example, that Nat's performance as Roderigo in "Othello" had originally struck me as a stretch, since it called for a lunatic level of masculine resentment. But Nat's teacher, who was well aware that Nat was gay, had helped her to craft a sexually ambivalent version of the character, whose intensity might plausibly flow from her attraction to Othello, and whose stylized, sashaying walk was a source of some confusion for my father, who wondered, as a physician, whether Roderigo was suffering from some kind of hip displacement.

This was a minor bit of incomprehension on my part. A bigger one was my assumption that Nat had accepted her progression into manhood as a natural thing. In fact, as I was to learn from a subsequent conversation in Berlin, she had never felt herself to be a man at all. "I certainly was a *boy*," she told me. "And, like many trans women, I had a protracted boyhood. You see this in gay men, too—the aging-twink syndrome. Anyway, it was when that started to end, and the horizon of manhood approached, that the dissonance became all too clear."

Until the moment she uttered these sentences, I was in the dark. I had been so for many years. Now I could begin a process of correction, which was likely to be slow.

What confused me most was that I was dwelling simultaneously in the past and the present. The whole long history of Nat's boyhood was alive for me, and the most trivial elements were precious, because only as you get older do you realize how terribly finite are the hours you will spend with the people you most love. So I couldn't always think clearly about what was going on before my eyes.

One evening during her stay in New York, she was set to d.j. at the Lot Radio, in Greenpoint. I was impressed that, after an absence of eighteen months, my child was immediately in demand—and in a location that had previously invited the likes of Talib Kweli and George Clinton to work the booth.

The set didn't start until ten o'clock, so Nat was still hanging around as Nina and I were heading out for a bite nearby. When Nat came out in a gauzy top, her breasts clearly visible, I felt the classic discomfort of a father confronting his daughter's sexuality. I looked away. What I worried about, though, wasn't propriety but danger: the subway at midnight, the city's supply of transphobic thugs.

Nina tried gently: "Maybe you want to wear a bra?" Nat declined. "A bralette?" Also no. Over burgers, Nina suggested that Nat still harbored a young man's pride in his body. In fact, it was the opposite, as I would learn later—after Nat had read a draft of this essay. "It felt more alienating to wear a bra," she told me. "I didn't fill it out—not with those budding prepubescent trans-girl breasts."

That was the lesson. Transition meant a new body but none of the cultural muscle memory that usually comes with it. Some feminists saw that as presumption, skipping the long price of admission—slights, salaries, stares. But to me this panoply of injuries seemed itself a poor form of validation, and the dangers facing trans women were plenty. When we returned home, Nat changed into a halter, still feminine but opaque. We didn't talk about it. Maybe our mild response had simply reminded her of the world's perpetually prying gaze.

Back in Berlin, in July, Nat gave herself her first estrogen shot, unfazed by the needle. "It's in a very fleshy part of the body," she reassured me. The effects came faster than with the gel—tender breasts, mood swings. "I'm P.M.S.-ing all over," she said, with the delight of someone who had longed for that badge of femininity. Nina laughed: most women would pay to avoid P.M.S., she pointed out.

But this leads back to the contested issue of what makes a woman. When Jan Morris described her transition in "Conundrum," she embraced the

familiar trappings of femininity—cosmetics, high heels, brightly colored jewelry. Society had defined womanhood that way; why not accept the definition, especially if it gave her pleasure?

By 1974, though, many women had already discarded those notions as instruments of domination, psychic equivalents of the whalebone corset. Reviewing “Conundrum” in the *Times*, Rebecca West dismissed Morris’s enthusiasm for these tokens of womanhood as a parody of femininity: “She sounds not like a woman, but like a man’s idea of a woman.” West, herself a hard-charging foreign correspondent, missed the courage it took to write about a sex change in the first place. Her critique also reflected (and amplified) a widespread suspicion—that trans femininity was always a performance, a costume.

“One feels sure that she is not a woman,” West insists, having been particularly offended by the author’s description of her hormonally enhanced (perhaps the word is conical) breasts. What, then, would West have made of Nat’s body, even concealed under a halter top? What of her height, her glossy hair, the estrogen-softened skin? And what of her voice?

The voice box, a tube of cartilage, muscles, and ligaments which takes its final shape at puberty, doesn’t change with estrogen. For boys, a surge of testosterone enlarges it, and drops the pitch about an octave—hence the deep voice Nat acquired at thirteen, which I loved as much as her pale eyes. Estrogen gave her smooth cheeks and wider hips but left her voice untouched. So she still spoke in that low, confiding register, leavened with campy inflections she’d learned in her days as a gay man.

Some trans women cultivate a new voice. Pitch, resonance, and intonation can all be reshaped: men tend to a narrow range and flat melody, women to coloratura leaps and flourishes, turning thought into small songs. The process is like learning an instrument. Nat, being a poet, knew this intuitively: the voice was something you played.

In March of 2022, I flew to Berlin, my first visit in two years. On my second night there, Nat made asparagus risotto at the place where I was staying, on Böhmische Strasse. She invited both Christian and Christina—boyfriend and wife, with their confusingly similar names.

Christian, gentle and curly-haired, talked of his music while Nat stirred the pot. On the wall, by coincidence, hung a photograph by a friend of theirs, who had once shot Nat and Christian for what she called an “ethical porn collective.” I felt the usual parental unease: *How’s this going to go down when you apply for that job at Lehman Brothers?* But Lehman Brothers, founded in 1850, is gone, along with so many rules of personal deportment that go back just as far. Where my generation hoarded privacy, Nat’s seemed to dissolve it. The photo shoot, for them, was simply a record of two bodies, both of which would change dramatically over time. Why not share it?

Then Christina arrived, chic and funny, my improbable daughter-in-law. She edited a small German quarterly, and we found it easy to talk and grouse about the task of making writers do what you wanted them to do. She was, she said, coming to New York in June with her . . . she hesitated.

“Go ahead,” Nat said, laughing. “Say it!”

“With my boyfriend,” she finally got out.

My impression was that the word was too dull and bougie to be uttered. Perhaps even the relationship, the dusty old dyad of man and woman, was now slightly antique.

For the next few days, I went out every morning to a coffee shop on Sonnenallee, often with a battered copy of “The Great Gatsby” that I’d found on a bookshelf at the apartment I was renting. I was struck by Fitzgerald’s line about Gatsby’s “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away.”

I think I was drawn to the book because Nat was one of those machines, a creature who could pull in a signal from far away, and because Gatsby’s reinvention of himself made me think of Nat’s. Gatsby was a social climber, but also something more—there was an artistry to what he did. Nat was always pursuing several things at once: showing graphic work in Madrid, lecturing on house music in Vienna, writing the text for a queer variation on

Schubert's "Die Winterreise." Maybe Nat's new life was also a work of art, in some strange, sweet, conceptual sense.

One night, I visited the bar where Nat worked twice a week. There she was, wearing a halter top. You took your shoes off at the entrance. In slippers, I stood at the bar and she made me a gimlet, which I gratefully drank. On the bar was a tip jar in the shape of upended buttocks—you fed your coin into the anus.

I remained at the bar for a while and watched her. My daughter was making drinks, energetically shaking the shaker, sometimes consulting a cheat sheet —did she need a drop of Pernod? The customers didn't seem to begrudge her this learning curve. They liked her, and I could bask in that, relax, enjoy my secret status as a proud father.

Nat admitted that she and Christian had had a fight before my visit. "It's all about your career!" he'd complained. "Everybody else is just an extra in 'The Nat Show.' " When I saw Nat and Christian together, though, they seemed close. Christian had given her bird-of-paradise flowers on International Women's Day, a small but perfect endorsement of her womanhood.

There were complications. Christian's previous long-term relationship had been with a woman. Now he was involved with a person whose body had slowly been changing during the entire course of their relationship—or, to put it another way, with a woman who had a penis and smooth skin and a rounder face, owing to what Nat romantically described as "new fat deposits" in her cheeks. Sometimes, Nat told me, Christian had rubbed some of the estrogen jelly into his skin. I assumed that he was curious about his lover's experience, and perhaps tantalized by the prospect of rearranging some molecules of his own. (In fact, Christian has since transitioned.)

One evening, the three of us lingered over dinner at their favorite Italian restaurant. We drank some orange wine, and I tried to recall how it got that color—something about the contact with the skin of the grapes. I watched them holding hands across the table, tender and at ease, and felt myself waving Christian inside the familial tent. I felt real warmth for him, and

gratitude that he loved Nat for exactly who she was. He loved her skin and what was inside it.

It was time to go home. The airlines still required a negative *COVID* test, and Nat took me to the testing site on Richardstrasse, explaining my situation in brisk German that made me feel proud and feeble at once. I let the nurse push the swab high into my sinus cavity, the bristles tickling what felt like the outer lining of my brain. She could have been collecting a sample of my emotional life, some strange residue of regret and amazement and love.

We stepped back into the sunlight. Everywhere, there were Germans with strollers, serious vehicles with five-point harnesses and expandable canopies and suspensions like you found on a Mercedes sedan. In each stroller was a pink baby. Sometimes there was a toddler, too, looking big and worldly, but actually helpless, just like me.

Nat had work to do, and we arranged to meet later. In front of my rented place, I watched her round the corner onto Niemetzstrasse and disappear. Only then did I notice that somebody had left a cardboard box near the entrance.

Not very German, I thought. These people don't leave stuff by the curb. They disperse their belongings, their very history, into lots of color-coded bins, and the bigger stuff, the *Sperrmüll*, gets picked up right on schedule. The evidence of having lived is spirited away.

I peered inside and saw a wooden puzzle—the kind where you fit animals into the appropriate slots: lion, monkey, giraffe, kangaroo. We had given Nat a puzzle like that long ago, had watched him, or her, make big decisions about who belonged where. A child's deliberations are beautiful to behold. I stood on the sidewalk and tried to remember those moments. They were in my brain, discharges of electricity, a shower of sparks. They were private. What was public was the box, a small tabernacle on the sidewalk, and the tears that were sneaking up on me. I looked and looked into the box, and then I went upstairs. ♦

James Marcus is a writer, an editor, and a translator. His books include “[Glad to the Brink of Fear: A Portrait of Ralph Waldo Emerson](#).”

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[**Annals of Artificial Intelligence**](#)

The Case That A.I. Is Thinking

ChatGPT does not have an inner life. Yet it seems to know what it's talking about.

By [James Somers](#)

November 3, 2025

How convincing does the illusion of understanding have to be before you stop calling it an illusion?
Animations by Zach Lieberman

Dario Amodei, the C.E.O. of the artificial-intelligence company Anthropic, has been predicting that an A.I. “smarter than a Nobel Prize winner” in such fields as biology, math, engineering, and writing might come online by 2027. He envisions millions of copies of a model whirring away, each conducting its own research: a “country of geniuses in a datacenter.” In June, Sam Altman, of OpenAI, wrote that the industry was on the cusp of building “digital superintelligence.” “The 2030s are likely going to be wildly different from any time that has come before,” he asserted.

Meanwhile, the A.I. tools that most people currently interact with on a day-to-day basis are reminiscent of Clippy, the onetime Microsoft Office “assistant” that was actually more of a gadfly. A Zoom A.I. tool suggests that you ask it “What are some meeting icebreakers?” or instruct it to “Write a short message to share gratitude.” Siri is good at setting reminders but not much else. A friend of mine saw a button in Gmail that said “Thank and tell anecdote.” When he clicked it, Google’s A.I. invented a funny story about a trip to Turkey that he never took.

The rushed and uneven rollout of A.I. has created a fog in which it is tempting to conclude that there is nothing to see here—that it’s all hype. There is, to be sure, plenty of hype: Amodei’s timeline is science-fictional. (A.I. models aren’t improving that fast.) But it is another kind of wishful thinking to suppose that large language models are just shuffling words around. I used to be sympathetic to that view. I sought comfort in the idea that A.I. had little to do with real intelligence or understanding. I even

celebrated its shortcomings—rooting for the home team. Then I began using A.I. in my work as a programmer, fearing that if I didn’t I would fall behind. (My employer, a trading firm, has several investments in and partnerships with A.I. companies, including Anthropic.) Writing code is, by many accounts, the thing that A.I. is best at; code has more structure than prose does, and it’s often possible to automatically validate that a given program works. My conversion was swift. At first, I consulted A.I. models in lieu of looking something up. Then I gave them small, self-contained problems. Eventually, I gave them real work—the kind I’d trained my whole career to do. I saw these models digest, in seconds, the intricate details of thousands of lines of code. They could spot subtle bugs and orchestrate complex new features. Finally, I was transferred to a fast-growing team that aims to make better use of A.I. tools, and to create our own.

The science-fiction author William Gibson is said to have observed that the future is already here, just not evenly distributed—which might explain why A.I. seems to have minted two cultures, one dismissive and the other enthralled. In our daily lives, A.I. “agents” that can book vacations or file taxes are a flop, but I have colleagues who compose much of their code using A.I. and sometimes run multiple coding agents at a time. Models sometimes make amateur mistakes or get caught in inane loops, but, as I’ve learned to use them effectively, they have allowed me to accomplish in an evening what used to take a month. Not too long ago, I made two iOS apps without knowing how to make an iOS app.



“O.K., we’re good on bread crumbs. Now we’re looking for a pound of ground beef and a pound of veal.”

Cartoon by Olivia Noble

I once had a boss who said that a job interview should probe for strengths, not for the absence of weaknesses. Large language models have many weaknesses: they famously hallucinate reasonable-sounding falsehoods; they can be servile even when you’re wrong; they are fooled by simple puzzles. But I remember a time when the obvious strengths of today’s A.I. models—fluency, fluidity, an ability to “get” what someone is talking about—were considered holy grails. When you experience these strengths firsthand, you wonder: How convincing does the illusion of understanding have to be before you stop calling it an illusion?

On a brutally hot day this summer, my friend Max met up with his family at a playground. For some reason, a sprinkler for kids was switched off, and Max’s wife had promised everyone that her husband would fix it.

Confronted by red-faced six- and seven-year-olds, Max entered a utility shed hoping to find a big, fat “On” switch. Instead, he found a maze of ancient pipes and valves. He was about to give up when, on a whim, he pulled out his phone and fed a photo into ChatGPT-4o, along with a description of his problem. The A.I. thought for a second, or maybe didn’t think, but all the same it said that he was looking at a backflow-preventer system typical of irrigation setups. Did he see that yellow ball valve toward

the bottom? That probably controlled the flow. Max went for it, and cheers rang out across the playground as the water turned on.

Was ChatGPT mindlessly stringing words together, or did it understand the problem? The answer could teach us something important about understanding itself. “Neuroscientists have to confront this humbling truth,” Doris Tsao, a neuroscience professor at the University of California, Berkeley, told me. “The advances in machine learning have taught us more about the essence of intelligence than anything that neuroscience has discovered in the past hundred years.” Tsao is best known for decoding how macaque monkeys perceive faces. Her team learned to predict which neurons would fire when a monkey saw a specific face; even more strikingly, given a pattern of neurons firing, Tsao’s team could render the face. Their work built on research into how faces are represented inside A.I. models. These days, her favorite question to ask people is “What is the deepest insight you have gained from ChatGPT?” “My own answer,” she said, “is that I think it radically demystifies thinking.”

The most basic account of how we got here goes something like this. In the nineteen-eighties, a small team of cognitive psychologists and computer scientists tried to simulate thinking in a machine. Among the more famous of them were David Rumelhart, Geoffrey Hinton, and James McClelland, who went on to form a research group at U.C. San Diego. They saw the brain as a vast network in which neurons fire in patterns, causing other sets of neurons to fire, and so on; this dance of patterns is thinking. The brain learns by changing the strength of the connections between neurons. Crucially, the scientists mimicked this process by creating an artificial neural network, and by applying a simple algorithm called gradient descent to increase the accuracy of its predictions. (The algorithm could be compared to a hiker navigating from a mountaintop to a valley; a simple strategy for eventually finding one’s way is to insure that every step moves downhill.) The use of such algorithms in large networks is known as deep learning.

Other people in A.I. were skeptical that neural networks were sophisticated enough for real-world tasks, but, as the networks got bigger, they began to solve previously unsolvable problems. People would devote entire

dissertations to developing techniques for distinguishing handwritten digits or for recognizing faces in images; then a deep-learning algorithm would digest the underlying data, discover the subtleties of the problem, and make those projects seem obsolete. Deep learning soon conquered speech recognition, translation, image captioning, board games, and even the problem of predicting how proteins will fold.

Today's leading A.I. models are trained on a large portion of the internet, using a technique called next-token prediction. A model learns by making guesses about what it will read next, then comparing those guesses to whatever actually appears. Wrong guesses inspire changes in the connection strength between the neurons; this is gradient descent. Eventually, the model becomes so good at predicting text that it appears to know things and make sense. So that is something to think about. A group of people sought the secret of how the brain works. As their model grew toward a brain-like size, it started doing things that were thought to require brain-like intelligence. Is it possible that they found what they were looking for?

There is understandable resistance to such a simplistic and triumphant account of A.I. The case against it was well argued by Ted Chiang, who wrote an article for this magazine in early 2023 titled "ChatGPT Is a Blurry JPEG of the Web." He meant it in a more or less deflationary way: that's *all* ChatGPT is. You feed the whole internet to a program and it regurgitates it back to you imperfectly, like a copy of a copy of a photograph—but with just enough facility to fool you into believing that the program is intelligent. This spring, a similar argument was made in a book, "The AI Con," by Emily M. Bender, a linguist, and Alex Hanna, a sociologist. Bender is perhaps best known for describing L.L.M.s as "stochastic parrots." "Large language models do not, cannot, and will not 'understand' anything at all," the writer Tyler Austin Harper declared in a book review in *The Atlantic*. Models "produce writing not by thinking but by making statistically informed guesses about which lexical item is likely to follow another." Harper buttressed these technical arguments with moral ones. A.I. enriches the powerful, consumes enough energy to accelerate climate change, and marginalizes workers. He concluded that "the foundation of the AI industry is a scam."

A leading neuroscientist argues that ChatGPT "radically demystifies thinking."

But the moral case against A.I. may ultimately be stronger than the technical one. “The ‘stochastic parrot’ thing has to be dead at some point,” Samuel J. Gershman, a Harvard cognitive scientist who is no A.I. hype man, told me. “Only the most hardcore skeptics can deny these systems are doing things many of us didn’t think were going to be achieved.” Jonathan Cohen, a cognitive neuroscientist at Princeton, emphasized the limitations of A.I., but argued that, in some cases, L.L.M.s seem to mirror one of the largest and most important parts of the human brain. “To a first approximation, your neocortex is your deep-learning mechanism,” Cohen said. Humans have a much larger neocortex than other animals, relative to body size, and the species with the largest neocortices—elephants, dolphins, gorillas, chimpanzees, dogs—are among the most intelligent.

In 2003, the machine-learning researcher Eric B. Baum published a book called “What Is Thought?” (I stumbled upon it in my college’s library stacks, drawn by the title.) The gist of Baum’s argument is that understanding is compression, and compression is understanding. In statistics, when you want to make sense of points on a graph, you can use a technique called linear regression to draw a “line of best fit” through them. If there’s an underlying regularity in the data—maybe you’re plotting shoe size against height—the line of best fit will efficiently express it, predicting where new points could fall. The neocortex can be understood as distilling a sea of raw experience—sounds, sights, and other sensations—into “lines of best fit,” which it can use to make predictions. A baby exploring the world tries to guess how a toy will taste or where food will go when it hits the floor. When a prediction is wrong, the connections between neurons are adjusted. Over time, those connections begin to capture regularities in the data. They form a compressed model of the world.

Artificial neural networks compress experience just like real neural networks do. One of the best open-source A.I. models, DeepSeek, is capable of writing novels, suggesting medical diagnoses, and sounding like a native speaker in dozens of languages. It was trained using next-token prediction on many terabytes of data. But when you download the model it is one six-hundredth of that. A distillation of the internet, compressed to fit on your laptop. Ted Chiang was right to call an early version of ChatGPT a blurry *JPEG* of the web—but, in my view, this is the very reason these

models have become increasingly intelligent. Chiang noted in his piece that, to compress a text file filled with millions of examples of arithmetic, you wouldn't create a zip file. You'd write a calculator program. "The greatest degree of compression can be achieved by understanding the text," he wrote. Perhaps L.L.M.s are starting to do that.

It can seem unnatural, even repulsive, to imagine that a computer program actually understands, actually *thinks*. We usually conceptualize thinking as something conscious, like a Joycean inner monologue or the flow of sense memories in a Proustian daydream. Or we might mean reasoning: working through a problem step by step. In our conversations about A.I., we often conflate these different kinds of thinking, and it makes our judgments pat. ChatGPT is obviously not thinking, goes one argument, because it is obviously not having a Proustian reverie; ChatGPT clearly is thinking, goes another, because it can work through logic puzzles better than you can.

Something more subtle is going on. I do not believe that ChatGPT has an inner life, and yet it seems to know what it's talking about. Understanding —having a grasp of what's going on—is an underappreciated kind of thinking, because it's mostly unconscious. Douglas Hofstadter, a professor of cognitive science and comparative literature at Indiana University, likes to say that cognition is recognition. Hofstadter became famous for a book about the mind and consciousness called "Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid," which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1980. Hofstadter's theory, developed through decades of research, is that "seeing as" is the essence of thinking. You see one patch of color as a car and another as a key chain; you recognize the letter "A" no matter what font it is written in or how bad the handwriting might be. Hofstadter argued that the same process underlies more abstract kinds of perception. When a grand master examines a chess board, years of practice are channelled into a way of seeing: white's bishop is weak; that endgame is probably a draw. You see an eddy in a river as a sign that it's dangerous to cross. You see a meeting you're in as an emperor-has-no-clothes situation. My nearly two-year-old son recognizes that late-morning stroller walks might be an opportunity for a croissant and makes demands accordingly. For Hofstadter, that's intelligence in a nutshell.

Hofstadter was one of the original A.I. deflationists, and my own skepticism was rooted in his. He wrote that most A.I. research had little to do with real thinking, and when I was in college, in the two-thousands, I agreed with him. There were exceptions. He found the U.C.S.D. group interesting. And he admired the work of a lesser-known Finnish American cognitive scientist, Pentti Kanerva, who noticed some unusual properties in the mathematics of high-dimensional spaces. In a high-dimensional space, any two random points may be extremely far apart. But, counterintuitively, each point also has a large cloud of neighbors around it, so you can easily find your way to it if you get “close enough.” That reminded Kanerva of the way that memory works. In a 1988 book called “Sparse Distributed Memory,” Kanerva argued that thoughts, sensations, and recollections could be represented as coördinates in high-dimensional space. The brain seemed like the perfect piece of hardware for storing such things. Every memory has a sort of address, defined by the neurons that are active when you recall it. New experiences cause new sets of neurons to fire, representing new addresses. Two addresses can be different in many ways but similar in others; one perception or memory triggers other memories nearby. The scent of hay recalls a memory of summer camp. The first three notes of Beethoven’s Fifth beget the fourth. A chess position that you’ve never seen reminds you of old games—not all of them, just the ones in the right neighborhood.



“Bye, sweetie—have a day filled with social drama, drastically shifting friendships, and academic milestones, which you’ll describe to me later as ‘fine.’ ”
Cartoon by Ali Solomon

Hofstadter realized that Kanerva was describing something like a “seeing as” machine. “Pentti Kanerva’s memory model was a revelation for me,” he wrote in a foreword to Kanerva’s book. “It was the very first piece of research I had ever run across that made me feel I could glimpse the distant goal of understanding how the brain works as a whole.” Every kind of thinking—whether Joycean, Proustian, or logical—depends on the relevant thing coming to mind at the right time. It’s how we figure out what situation we’re in.

Kanerva’s book receded from view, and Hofstadter’s own star faded—except when he occasionally poked up his head to criticize a new A.I. system. In 2018, he wrote of Google Translate and similar technologies: “There is still something deeply lacking in the approach, which is conveyed by a single word: *understanding*.” But GPT-4, which was released in 2023, produced Hofstadter’s conversion moment. “I’m mind-boggled by some of the things that the systems do,” he told me recently. “It would have been inconceivable even only ten years ago.” The staunchest deflationist could deflate no longer. Here was a program that could translate as well as an expert, make analogies, extemporize, generalize. Who were we to say that it didn’t understand? “They do things that are very much like thinking,” he said. “You could say they *are* thinking, just in a somewhat alien way.”

L.L.M.s appear to have a “seeing as” machine at their core. They represent each word with a series of numbers denoting its coördinates—its vector—in a high-dimensional space. In GPT-4, a word vector has thousands of dimensions, which describe its shades of similarity to and difference from every other word. During training, a large language model tweaks a word’s coördinates whenever it makes a prediction error; words that appear in texts together are nudged closer in space. This produces an incredibly dense representation of usages and meanings, in which analogy becomes a matter of geometry. In a classic example, if you take the word vector for “Paris,” subtract “France,” and then add “Italy,” the nearest other vector will be “Rome.” L.L.M.s can “vectorize” an image by encoding what’s in it, its mood, even the expressions on people’s faces, with enough detail to redraw

it in a particular style or to write a paragraph about it. When Max asked ChatGPT to help him out with the sprinkler at the park, the model wasn't just spewing text. The photograph of the plumbing was compressed, along with Max's prompt, into a vector that captured its most important features. That vector served as an address for calling up nearby words and concepts. Those ideas, in turn, called up others as the model built up a sense of the situation. It composed its response with those ideas "in mind."

A few months ago, I was reading an interview with an Anthropic researcher, Trenton Bricken, who has worked with colleagues to probe the insides of Claude, the company's series of A.I. models. (Their research has not been peer-reviewed or published in a scientific journal.) His team has identified ensembles of artificial neurons, or "features," that activate when Claude is about to say one thing or another. Features turn out to be like volume knobs for concepts; turn them up and the model will talk about little else. (In a sort of thought-control experiment, the feature representing the Golden Gate Bridge was turned up; when one user asked Claude for a chocolate-cake recipe, its suggested ingredients included "1/4 cup dry fog" and "1 cup warm seawater.") In the interview, Bricken mentioned Google's Transformer architecture, a recipe for constructing neural networks that underlies leading A.I. models. (The "T" in ChatGPT stands for "Transformer.") He argued that the mathematics at the heart of the Transformer architecture closely approximated a model proposed decades earlier—by Pentti Kanerva, in "Sparse Distributed Memory."

Should we be surprised by the correspondence between A.I. and our own brains? L.L.M.s are, after all, artificial neural networks that psychologists and neuroscientists helped develop. What's more surprising is that when models practiced something rote—predicting words—they began to behave in such a brain-like way. These days, the fields of neuroscience and artificial intelligence are becoming entangled; brain experts are using A.I. as a kind of model organism. Evelina Fedorenko, a neuroscientist at M.I.T., has used L.L.M.s to study how brains process language. "I never thought I would be able to think about these kinds of things in my lifetime," she told me. "I never thought we'd have models that are good enough."

It has become commonplace to say that A.I. is a black box, but the opposite is arguably true: a scientist can probe the activity of individual artificial neurons and even alter them. “Having a working system that instantiates a theory of human intelligence—it’s the dream of cognitive neuroscience,” Kenneth Norman, a Princeton neuroscientist, told me. Norman has created computer models of the hippocampus, the brain region where episodic memories are stored, but in the past they were so simple that he could only feed them crude approximations of what might enter a human mind. “Now you can give memory models the exact stimuli you give to a person,” he said.

The Wright brothers studied birds during their early efforts to build an airplane. They noted that birds take off into the wind, even though a reasonable person might have assumed they’d want the wind at their backs, and that they warp the tips of their wings for balance. These findings influenced their rudimentary glider designs. Then they built a six-foot-long wind tunnel, which allowed them to test a set of artificial wings under precisely controlled conditions. Their next round of glider flights was far more successful. Strangely, it was only well after they’d made a working flying machine that it became possible to understand exactly how the birds do it.

A.I. enables scientists to place thinking itself in a wind tunnel. For a paper provocatively titled “On the Biology of a Large Language Model,” Anthropic researchers observed Claude responding to queries and described “circuits”—cascades of features that, together, perform complex computations. (Calling up the right memories is one step toward thinking; combining and manipulating them in circuits is arguably another.) One longstanding criticism of L.L.M.s has been that, because they must generate one token of their response at a time, they can’t plan or reason. But, when you ask Claude to finish a rhyming couplet in a poem, a circuit begins considering the last word of the new line, to insure that it will rhyme. It then works backward to compose the line as a whole. Anthropic researchers counted this as evidence that their models do engage in planning. Squint a little and you might feel, for the first time, that the inner workings of a mind are in view.

You really do have to squint, though. “The worry I have is that people flipped the bit from ‘I’m really skeptical of this’ to totally dropping their shields,” Norman, the Princeton neuroscientist, told me. “Many things still have to get figured out.” I’m one of the people that Norman is talking about. (Perhaps I am too easily moved by the seeming convergence of “Sparse Distributed Memory” and an Anthropic model.) In the past year or two, I started to believe what Geoffrey Hinton, who recently won a Nobel Prize for his A.I. research, told the journalist Karen Hao in 2020: “Deep learning is going to be able to do everything.” But we have also seen that larger models aren’t always better models. Curves plotting model performance against size have begun flattening out. It’s becoming difficult to find high-quality data that the models haven’t already digested, and computing power is increasingly expensive. When GPT-5 came out, in August, it was a merely incremental improvement—and so profound a disappointment that it threatened to pop the A.I. investment bubble. The moment demands a middle kind of skepticism: one that takes today’s A.I. models seriously without believing that there are no hard problems left.

Perhaps the most consequential of these problems is how to design a model that learns as efficiently as humans do. It is estimated that GPT-4 was exposed to trillions of words in training; children need only a few million to become fluent. Cognitive scientists tell us that a newborn’s brain has certain “inductive biases” that accelerate learning. (Of course, the brain is the result of millions of years of evolution—itself a sort of training data.) For instance, human babies have the expectation that the world is made of objects, and that other beings have beliefs and intentions. When Mama says “banana,” an infant connects that word to the entire yellow object she’s looking at—not just its tip or its peel. Infants perform little experiments: Can I eat this? How far can I throw that? They are motivated by emotions such as desire, curiosity, and frustration. Children are always trying to do something just beyond their ability. Their learning is efficient because it’s embodied, adaptive, deliberate, and continuous. Maybe truly understanding the world requires participating in it.

An A.I.’s experience, in comparison, is so impoverished that it can’t really be called “experience.” Large language models are trained on data that is already extraordinarily refined. “I think the reason they work is that they’re

piggybacking on language,” Tsao, the U.C. Berkeley neuroscientist, told me. Language is like experience pre-chewed; other kinds of data are less dense with meaning. “Why is it that we haven’t had a comparable revolution in terms of reasoning about video data?” Gershman, the Harvard cognitive scientist, asked. “The kinds of vision models that we have still struggle with common-sense reasoning about physics.” A recent model from DeepMind can generate videos in which paints are mixed correctly and mazes are solved—but they also depict a glass bouncing, instead of shattering, and ropes defying physics by being smooshed into a knot. Ida Momennejad, a cognitive neuroscientist who now works for Microsoft Research, has done experiments in which an L.L.M. is given a virtual walk-through of a building and then asked questions about routes and shortcuts—spatial inferences that come easily to humans. With all but the most basic setups, the A.I.s tend to fail or hallucinate nonexistent paths. “Do they really do planning?” she said. “Not really.”

In my conversations with neuroscientists, I sensed a concern that the A.I. industry is racing ahead somewhat thoughtlessly. If the goal is to make artificial minds as capable as human minds are, then “we’re not training the systems in the right way,” Brenden M. Lake, a cognitive scientist at Princeton, told me. When an A.I. is done training, the neural network’s “brain” is frozen. If you tell the model some facts about yourself, it doesn’t rewire its neurons. Instead, it uses a crude substitute: it writes down a bit of text—“The user has a toddler and is studying French”—and considers that before other instructions you give. The human brain updates itself continuously, and there’s a beautiful theory about one of its ways of doing so: when you sleep, selected snapshots from your episodic memory are replayed for your neocortex in order to train it. Your high-dimensional thought space gets dimpled by the replayed memories; you wake up with a slightly new way of seeing.

The A.I. community has become so addicted to—and so financially invested in—breakneck progress that it sometimes pretends that advancement is inevitable and there’s no science left to do. Science has the inconvenient property of sometimes stalling out. Silicon Valley may call A.I. companies “labs,” and some employees there “researchers,” but fundamentally it has an engineering culture that does whatever works. “It’s

just so remarkable how little the machine-learning community bothers looking at, let alone respects, the history and cognitive science that precedes it,” Cohen said.

Today’s A.I. models owe their success to decades-old discoveries about the brain, but they are still deeply unlike brains. Which differences are incidental and which are fundamental? Every group of neuroscientists has its pet theory. These theories can be put to the test in a way that wasn’t possible before. Still, no one expects easy answers. The problems that continue to plague A.I. models “are solved by carefully identifying ways in which the models don’t behave as intelligently as we want them to and then addressing them,” Norman said. “That is still a human-scientist-in-the-loop process.”

In the nineties, billions of dollars poured into the Human Genome Project on the assumption that sequencing DNA might solve medicine’s most vexing problems: cancer, hereditary conditions, even aging. It was a time of bluster and confidence—the era of Dolly the cloned sheep and “Jurassic Park”—when biotech was ascendant and the commentariat reckoned with whether humans should be playing God. Biologists soon found that the reality was more complicated. We didn’t cure cancer or discover the causes of Alzheimer’s or autism. We learned that DNA tells just one part of the story of life. In fact, one could argue that biology got swept up in a kind of gene fever, fixating on DNA because we had the means to study and understand it.

Still, nobody would claim that Francis Crick was wrong when, on the day in 1953 that he helped confirm the structure of DNA, he walked into a Cambridge pub talking about having discovered the secret of life. He and his colleagues did more to demystify life than almost anyone, ever. The decades following their discovery were among the most productive and exciting in the history of science. DNA became a household term; every high schooler learns about the double helix.

With A.I., we once again find ourselves in a moment of bluster and confidence. Sam Altman talks about raising half a trillion dollars to build Stargate, a new cluster of A.I. data centers, in the U.S. People discuss the race for superintelligence with a gravitas and an urgency that can seem

ungrounded, even silly. But I suspect the reason that the Amodeis and Altmans of the world are making messianic pronouncements is that they believe that the basic picture of intelligence has been worked out; the rest is just details.

Even some neuroscientists believe that a crucial threshold has been crossed. “I really think it could be the right model for cognition,” Uri Hasson, a colleague of Cohen’s, Norman’s, and Lake’s at Princeton, said of neural networks. This upsets him as much as it excites him. “I have the opposite worry of most people,” he said. “My worry is not that these models are similar to us. It’s that we are similar to these models.” If simple training techniques can enable a program to behave like a human, maybe humans aren’t as special as we thought. Could it also mean that A.I. will surpass us not only in knowledge but also in judgment, ingenuity, cunning—and, as a result, power? To my surprise, Hasson told me that he is “worried these days that we might succeed in understanding how the brain works. Pursuing this question may have been a colossal mistake for humanity.” He likened A.I. researchers to nuclear scientists in the nineteen-thirties: “This is the most interesting time in the life of these people. And, at the same time, they know that what they are working on has grave implications for humanity. But they cannot stop because of the curiosity to learn.”

One of my favorite books by Hofstadter is a nerdy volume called “Fluid Concepts and Creative Analogies: Computer Models of the Fundamental Mechanisms of Thought.” When I was in college, it electrified me. The premise was that a question such as “What is thinking?” was not merely philosophical but, rather, had a real answer. In 1995, when the book was published, Hofstadter and his research group could only gesture at what the answer might be. Thinking back on the book, I wondered whether Hofstadter would feel excited that A.I. researchers may have attained what he had yearned for: a mechanical account of the rudiments of thinking. When we spoke, however, he sounded profoundly disappointed—and frightened. Current A.I. research “confirms a lot of my ideas, but it also takes away from the beauty of what humanity is,” he told me. “When I was younger, much younger, I wanted to know what underlay creativity, the mechanisms of creativity. That was a holy grail for me. But now I want it to remain a mystery.” Perhaps the secrets of thinking are simpler than anyone

expected—the kind of thing that a high schooler, or even a machine, could understand. ♦

James Somers, a writer and a computer programmer, first contributed to The New Yorker in 2018.

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

The Runaway Monkeys Upending the Animal-Rights Movement

A troop of macaques escaped one of the largest primate-breeding facilities in America. Now a strange coalition of uncompromising activists and MAGA loyalists is demanding that all lab animals be set free.

By [Ava Kofman](#)

November 3, 2025



At breeding and research centers like Alpha Genesis, conditions often drive monkeys to the point of madness. Photographs by Devin Lunsford for The New Yorker

Last November, the day after the election, Daniel Vance was eating lunch in his truck when he noticed something move in the trees across the road. The forecast had predicted thunderstorms in the rural town of Yemassee, South Carolina, where Vance, a land surveyor, was mapping sewage lines. Taking another bite of his foot-long sub, he figured that it must be the wind picking up. Then he saw the monkeys. Dozens of them were streaming over a tall metal fence at a compound owned by Alpha Genesis, one of the country's biggest breeders of primates used in scientific experiments. Swinging from the overhanging branches and darting through the woods, the animals were heading toward a nearby housing project, their pink faces lit with glee.

Fearing that they could be carrying disease, Vance called Alpha Genesis. Within minutes, a Code X—for escape—was triggered, and a recapture mission was under way. Alpha Genesis employees set out fruit-baited traps; the Yemassee Police Department deployed thermal-imaging cameras. Residents were advised to shut their windows and to dial 911 if they spotted a fugitive. The police chief began to field tips about simian sightings as far away as Florida. Most of these informants, he found, had trouble distinguishing between monkeys and squirrels.

In an unsettled nation eager for diversion, news of the escape went viral. The *Daily Mail* posted video dispatches from the perimeter of the Alpha Genesis facility, while late-night hosts provided updates about the primates who had voted with their feet. On Saturday, Vance was interviewed by Pete Hegseth on “Fox & Friends Weekend,” which played a short clip of the breakout that Vance had captured with his phone. By the time he returned to work the next week, cop cars and news vans roamed the streets, as though an actual jailbreak had occurred. “I felt like I was in a Kafka story,” Vance told me, “where everything keeps getting more absurd.” The town’s resident graphic designer started printing T-shirts with a monkey above the slogan “**STRAIGHT OUTTA YEMASSEE.**” When they sold out in days, she expanded into coffee mugs and champagne flutes.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Yemassee (population 1,080) is home to four times as many monkeys as humans. About four thousand live at Alpha Genesis's main campus, which locals call the Monkey Farm. Another three thousand reside at a separate facility, in a neighboring county up the road. On Morgan Island, off the coast of South Carolina, the company also manages a free-range breeding colony of thirty-seven hundred monkeys for the National Institutes of Health. Alpha Genesis ships many of its primates to labs across the country, though it also conducts experiments on site: testing for pharmaceutical companies; fetal-alcohol research for Washington University in St. Louis; Zika-vaccine studies led by Harvard Medical School.

There were forty-three runaways, part of a troop of roughly fifty that had recently arrived in Yemassee from the Morgan Island colony. All were rhesus macaques, a species known for its deep communal bonds and larkish intelligence. Found in cities and jungles throughout Asia, macaques form intricate matrilineal societies and display a keen sense of fairness. At one crowded temple in Bali, they not only pilfer jewelry, sunglasses, and cellphones from tourists to ransom in exchange for food; they also understand which of these items will fetch them better meals, guarding their loot until their mark coughs up the appropriate bounty.

After their escape, the Yemassee macaques stayed close to the facility, snatching at the apples that surrounded the traps and cooing at the troop members who remained behind the fence. Greg Westergaard, the C.E.O. of Alpha Genesis, described these antics as an amusing sideshow. Animal-rights advocates suggested otherwise. "Macaques are the marines of monkeys, because they never leave a man behind," Lisa Jones-Engel, a primatologist and senior science adviser at People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (*PETA*), told me. "They could have followed the woods and ended up in a rhesus nirvana. What kills me is they were crying for their friends and daughters to come with them."

November 6, 2024, was not the first attempt at a primate Independence Day in Yemassee. At least sixty-seven other monkeys, in eleven separate incidents, have escaped from their cages at Alpha Genesis in the past decade. What made the recent exodus different was not just its scale but its political timing. Groups that oppose animal testing, historically the province

of liberals and progressives, were in the process of forging a delicate alliance with the incoming Trump Administration. An estimated third of the forty-eight-billion-dollar budget of the N.I.H. goes toward funding animal research—and animal protectionists, Make America Healthy Again adherents, and anti-establishment libertarians were realizing that they shared a desire to see that budget slashed.

For all of these camps, the fracas at Alpha Genesis offered a new occasion to denounce the waste of taxpayer dollars on unseemly animal experiments. Since 2008, the company has received more than a hundred and twenty million dollars in government contracts, including nineteen million last year from the N.I.H. alone. In December, 2021, the Republican congresswoman Nancy Mace held a floating press conference off the shore of Morgan Island, which lies in her district. Standing on the deck of a powerboat, Mace told reporters that the G.O.P.’s fledgling interest in the fate of laboratory animals was bringing together “the QAnon side of the Party and the socialist squad.” After November’s escape, Mace called for a congressional briefing, describing the incident as “the latest in a long list of violations,” and spoke to Westergaard, the Alpha Genesis C.E.O. “He tried to tell me how good the primates have it at his facility,” she said to ABC News. “And my response was, they have it good until you kill them with disease.”

Westergaard, who has an austere face, deep-set blue eyes, and a head of gray hair, remembered their conversation differently. Mace, he said, had offered her support and “recognized the economic importance of our company to the people of the Lowcountry.” The region was once dominated by slave plantations; during the two World Wars, Yemassee was best known for its train depot, which welcomed marine recruits on their way to basic training. Today, many residents depend on the Monkey Farm for their livelihood. They work there, or they have family members who do, or they feed its employees. At lunchtime, especially on paydays, the local mini-mart is packed with Alpha Genesis staff. So is the liquor store.

The one-traffic-light town teemed with rumors about how the escape had happened. “It was either an intentional act or the product of extreme incompetence, because, unless a wall falls down, there are so many safeguards in place,” a former Alpha Genesis supervisor told me. The

macaques were secured by three gates, each fastened by two sets of locks and latches. At first, Westergaard blamed the breach on an employee who had accidentally left them open and walked off the job. Then he said that he couldn't rule out the possibility of sabotage.

Until the twentieth century, primates were considered too big, feral, and expensive for most experiments; researchers favored guinea pigs, frogs, rabbits, and dogs. That changed in 1908, when two Viennese scientists—having failed to infect the usual animals with polio—transferred cells taken from a stricken nine-year-old boy into a baboon and a rhesus macaque. Both experienced symptoms, with the macaque losing control of his legs. At least a million monkeys died in the race to develop vaccines for polio, which had previously paralyzed thousands of children each year.

Buoyed by this success, Congress established a series of primate research centers in the nineteen-sixties, hoping that our closest living relatives might help solve other medical mysteries, from Alzheimer's to Zika. Monkeys have since been central to efforts to transplant organs (and prevent their rejection), to refine treatments for diabetes, to understand the effects of lead poisoning and secondhand smoke, and to test immunotherapies for cancer. If you take Claritin or have an I.U.D., you've benefitted from primate research.

With their large hands and expressive, doleful faces, the great apes are often depicted as the poster children for experimentation. This is misleading. Macaques—who are smaller and more easily bred in captivity—are the most frequently used lab monkeys, and with the rise of tranquilizers and commercial air travel after the Second World War, they became far easier to obtain. In the nineteen-fifties and sixties, India shipped hundreds of thousands of rhesus macaques to American labs. That trade was governed by a treaty stipulating that the monkeys could be used strictly for biomedical research. In the late seventies, an activist named Shirley McGreal, who'd recently founded the International Primate Protection League, learned that the U.S. military was quietly violating this agreement. Army researchers had been exposing macaques to lethal doses of nuclear radiation, placing them on treadwheels, and prodding them with electric shocks to keep them running until they died. McGreal launched a letter-

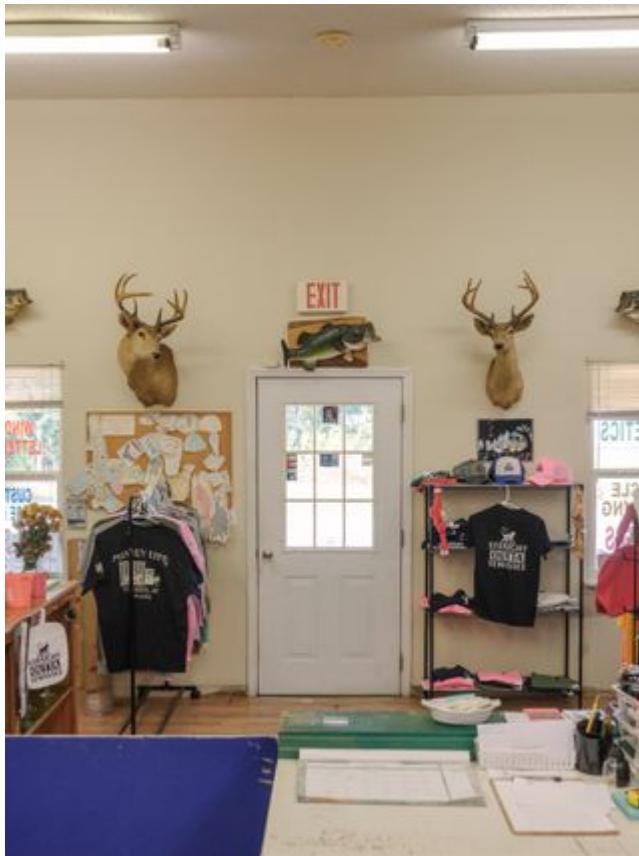
writing campaign to Indian newspapers, prompting the country's Prime Minister to permanently ban all primate exports to the United States. Bangladesh soon followed suit.

Worried that further vaccine development would stall, U.S. government scientists decided to invest in domestic breeding colonies, including the one on Morgan Island, which was established in 1979. It was eventually managed by Laboratory Animal Breeders & Services (*LABS*) of Virginia, a private company that also ran a primate facility in Yemassee. For decades, hundreds of Morgan Island's juveniles have been rounded up and sent to Bethesda, Maryland, where they've been conscripted in the wars against H.I.V., malaria, and tuberculosis. "They had these big corrals on the island, and when it came time to send out shipments they would put a bunch of fruit inside, close the doors, and the little ones who jumped in would get captured," Kathleen Conlee, who in the nineties worked for *LABS* of Virginia as a behavioral manager, told me. Conlee's experience there prompted her to join the Humane Society of the United States, where she has worked ever since. "You'd hear their cries throughout the island, wailing for their moms," she said. "I'll never forget that sound as long as I live."

Because newborn monkeys take a few years to reach the suitable age for experiments, facilities sometimes supplement their inventories. In 1997, McGreal's International Primate Protection League received a tip about an Indonesian shipment of nursing macaques headed to Yemassee by way of Paris and Chicago. Importing monkeys to the United States for scientific research is legal, but importing nursing animals and unweaned infants is not. McGreal embarked on another impassioned epistolary campaign, this time addressed to U.S. government officials; again, it worked. In 2002, a federal grand jury indicted *LABS* of Virginia and three of its board members for smuggling. (The company eventually pleaded guilty to falsifying records and was fined half a million dollars, and the charges against the board members were dismissed.) As the case made its way through court, *LABS*'s research director, Greg Westergaard, purchased his beleaguered employer and renamed it Alpha Genesis.

Westergaard excelled at the two most important parts of the job: winning government contracts and keeping a low profile. The monkey business is dominated by a handful of highly secretive and rivalrous brokers. The biggest, such as Charles River Laboratories and Inotiv, are publicly traded companies that supply scientists with an array of animals. Others, like Alpha Genesis and Worldwide Primates, are family-run firms that deal exclusively in monkeys. “Sometimes it feels as though they’re all trying to eat one another alive,” Nick Atwood, the co-founder of a direct-action animal-rights group in Florida, told me. Atwood suspected that some of the best anonymous tips he’d received were from the founder of Worldwide Primates, Matthew Block, attempting to smear his adversaries. The company’s attorney, Paul Pelletier, said that this claim had “no truth whatsoever.”

The enmity that dealers harbor for one another is outmatched only by their shared hatred of activists. In 2014, Block called 911 about an envelope mailed to his late mother’s house in Miami which was filled with white powder and a note that read, in part, “*YOU ARE THE LOWEST PIECE OF CRAP WALKING THE EARTH AND YOU DESERVE WHAT YOU DO TO HELPLESS MONKEYS EVERY DAY!*” Block suggested that the letter came from activists associated with Atwood’s group, which had regularly protested outside his family’s homes—but, when the F.B.I. investigated the threat, it discovered Block’s own DNA on the seal strip. Block, who’d previously pleaded guilty to playing a role in the Bangkok Six, a smuggling case involving baby orangutans, was given five years of probation for intentionally conveying false information through the mail. (Pelletier, the attorney, said that Block has repeatedly expressed remorse for the incident.)



After the recent monkey escape, a local graphic designer started making shirts and trucker hats emblazoned with the slogan “Straight Outta Yemassee.”

Unlike his more colorful competitors, Westergaard was quiet and aloof, according to two dozen current and former employees, though he sometimes lost his temper. “You never saw him, but if you were called into his office you were terrified,” one said. In the afternoons, Westergaard would ride his bicycle across the campus to hand out treats to his beloved tufted capuchins, who were widely considered the most spoiled monkeys on the property. Some of them, like Patty, he’d known since 1983, when he was an undergraduate majoring in psychology at San Diego State University. Others he was said to have brought over from the N.I.H., where he’d later worked as a researcher, studying the monkeys’ tool use and considerable artistic abilities. In a press release celebrating Patty’s thirty-seventh birthday, in 2020, Westergaard attributed the capuchin’s longevity to her sweet temperament and the care that she’d received at Alpha Genesis. “She still loves listening to the birds singing in the morning,” he said, “and she still believes the Rolling Stones are the greatest rock and roll band of all time.”

That spring, as scientists began to test treatments for *COVID-19*, demand for lab monkeys surged. China, which had become the biggest foreign supplier of monkeys to the United States, shut down exports around the time of the outbreak, and the ensuing shortage caused prices to quadruple, with breeders charging as much as twenty thousand dollars per macaque. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, there are a little more than a hundred thousand monkeys for research and teaching in the country; Westergaard was inundated with calls from scientists who were scrambling for more. In 2023, a committee assembled by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine concluded that, without greater investment in a strategic monkey reserve, the United States would struggle to combat future pandemics and to compete with China.

Yet plans to expand America’s lab-monkey stockpile have been met with fierce opposition. In the woodsy city of Bainbridge, in southwest Georgia, hunters, anti-vaxxers, and environmentalists have banded together to fight Safer Human Medicine, a newly formed company that has proposed transforming hundreds of acres of land into a breeding facility for up to thirty thousand monkeys. Seemingly eager to undercut the competition, Westergaard joined the pile-on; last fall, in a Facebook group called No Monkey Breeding Bainbridge, GA!, he posted that Safer Human Medicine was “very likely a front for another business entity,” whose backers were “possibly Chinese.” (A Safer Human Medicine spokesperson said that this was “categorically false” and lamented that “Dr. Westergaard has chosen to spread baseless rumors online, sowing confusion and fear.”) Ironically, it was the escape at Westergaard’s own business that dealt the Bainbridge activists their strongest hand. “I couldn’t go anywhere without people saying, Did you see what just happened in South Carolina?” Yveta Merritt, a Bainbridge seamstress and organizer, told me last December. “If we’re supposed to have thirty thousand, how many could get loose if that happens here?”

Westergaard tolerated the spotlight so long as the escape, which he’d described as “a little adventure,” was treated as just that. This narrative soon became difficult to sustain. Two weeks after the monkeys broke out, an overnight worker at Alpha Genesis noticed a group of long-tailed macaques lying on the ground inside one of the compound’s enclosures. A diesel

heater, used to warm them on cold nights, had malfunctioned. Dozens were rushed to the facility's clinic, where twenty-two were eventually pronounced dead. "Their eyes were closed, some had vomited, and others had diarrhea," Leslie St. Ann, a senior veterinary technician who treated the animals, told me. "Some were seizing, and they died before I could euthanize them, the poor little things." By morning, the heater was replaced, and the thermometer, which one employee said had reached at least a hundred and ten degrees, disappeared.



"My sense of self-worth is diminished whenever I see someone on television who isn't me."

Cartoon by William Haefeli

As scrutiny of Westergaard's facility intensified, he descended into the self-dramatizing paranoia characteristic of exotic-wildlife dealers. He stopped responding to most journalists; he fired St. Ann, along with other employees whom he suspected of leaking to the press; and he told the *Charleston Post and Courier* that the heater-related fatalities might have been caused by "extremist activity." In December, PETA released a trove of internal documents from Alpha Genesis that a whistle-blower had shared. The medical records, incident reports, photographs, and e-mails, which were collected between late 2020 and the summer of 2023, detailed a succession of gruesome injuries and deaths. In a public statement, Westergaard said that he couldn't confirm the authenticity of the documents, and suggested that the photos, which showed macaques with ripped-off skin and fractured tails, could have been taken at another facility or "simply faked."

Privately, his lawyers sent a cease-and-desist letter to a former employee named Kathy Strickland.

Strickland often joked that she didn't have hobbies: she had a veterinary practice. But in 2020, at the start of the pandemic, she'd been forced to close her small-animal emergency clinic in Brunswick, Georgia, because staff members were getting sick. She picked up shifts at other clinics until the fall, when she saw an online ad for a job at Alpha Genesis. It promised a competitive salary, plus benefits, for a forty-hour week. She didn't know anyone who'd worked with research animals, but she remembered how fondly they were talked about in veterinary school. "We were told about the sacrifice the animals were making for humankind and how, because of that, the treatment of them was better," she said. She was working non-stop, nearing fifty, and ready for a change.

After joining Alpha Genesis that December, Strickland needed a few days to adjust to the acrid smell of the grounds—feces shot through with ammonia—and to the codes of behavior governing human-macaque interactions. Although her new patients had mostly been born in captivity, they remained undomesticated, with daggerlike teeth. It was best to avoid sustained eye contact, which could be taken as an act of aggression; when the monkeys smacked their lips, it was considered friendly and submissive to lip-smack in return. Nicknames were discouraged but inevitable. The staff joked that Big Papi, a prolific breeder, was Strickland's boyfriend. She liked to bring him treats: a banana in the morning, Nilla Wafers in the afternoon. Big Papi was courteous and gentlemanly, unlike Grabby, who snatched at pens, glasses, hair—whatever was in sight.

The clinic was dirtier than any of the animal hospitals that Strickland had worked in, with swarms of cockroaches hiding between the metal cages. It was also more dangerous. Many lab monkeys carry an illness called B virus, which rarely harms them but has killed nearly half the people it has infected. Because it can be transmitted through scratches, bites, and saliva, Strickland was required to wear long sleeves, a head covering, a surgical mask, a face shield, steel-toed boots, and two pairs of gloves—and to sedate her charges for even the most straightforward procedures.

She was surprised by how many of the problems she was treating were caused by staff negligence. When the maintenance team forgot to fix a heater, she would end up needing to amputate frostbitten fingers and tails. Or a water line would break, and no one would notice for hours, at which point monkeys would come to her dehydrated, with pinched skin and sunken eyes. Cages were old, and repairs often makeshift, so animals were always escaping—or injuring themselves trying to. In e-mails from July, 2022, one veterinarian identified fifteen recent escapes, adding that a deeper search of records would likely yield more.

The processing team, responsible for trapping and transporting monkeys, was known for causing some of the worst injuries. They frequently returned macaques to the wrong group enclosures, where the animals would proceed to beat one another senseless. The workers themselves could also be rough, using metal nets to slam macaques on the ground. “It was a macho contest, where they didn’t want to let the monkeys get the best of them,” Strickland said. “They would go out there like a bunch of cowboys and grab them by the tails. You’re never supposed to do that, since you can fracture a tail pretty easily.” Often, when the monkeys saw the processing team’s van pull up, they screamed and got the runs—both a defense mechanism and a stress response. The chronic diarrhea could cause part of their intestines to fall out. In severe cases, as long as the tissue wasn’t infected or necrotic, Strickland would gently place it back inside with purse-string stitches.

“People aren’t doing their jobs,” one of her veterinary colleagues wrote to supervisors in the summer of 2022, after entering a building in which the “vast majority of cages had minimal or no food whatsoever.” He listed four monkeys who had lost about a fifth of their body weight and described food covered in mold. “A large amount of us feel like we’re drowning,” he stated in another e-mail. “These woes all go back to the common theme of insufficient training,” he concluded, and quit not long after that. When Strickland sounded this theme to a veterinarian hired by the company to consult on animal welfare, the vet advised her to lower her expectations: “Going into these situations knowing the techs aren’t trained and won’t be able to provide the support you’d like may help you be less frustrated.”

Strickland felt more hopeful when she was able to suggest improvements. St. Ann, who worked with Strickland in the clinic, said that “Dr. Kathy,” as she was called, tried to provide training. Strickland taught her techs how to read syringes, how to take an animal’s temperature and pulse. After she ordered parasite treatments, the infant death rate seemed to drop. But she came to feel that, no matter how many changes she made, she was working within a “culture of disregard.”

Employees at the facility stole pressure washers, respirators, ketamine, and at least one baby macaque, who was rumored to have been traded for a dog and an A.T.V. In the afternoons, some of the areas behind the enclosures took on the atmosphere of a night club. People drank, smoked weed, played dice. “It could get sexual out there,” a longtime supervisor told me. “It wasn’t just the monkeys breeding.”

Strickland glimpsed Westergaard only when he would pop out of his office to pay his respects to the capuchins. Although he drove flashy sports cars, he dressed casually: shorts, T-shirts, a Led Zeppelin hoodie. “We were warned never to speak with him,” Strickland said. “Doctors ended up in screaming matches when they went to him with concerns.”

Veterinarians occupy a conflicted role in laboratories. Their job is to advocate for an animal’s well-being, but when their recommendations complicate or raise the cost of an experiment they might be ignored. Pete Otovic, a veterinarian who has worked at eight primate-research centers, told me he’d come to see his unhappy position as akin to that of an Olympic doctor, whose “goal is to keep someone working rather than to take them out of the game.”

Like several of her colleagues, Strickland submitted anonymous complaints to the Department of Agriculture, which regulates facilities and labs under the Animal Welfare Act. The act almost entirely excludes rats and mice, the most common research animals. It outlines minimal standards for housing, food, and pain management—and is minimally enforced. “Facilities can get consistent warnings and violations, but it’s almost never followed up with any sort of action,” Mary Hollingsworth, a former senior trial attorney at the Department of Justice who now leads Harvard Law School’s Animal Law & Policy Clinic, said. Between 2020 and 2025, the more than

seventeen thousand zoos, labs, breeders, and classrooms currently covered by the Animal Welfare Act were fined just a hundred and twenty times, according to an analysis by the Animal Welfare Institute. Even when entities are penalized, the U.S.D.A.’s Office of Inspector General says, the fines are so low that violators view them as “a cost of doing business.”

“You can see this pattern play out at Alpha Genesis,” Hollingsworth told me. Over the last eleven years for which records are available, the company has been repeatedly cited by U.S.D.A. inspectors for escapes, insufficient food and water, processing injuries, and preventable deaths, but fined only once: a twelve-thousand-six-hundred-dollar penalty in 2017. (In an e-mail, the U.S.D.A. emphasized that citations were generally enough to insure compliance.) Deaths that drew no fine included an infant strangling itself with gauze, two animals whose fingers were stuck in the wiring of their enclosure, and a female with her head trapped in a chain-link fence and her body soaking wet, raising the possibility that someone had washed the cage without noticing she was dangling from it.

Regulators largely rely on research facilities to self-report animal-welfare violations like these, but Strickland and St. Ann were among several employees who told me that they had been encouraged to avoid mentioning particularly ghastly fatalities. Strickland collected multiple necropsy reports in which signs of trauma or references to hypothermia had been removed between her initial draft and the company’s final submission. “I started documenting little things,” she told me, “to verify as much as I could.” In her journal, Strickland wrote about how, on one of her weekend calls, she planned to euthanize a monkey who was gasping in respiratory distress, but was asked to wait for several hours, because it was enrolled in a valuable study.

There are virtually no limits on what scientists can do to animals once they enter experiments. Although the U.S.D.A. inspects facilities, it delegates oversight of the science to Institutional Animal Care and Use Committees, whose members, appointed by a facility’s or university’s leadership, might profit from the research they approve. The committees evaluate whether scientists are considering “the three ‘R’s’: deploying alternatives to animal use (replacement), using as few animals as possible (reduction), and

minimizing suffering (refinement). These considerations can meaningfully alter the course of experiments, but the committees are frequently criticized for acting as a rubber stamp, not least because they've been shown to sign off on as many as ninety-eight per cent of proposals up for review.

The most notorious procedures at the Yemassee facility were conducted by George Ward, a veterinarian who'd helped *LABS* of Virginia import macaques from Indonesia in the nineties. Now in his eighties, Ward rented out small buildings on the campus, where he worked with his energetic daughter, Charlene, and a clique of obese monkeys, whose blood he sent to researchers for use in their experiments. Medical guidelines advise against drawing more than ten per cent of an animal's blood volume, but, according to five former employees who assisted the Wards, at Alpha Genesis and elsewhere, George and Charlene over-bled their animals and shuffled them across the exam table quickly, as though they were car parts on an assembly line. (The Wards did not respond to requests for comment.) "Even those of us who love what we do are extremely hesitant about Dr. Ward," a technician told me. "He saw everything as a dollar sign." Some of the Ward monkeys became unusually lethargic; when they got too sick or too old, he harvested their body parts and sold them off as specimens.

Strickland was so busy in the clinic that at first she didn't realize that even healthier animals were behaving strangely. In the wild, macaques can traverse miles of novel terrain each week and socialize through grooming, but in many laboratories they are isolated in barren cages no bigger than a washing machine. This practice, an effort to reduce uncontrolled variables, drives many primates insane. The majority develop what are known as "stereotypies"—repetitive coping behaviors, like somersaulting, rocking back and forth, and pacing in circles. At least ten per cent of all isolated monkeys self-mutilate. They pluck out fur, poke at their eyes, slam their heads against their cage, and gnaw at their own flesh. St. Ann recalled animals biting their scrotum or penis. More than one monkey whom Strickland treated had chewed through their thighs until they'd reached the bone.



"Well, she certainly has a type."

Cartoon by Edward Steed

In an attempt to reduce such anguish, the Animal Welfare Act requires that facilities provide “enrichment” for the “psychological well-being” of captive primates. What that looks like has been left up to the facilities themselves. “Putting a stick in the cage was seen as such a big deal that people wrote entire papers about it,” Conlee, the *LABS* of Virginia behavioral manager from the nineties, told me. Things have become more sophisticated since then, she added, but not by much. Some researchers provide puzzle toys, grooming sessions, or TV; others might offer a small mirror. Hundreds of monkeys at Alpha Genesis are “singly housed” in small cages, but the majority are held in group enclosures, where they’re supplied with balls, swings, perches to climb on, and—the most popular form of “enrichment”—snacks. “It’s the highlight of their day, and one of the saddest things, how excited they are about a piece of sweet potato or a couple of Froot Loops,” a former vet tech said. Even the smallest diversions seem to make a difference, a testament to the monkeys’ loneliness and privation. Touch is so important to macaques that if they are paired together, or given a small opening through which to stroke each other’s fur, they are less likely to tear themselves apart.

While reasonable people disagree about the ethics of using animals for research, a growing number of scientists have come to believe that we are currently using them poorly. Of the treatments that show promise in animal studies, around ninety per cent go on to fail in human trials. In 2014, an analysis of more than two thousand drugs found that animal tests were

“highly inconsistent” at predicting toxic responses in humans and “little better than what would result merely by chance.”

Some of these failures can be chalked up to biology: even the great apes, our closest genetic kin, have proved to be lousy proxies for humans. But others might stem from the conditions in which these experiments take place. Mental health and immune response are affected by how animals are feeling—and, as the rash of stereotypies suggests, captive animals are not feeling well. “In some cases, we’re inducing psychiatric disorders, and then trying to model those disorders, when all of our control groups are nut cases,” Larry Carbone, a prominent lab-animal veterinarian and ethicist, told me. “It’s a bit like saying, ‘I’m only going to study neurotic white men in their early thirties in Cleveland, but then I’m going to try to extrapolate from that to human health globally.’” Carbone, who spent years working at some of the nation’s top labs, noticed that the scientists least concerned about animal welfare were often those least involved with their animals’ day-to-day care. Seeking to transform their test subjects into tidy rows of data, they were willing to overlook troubling behaviors.

The psychologist John Gluck was once such a researcher, an experience that he recounts with great candor in a 2016 memoir, “*Voracious Science and Vulnerable Animals: A Primate Scientist’s Ethical Journey*.” Gluck came of age as a scientist in the nineteen-sixties, when the potential gains of primate research were widely viewed as worth any suffering that the animals might endure. As a graduate student, he trained under Harry Harlow, a psychologist who headed the Wisconsin Regional Primate Research Center. Harlow became famous for his studies of depression and maternal deprivation, some of which involved isolating baby macaques at the bottom of a vertical steel chamber that he’d nicknamed “the pit of despair”—an ordeal from which they never fully recovered. In study after study, Harlow, Gluck, and their colleagues found that their primates were sentient, self-aware, and severely distressed. This, Gluck realized, was the paradox: monkeys were celebrated as test subjects for their similarities to humans, but, when it came to the animals’ suffering, those similarities were “minimized, ignored, or denied.”

Over the decades, Gluck started to question the value of conducting psychological experiments on monkeys. Such studies often seemed to reiterate well-observed phenomena—for example, that prolonged fear and isolation cause long-lasting trauma—and to offer little use to humans. Some Alpha Genesis monkeys have ended up in one of the country’s most controversial psychology labs, run by Elisabeth Murray, a neuroscientist at the N.I.H., in Bethesda. In what *PETA* calls her “fright experiments,” Murray creates targeted lesions in the brains of macaques by injecting them with neurotoxins or suctioning out parts of the tissue. Then she places them inside darkened cages where a guillotine-style door eventually snaps open, revealing a toy snake or spider that can be made to jump. Sometimes monkeys undergo additional surgeries in which steel posts are implanted into their skulls, preventing their heads from moving during tests. Murray told me by e-mail that her research adheres to “the highest standards for animal husbandry and veterinary care,” that it provides crucial insight into the brain, and that it can help identify treatments for conditions like P.T.S.D. Her critics, Gluck among them, disagree, contending that human trauma is shaped by myriad experiences, which can’t be simulated by exposing a brain-damaged monkey to a fake spider.

When Strickland read about these kinds of experiments, she wondered if, by prolonging the lives of research animals, she was merely prolonging their suffering. She feared that the situation would be even worse for the monkeys if she quit—a sentiment I heard often from workers at Alpha Genesis and at labs across the country. Strickland considered herself a doctor, not an activist, but she constantly argued with her supervisors about how the monkeys were treated. In July, 2023, she sent colleagues an e-mail about switched-off exhaust fans and sweltering temperatures in some of the facility’s buildings, quoting the ventilation requirements in the Animal Welfare Act and calling the situation “ridiculous.” The next day, she was fired.

In the months that followed, she picked up shifts in emergency clinics and tried to get into medical writing, but whenever she read about animal experiments she’d start to cry. She knew about burnout, which she’d experienced while running her own clinic. This felt different. As she saw it, she’d gone from having the laid-back personality of the Dude—the

bathrobe-clad character portrayed by Jeff Bridges in “The Big Lebowski,” her favorite movie—to having that of the Dude’s foil, Walter Sobchak (John Goodman), an uptight Vietnam veteran with P.T.S.D. She started meeting with a therapist, who’d formerly worked as a vet tech, and they discussed the guilt she felt about leaving the animals behind. For months, she’d been having a recurring dream in which an alpha-male macaque was following her around, hopping up and down on all fours. He bared his teeth, but not in an aggressive manner. He was just trying to get her attention.

After hearing about the heater deaths in November, Strickland sent the material she’d collected to Alka Chandna, a vice-president of laboratory investigations at *PETA*. “I’ve seen a lot of these problems over the years,” Chandna told me. “What I found shocking in this case was all of the e-mails flowing where they acknowledged the problems but nothing seemed to get better.” Before filing a complaint with the U.S.D.A., Chandna agreed to protect Strickland’s anonymity, though Strickland understood that this might prove impossible. As she texted St. Ann, “Anyone that ever worked with me should be able to figure out the common person in all those documents. 😊.”

On my first day in Yemassee, just after New Year’s, I was driving down the road where Vance had spotted the monkeys when I saw six men staring up at the pines. A few yards in front of them was a rusted metal cage. One man was flying a remote-controlled drone over the trees.

By the time I arrived, thirty-nine of the forty-three monkeys had been recaptured. A vet tech told me that some had sauntered back into the front end of their enclosure, which was baited with fruit; others had been caught with humane traps manufactured by a company called Havahart. But as temperatures dropped below freezing and the final four runaways remained at large, activists feared that Westergaard might take more extreme measures to reclaim them. On several occasions, he’d floated the possibility of using tranquilizer darts, a technique that can injure monkeys by puncturing internal organs or sending them tumbling out of trees. Perhaps because of the attention generated by the escape, or the fact that the escapees were technically N.I.H. property, he’d so far demurred.

When I parked and introduced myself as a reporter to a man wearing an Alpha Genesis baseball cap, he walked away. The rest of the search party awkwardly stared at the ground and answered my questions in monosyllables, when they answered them at all. The man piloting the drone and a colleague of his, Noel Myers, a U.S.D.A. state director of wildlife services, were visiting Yemassee at the behest of Alpha Genesis. Myers told me that it was his first time tracking down primates, but that all he'd seen so far were birds and deer. I asked the other men how long they'd been looking.

"Too long," one said.

"Weeks," said another.

When was the last time they'd seen the monkeys?

"We haven't."

People in town were looser with talk. Everyone had a story about a time, growing up, when they'd heard about a monkey crossing the train tracks or rummaging through a neighbor's trash. "It's going to keep happening," Lennie Mathis, a clerk at Moore's Liquor Sales, said of the serial escapes. Mathis had worked on the animal-care and security teams at Alpha Genesis for twenty-two years, becoming deeply familiar with the ways of macaques. "Whenever you walk in the room, they watch you," he said. "All they have to do is watch you." Now seventy, he dressed like a hipster: frayed blue jeans, white Reebok sneakers, and a sweatshirt with a cartoon monkey sticking out its tongue.

During one nighttime shift, Mathis had gone into an enclosure at two in the morning to check on a heater, but before he could turn on the light five monkeys jumped him, having unlocked a gate in apparent need of repair. "Two of them bit me in my ear, and one bit me in my back," he said. "I was fighting them monkeys off me that night, and I couldn't find the damn door to get out. Finally, I found the doorknob and I turned it, thank God." After the lunch rush at the liquor store, during which he sold mini-bottles to some of his former colleagues, Mathis unzipped his hoodie to show me his scars.

The more time I spent in Yemassee, the more I kept hearing that the employee who'd let the monkeys out in November was a recent high-school graduate. "They told us no one knows who she is," her mother, Shirena Collins, said when I knocked on her door in January. I explained that, given the circuitous route by which I'd found her—a conversation at the mini-mart led me to a cashier at a Dollar General, who pointed me to an outlet store in the city of Beaufort, after which I located Collins's mobile home—that was probably still the case. Collins said that her daughter, Kaira Garvin, had just moved out, but she invited me in anyway. "This has been going on for a long time," she sighed, settling into a leather couch. Collins had been raised in the housing project down the road from the Monkey Farm; whenever the animals made a run for it, her family would keep her inside.



"And let me say this while I have you here: if you had rolled your clothes, you could have fit twice, maybe three times as much cocaine in this suitcase."

Cartoon by Maddie Dai

Collins called her daughter on FaceTime. "There's someone here who wants to talk to you," she said. Garvin was sitting on a bed in her dorm after her first day of classes at Benedict College, in Columbia, South Carolina. She had worked at Alpha Genesis for only three weeks, she said. It was her first real job, after a stint at McDonald's, and she'd loved it. As an animal-care technician, she was responsible for feeding the monkeys and cleaning their cages. She was doing so well that her supervisor had already allowed her to handle some of the enclosures on her own.

One of those enclosures belonged to the new troop from Morgan Island. They seemed terrified of people, Kaira said; whenever she entered their area, they'd run to the opposite side and hug one another. On the day of the escape, she recalled, she'd gone to grab a pressure hose to wash down their enclosure, leaving only one of its three gates open. She hadn't yet learned that the monkeys would be watching her every move. It wasn't until a few minutes later, when her supervisor alerted her on a walkie-talkie, that she realized the monkeys were gone.

"They fired me," she said. "But then they said I walked off the job." Garvin's family had to drive past Alpha Genesis to go to church, and when Garvin saw the scrum of reporters and cop cars outside she panicked. After that, she entered a deep depression and stopped leaving her room. Collins regularly checked on her to make sure that she hadn't killed herself. "When my baby hurts, she hurts," she said. Garvin was offended that the company said she'd fled the scene, which made her seem like a malicious employee rather than what she was: an undertrained and overwhelmed teen-ager.

In a letter to the N.I.H., Alpha Genesis later wrote that it had "terminated" the technician responsible, confirming, despite its own public statements, that Garvin hadn't quit on the job. But perhaps Westergaard's insinuation that Alpha Genesis was under siege from animal-liberation "extremists" was the cannier P.R. move. After all, though many Americans harbor an instinctive aversion to animal testing, they also dislike the idea of crunchy do-gooders meddling with private property. By hinting that his business was the victim of shape-shifting saboteurs, Westergaard distracted from the more prosaic story about the carelessness of his staff.

Yet it occurred to me that both narratives—the one about activists and the one about accidents—obscured the role played by the monkeys themselves, who seemed to be very much trying to leave. In "Fear of the Animal Planet: The Hidden History of Animal Resistance" (2011), the writer Jason Hribal argues that confined animals are praised as intelligent beings until they escape, at which point their actions are attributed to brute instinct, or human error. But for monkeys in captivity, Hribal observes, freedom becomes an abiding preoccupation. He recounts a story about three Japanese macaques at the Pittsburgh Zoo who fashioned a bridge from a fallen tree branch to

sneak out of their exhibit. Apes are even more methodical. Orangutans sometimes spend weeks finding the necessary materials (wires, bolts, screws), hiding their elaborate preparations from their keepers, and awaiting the perfect moment to execute their plans.

In January, a few days before Donald Trump’s Inauguration, I met the man who had done more than anyone to turn the Yemassee fugitives into a cause célèbre on Capitol Hill. “Right now is a golden age for anti-vivisection,” Justin Goodman, the policy director of White Coat Waste, said. He sat in his living room, near Annapolis, Maryland, snacking on vegan mezze in his slippers and cuddling with his wife, Stacy Lopresti-Goodman. As students at the University of Connecticut, the two had worked together to close the campus’s only primate lab. Lopresti-Goodman went on to become a psychology professor at Marymount University, where she has studied the trauma of captive primates, while Goodman realized that shutting down labs was his vocation. The week before my visit, he’d been talking with the conservative activist Roger Stone, staffers from the so-called Department of Government Efficiency, and Nancy Mace, whose 2021 press conference off the shore of Morgan Island he’d helped coördinate. For years, he’d demanded that the government stop financing “monkey prisons” like Alpha Genesis, and now he spoke with the zealous energy of anticipation. “We are bullish on the incoming Administration’s ability to stop animal testing,” he told me. “It’s the perfect storm of conditions.”

White Coat Waste was founded in 2011 by Anthony Bellotti, a Republican consultant who, while campaigning to defund the Affordable Care Act and Planned Parenthood, discovered that he could reframe the issue of animal experimentation as yet another example of federal misspending. His group eschews associations with “animal rights,” describing itself instead as a government-watchdog organization “uniting liberty-lovers and animal-lovers.” When the pandemic arrived, Bellotti and Goodman recognized that the growing constituency of people who’d come to hate scientists could also, with the right messaging, be made to hate the fact that scientists experimented on animals. Unlike other groups that oppose animal research, White Coat Waste does not concern itself with what people eat, wear, or hunt. “We’re a fanatically single-issue coalition,” Goodman said, “and that’s how we’ve been able to broaden the tent.”

Before joining White Coat Waste, in 2016, Goodman worked for nearly a decade at *PETA*, where he gradually came to feel that its “establishment approach”—a phrase that might raise eyebrows, given that the group is best known for its anti-fur advertisements featuring nude celebrities—was futile. “We would claim victory when one lab finally got shut down, but another five would just pop up in its place, because the money was still available,” Goodman told me. “That’s why wiping out taxpayer funding for animal testing is the most efficient way to save the most animals.” (When I asked Chandna, from *PETA*, about these remarks, she said, “We’ve pointed out the federal boondoggle from the start. White Coat Waste has young-male-testosterone energy, and it seems like they attack all the other groups for fund-raising purposes.”)

From Goodman’s perspective, Trump’s second term has been a roaring success. Along with ending grants for thousands of N.I.H.-funded studies on topics that the Administration has deemed unworthy—H.I.V. prevention, maternal-health disparities, vaccine hesitancy—DOGE terminated millions of dollars in grants for animal experiments, including specific line items that White Coat Waste said it had flagged: a \$299,240 grant to create “transgender mice,” \$1.1 million to use rats to study the party drug GHB. This spring, the N.I.H., the Environmental Protection Agency, and the Food and Drug Administration each announced significant plans to deprioritize the use of lab animals. The N.I.H. will require grant-review staff to undergo training to address “possible bias towards animal studies”; the E.P.A. has urged employees to adopt zebra fish and rats that it is retiring from research; and the F.D.A., in a bid to lower drug pricing, intends for testing on animals to be the exception rather than the norm within five years. “God did not make animals on planet Earth for us to abuse and torture,” Marty Makary, the commissioner of the F.D.A., told regulators and scientists in July.

That month, Laura Loomer, a conspiracy theorist and preternaturally gifted Trump whisperer with no official role in the Administration, posted on X that the Department of Defense “just exclusively told me this morning that they have made the decision to end all of the cruel dog and cat testing contracts exposed by White Coat Waste.” Goodman had brought these contracts, worth fifty-seven million dollars, to Loomer’s attention, after he

appeared on her show in April. The two have been working together ever since, Loomer told me. “We’re the party who is actually cracking down on animal abusers,” she said. “We’re the party that stood up for the dogs and cats of Ohio that were being eaten by Haitian illegals.”

Whenever I asked Goodman if he worried that his cause was being used as a fig leaf for the Trump Administration’s campaign against science and academic research more broadly, he shrugged off the question. “I will work with anyone who has the power or political will to get animals out of labs,” he said. Recently, I brought up an executive order that Trump issued in May which grants political appointees the power to “correct scientific information,” control the way it is communicated to the public, and initiate “discipline” against anyone who fails to parrot the *MAHA* line—a move that may effectively end scientific independence. “My goal is to save animals, not science,” Goodman replied. “I could care less about scientific institutions and whether they burn.”

The collaboration between certain *MAGA* influencers and animal-rights activists has drawn out the most confrontational tendencies within each camp. This summer, Loomer and White Coat Waste took aim at an unusual target: Nicole Kleinstreuer, a toxicologist who is spearheading the N.I.H.’s effort to expedite, of all things, the replacement of animals in regulatory testing and research. Under Kleinstreuer’s leadership, the agency has launched a new office to develop and validate alternatives to animal studies, such as computer simulations and “organ on a chip” technologies.

Kleinstreuer has said that she wants to “create lasting change for animal-free science.” But because she has echoed the scientific consensus—namely that, in the meantime, some animals remain necessary—White Coat Waste has branded her an enemy of progress and a “Fauci-loving ‘animal testing czar.’ ” Kleinstreuer, who subsequently received harassing messages and death threats online, has required security protection.

White Coat Waste’s criticism of Kleinstreuer has set it apart from the broader animal-rights movement. (“Have they lost their fucking minds?” Lisa Jones-Engel, the *PETA* scientist, said.) It is far from the only group, however, peddling the claim that an immediate end to animal research would be not only ethically justified but scientifically sound. This absolutist

framing elides the fact that, though non-animal methods are highly effective in certain areas—such as skin sensitivity and eye irritation—they cannot replicate the complexity of living, functioning organisms, especially in efforts to understand whole-body reactions, neurochemistry, and progressive disease. Monkeys remain critical, not least for vaccine development and studying reproductive health. As an N.I.H. official wrote in a letter to members of White Coat Waste’s board, “True progress in this area cannot occur overnight—it takes time, and pretending otherwise is misleading, counterproductive, and dangerous.”

Pretending otherwise, though, holds greater emotional appeal. “People want the idea that we don’t need animals anymore to be true because they love animals,” Heather Sidener, a former head of clinical medicine at the Oregon National Primate Research Center, said. “They haven’t really had the hard conversation with themselves about, What if it was my husband? What if it was my child? Would I really say to them, ‘I think you should die because I don’t think we should use animals to see if this new medicine is safe?’” Cindy Buckmaster, a scientist and a former chair of Americans for Medical Progress, an advocacy group for animal research, told me that when we no longer need lab animals it will be the “happiest day of my life”—but that, until then, researchers should insure that each animal they *do* use is made to count. “The way we view animals has changed a lot in the past twenty years,” she said, “and we need to own up to our shortcomings.”

After his disillusionment, Gluck, the primate researcher, retrained as an ethicist. In this role, he often finds himself giving lectures on the moral quandaries posed by his past career. Though his audience sometimes looks to him for prescriptions, he tends to avoid *TED*-talk bromides and ten-point plans, emphasizing, instead, his epistemic humility. There is still so much we don’t know about monkeys—but what we do know, he contends, should make scientists worry that the conditions of captivity are damaging their research. “The primary question we have to be concerned with is: how do we do this differently?” he told me recently. “Who are these animals? What is their life like? How can you create an environment that is least abusive?” Recognizing that animals are complex beings, with complex needs, may not only reduce their suffering but also yield better science.

A few weeks after my trip to Yemassee, the remaining macaques were apprehended after trappers noticed their footprints in some freshly fallen snow. Westergaard announced that the monkeys were healthy, safe, and celebrating their reunion. *PETA* had its doubts. Someone in town had told the activists that a monkey had been hit by a car, and the group was now demanding that Alpha Genesis provide “proof of life.” On Facebook, Westergaard thanked the people of Yemassee for their support during the recapture mission. “As for *PETA*,” he added, “they can go f*** themselves.”

Throughout the year, Westergaard did not respond to my texts, calls, voice mails, or e-mails; when I visited his office to request an interview, security escorted me off the premises. Neither he nor his company responded to questions about animal-welfare violations and allegations of negligence. Meanwhile, he continued to spar with *PETA* online. At one point, he denounced the documents that it had released from Strickland as part of a “misinformation campaign” that sought “to erode public trust in critical research institutions.” This seemed curious, since Westergaard had spent much of the spring and summer cozying up to an Administration that routinely attacked such institutions. In May, after Alpha Genesis passed its most recent U.S.D.A. inspections without any citations, Westergaard announced his company’s unwavering support for Trump’s Make America Healthy Again initiative. “We believe that cutting-edge science and compassionate care go hand-in-hand,” he said, adding that the recent inspection results reflected “the organization’s proactive, professional approach to research and animal husbandry.” One of his press releases featured an A.I.-generated illustration of three grinning macaques in *MAHA* baseball caps. Another euphemistically described the axe that the Administration has taken to the scientific enterprise as “programmatic changes in research priorities.” That these “programmatic changes” threaten to demolish not just animal research but one of its crowning achievements—the reduction of childhood illness and death through vaccination—went unmentioned.

Alpha Genesis’s red-meat pivot is emblematic of the desperate position in which the primate-breeding industry now finds itself. “Greg Westergaard is trying to make the best of an increasingly bad situation,” Goodman, of

White Coat Waste, told me this summer. “It will be worse for him sooner rather than later, if I have anything to do with it.” In June, Goodman brokered a get-together with Loomer and Mace, who is now running for governor of South Carolina. They posed for photos with a beagle rescued from a laboratory breeding facility and discussed turning Morgan Island into a sanctuary. Not long after, Mace told the *Post and Courier* that Westergaard had sent a member of his family to “spy” on her at a town-hall meeting in Yemassee. The congresswoman has joined White Coat Waste, PETA, and a group called Stop Animal Exploitation NOW! to demand that the government end Alpha Genesis’s federal contracts, several of which were awarded this year. (The N.I.H. declined to comment, citing “the Democrat-led shutdown.”)

Strickland told me that she supports the efforts to close Alpha Genesis and reduce animal testing, but she fears that the White House’s reckless approach could undermine progress toward new cures. She has diabetes, and last November her husband learned that he had metastatic colon cancer. When we met, earlier this year, she showed me a tattoo on her forearm. “Insulin Addict,” it read. I asked about her bicep, where several lovingly rendered long-tailed macaques were peeking out beneath her T-shirt. “There’s a juvie, an older guy who’s a little shy, an older mom, and an alpha male showing his teeth,” she explained, lifting her sleeve. They were pictured in the wild, surrounded by fronds and trees.

The Trump Administration’s attempt to defund scientific research has been accompanied by a bout of animal-related deregulation. In the week after his Inauguration, Trump fired the U.S.D.A.’s inspector general, whose office had been investigating Neuralink, Elon Musk’s brain-computer-interface company, in the wake of reporting on the grisly deaths of some of its rhesus macaques. (Neuralink did not respond to requests for comment.) The U.S.D.A.’s over-all workforce has since shrunk by roughly fifteen per cent. In July, the agency gave Alpha Genesis an “official warning,” without a fine, for the twenty-two heater-related deaths last November. Strickland wondered whether, as fewer experiments are conducted in federally funded laboratories, research would increase at privately owned facilities, pharmaceutical companies, and biotech firms subject to less oversight.

“Westergaard might end up positioning himself into being even more of a monopoly,” she told me. “It’s been a very double-edged sword.”

One sunny afternoon in South Carolina, I took a boat to Morgan Island. My captain, Scott Gordon, was a high-school visual-arts teacher who offered tours along the coast as a side hustle. He had long, shaggy hair and a pronounced surfer’s drawl. A squall had just blown through the bay, and the water seemed almost still, its surface reflecting egrets, herons, and little wisps of cloud in the sky. Gordon warned me that this was deceiving. “It’s still going to be pretty fucking *cold*,” he said. He wore a red felt beret, a snowboarding jacket over a sweatshirt, and orange wind-breaking pants on top of long johns and jeans. He loaned me a second pair of gloves and a neon balaclava. We looked like we were heading to a Nordic rave.

Out on the sound, we sped past grassy islets and an upturned shrimp boat. Gordon gestured north. If we turned left and followed the Combahee River, he said, we’d reach the ferry landing where Harriet Tubman had launched a Union raid that destroyed several plantations and freed more than seven hundred enslaved people.

Gordon slowed the boat as Morgan Island appeared, along with warning signs explaining that we were under video surveillance and should not disturb the animals, emit wastewater, or trespass. The island was forested with palmettos and live oaks, but there was no sign of primate life. “Usually, they’re all up around this area,” Gordon said apologetically. He cut the engine, wondering if it had spooked the animals. We could hear an Alpha Genesis employee puttering around on the dock.

An hour passed. The tide rose. I borrowed Gordon’s binoculars to look for monkeys, unsuccessfully, while he took a leak in the water. Just as we were about to give up, the Alpha Genesis employee rode off in a powerboat. After she disappeared around the bend, two rhesus macaques sprinted down the sloping branch of a tree. They were juveniles, tiny and curious. “I think they’re fucking scouts,” Gordon whispered. “They can tell who’s who.”

Slowly, cautiously, a few more appeared, their chests tattooed with black numbers and letters. We heard screeching, hooting, barking. Soon they were everywhere, clambering down trees, jumping onto the roof of a shed, and

dangling from branches. A big one, the size of a terrier, strutted along the sand. He was followed by an interested female, her behind swollen red. “The struggle for dominance, the things about being human on an elementary level, you can see it all play out here,” Gordon said. A mother groomed an infant with exacting devotion. Two playmates took a running leap at each other, falling backward to the ground. Occasionally, a monkey glanced at our boat, but most were turned away from the shore. Against experience, they’d decided that we could be trusted, and paid us no mind. ♦



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Joachim Trier Has Put Oslo on the Cinematic Map

His new film, “Sentimental Value,” is another intimate character study set in the Norwegian capital. His approach to directing is as empathic as his films.

By [Margaret Talbot](#)

November 3, 2025



Trier wants his actors to be comfortable enough on set to make “mistakes,” and directs them with “tender encouragement,” explaining, “People work better that way—at least, the people I want to work with.” Photograph by Knut Egil Wang for The New Yorker

If you walk through the elegant neighborhood of Frogner, in Oslo, you may notice a house that doesn’t fit in with the understated apartment buildings and embassies nearby. It’s not that the house is ugly or run-down. Rather, it evokes a cottage from a fairy tale. Clad in dark wood with a steeply gabled roof, it has squiggles of cherry-red trim, like decorations on a birthday cake. Norwegians call such architecture *dragestil*, or “dragon style,” a late-nineteenth-century aesthetic recalling Viking ships and wooden-stave churches. To Joachim Trier, the Norwegian director whose new film, “Sentimental Value,” is partially set at this address, the house is “a bit like

Pippi Longstocking's. There's a feeling of something wild and soulful in the middle of something more mannered and polite."

Although it's a cliché to say that a place can be as much of a character in a movie as a person, it's a cliché that Trier has made his own. In three of his previous six films—"Reprise" (2006), "Oslo, August 31st" (2011), and his breakout hit, "The Worst Person in the World" (2021)—Oslo has been far more than a backdrop. His characters are constantly roaming the city, and Trier highlights its melancholy beauty: its lush but empty-looking parks; its moody indigo fjord.

In May, when "Sentimental Value" premiered at Cannes, where it received the Grand Prix, one of the film's stars, Elle Fanning, appeared at a press conference in a T-shirt that said "*Joachim Trier Summer*." The previous month, the pop star Charli XCX—who'd coined the term "Brat Summer" to promote an album in 2024—had performed at Coachella, including Trier's name in a strobing slide show listing artists deserving of their own summer. Trier told me that, in Norway, there had been many jokes about what a "Trier Summer" might mean. Though his films are formally playful and, at times, droll, they are also intimate explorations of difficult emotions.

Among the recurrent themes are suicide, mysteriously intractable sorrow, and failed attempts at familial and romantic connection. Trier said, laughing, "A Norwegian newspaper was, like, 'Joachim Trier Summer? What's that? Being depressed? Being lonely at parties?'"

In October, I spoke to the Norwegian writer Karl Ove Knausgaard, an early admirer of Trier's who has become a friend, of a particular sort. The first time they talked, at a literary festival in New York, in 2016, Trier told Knausgaard a secret about himself, and since then they've met about once a year, for long conversations. "We talk about incredibly personal things," Knausgaard said. "There is some sort of safe space with him, and he's very honest and very interested in other people and their relationships." In between those meetings, they are rarely in touch. Nonetheless, Knausgaard said, if he were drowning, Trier would be one of the people he'd most want to see in an approaching lifeboat. The previous day, Knausgaard had been to a screening of "Sentimental Value" in London, where he lives. (The film opens in the U.S. on November 7th.) "I was enormously touched by it," he

said. “I was actually crying.” Knausgaard texted Trier afterward to say, “I know where the bar is now—you’re over it.” Knausgaard told me, “I wanted to just go home and write about relationships and families. I thought, That’s where you *should* be, where you touch other people’s emotions. Not in a hollow—sorry—Hollywood way, but in a way where there are many things you can reflect on later.”

The phrase “Joachim Trier Summer” wasn’t exactly Knausgaardian, but it struck me as not entirely empty. There *is* something wistfully summery about “Sentimental Value,” as there is in nearly all of Trier’s movies—a sweet but sharp longing that feels tied to the northern light and its long, seductive fade. Anders Danielsen Lie, a gifted actor who has been in four of Trier’s movies (and, remarkably, is also a physician and a public-health official in Oslo), said that, for him, a Joachim Trier Summer was “walking through Oslo in June, early in the morning, coming home from a party, and the smell of the lilacs.” He added, “Looking at Oslo through the lens of his films has enhanced my sensory experiences of the city.”

In “Sentimental Value,” the *dragestil* house reverberates with the joys and the sorrows of successive generations. In a prologue—Trier is unfashionably fond of them—a young girl who lives there, Nora, describes the place with a tender, anthropomorphizing curiosity. She wonders whether the house prefers to feel “empty and light” or “full and heavy,” and notices a crack that crawls up one wall, “as if the house was sinking, collapsing, only in very slow motion.” Nora grows up in the house with her beloved sister, Agnes (Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas), her depressive therapist mother, and—until he abruptly moves out—her overweening film-director father, Gustav (Stellan Skarsgård).

The movie jumps forward several decades. Nora (played by Renate Reinsve, the star of “Worst Person”) is now a successful theatre actress who—as she tells her married lover one morning in bed—is eighty per cent fucked up. After her mother dies, Gustav reappears and lays claim to the house, which his family has long owned. In a fraught attempt at reconciliation, he asks Nora to star in his next movie. (His arts of persuasion frequently run up against his egotistical bluntness: “It’s not that I hate theatre,” he tells Nora, the theatre actress. “I just hate watching it.”)

When she refuses—it's not a juicy role she wants from him but, rather, parental attention—he casts a young American star (Fanning), to whom he effortlessly becomes a nurturing mentor.

As the consequences of Gustav's awkward overture to Nora play out, the daughters come to a new understanding of their sisterly bond, the tragedy that shaped their father's childhood, and the ways that art can and cannot help us reach one another. The old house, with its built-in bookshelves and an iron stove through which Nora can eavesdrop on her mother's therapy sessions downstairs, suits this sort of family, with its confident taste and delicate secrets. But the house is also a benignly indifferent witness to the happiness and the strife that occur within its walls—and to the heartbreakingly transience of human lives.

Trier and his location scouts searched for the right house for nearly a year. In the end, he found it a five-minute walk from the apartment where he lives with his wife, Helle Bendixen Trier, an architect and an experimental-theatre artist, and their two daughters, who are four and one. He loved the house's big windows, which allowed him to occasionally shoot from outside, "as though the house is looking in" on the people within, and the way the light drifted across the interior walls in the course of a day. Even the house's actual residents were the right types—one was a post-punk musician Trier admired. "It had this vibe of the family having come from old money, but then the people who lived in it later being more cultural types, with interesting curiosities," Trier said. "It had a melancholic feeling of a grand past."

Using this location had personal benefits: on the days he was filming at the house, he could see his daughters for breakfast and put them to bed. Trier deeply understands a director like Gustav, with his art-monster tendencies and half-blundering, half-charming attempts to reach his daughters, but he hardly wants to *be* Gustav. In fact, much of Trier's process seems to be about finding ways to buck that model. It helps, as Helle told me, that Trier is "endlessly fascinated" by other people's psychology—"penetrating the top layer of big emotions and trying to understand *why* people are like they are. That is a constant conversation, at home and with our friends."

Trier, who is tall and slim, with closely trimmed hair, a stubbly beard, blue eyes behind tortoiseshell glasses, and a penchant for black chinos and sneakers, looks like your favorite history teacher. On set, he bounces with a natural athleticism. He used to race down ski slopes; he has gone more slowly ever since an accident in 2019 which nearly necessitated the amputation of his foot. Trier is gregarious and emotionally accessible, prone to clasping his hands together in enthusiasm, uttering an exuberant “*Exa-a-actly!*” when he agrees with a comment, and tearing up while directing. (He also got misty when I recounted something kind his wife had said about him.)

This last tendency is one he shares with the director of photography on “Sentimental Value” and “Worst Person,” the Danish cinematographer Kasper Tuxen. “A lot of D.P.s are kind of super-masculine,” Trier said. “Kasper is so sensitive and lovely—he’s really engaged with what the actors are doing.” Tuxen told me that it posed a technical hazard to film scenes he found especially moving. Trier’s movies are shot on 35-mm., and Tuxen scoots in close to the actors, often on a rolling stool ignominiously known as a butt dolly. “Shooting on film, you have an actual optical-glass viewfinder,” Tuxen said. “It’s beautiful for seeing things clearly, but the condensation from a wet eyeball is a problem. When my operating eye gets wet, the glass gets fogged up. So I need to use a heated viewfinder, to cook my tears.”

The American director Mike Mills (“Beginners,” “20th Century Women”) is a close friend of Trier’s; he also works with Tuxen. Mills and Trier both approach filmmaking with an unabashed sincerity, even as they play around with winking archival montages, flash-forwards, and other arch techniques. The two have regular Zoom conversations that can last for hours, and they share preliminary cuts of their films with each other. Mills said that he and Trier, “two very therapized men,” were uncomfortably aware of film history being “filled with narcissists who maybe made great films but were horrible to be close to.” He went on, “If you’re the type of person who sees a lot of that as being a dead end, or problematic, or not leading toward happiness or a richer life, how do you *react* to that?” Like Trier, Mills has a tendency to make therapeutically savvy remarks, then worry aloud that they sound pretentious.

I ran Mills's comments by Trier when I met him for coffee during the New York Film Festival. In directing, Trier said, "there's a lot of heavy lifting, both in getting your creative control and in getting everyone on board—leading a big team of people early in the morning when they're tired, and half of them have undiagnosed A.D.H.D. but you love their energy." This situation "can encourage macho behavior, because you're a leader—the militaristic general." When Trier needs to rally his troops, he deepens his voice, claps his hands, and announces, "politely but sternly, like a teacher—"We gotta focus, everybody!" He prefers to operate in a mode "of tender encouragement, because people work better that way—at least, the people *I* want to work with."

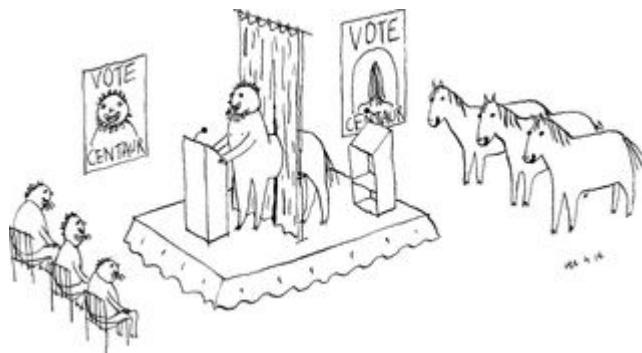
I visited the set of "Sentimental Value" last October. The shoot was on a soundstage a thirty-minute train ride from downtown Oslo. Inside was a re-creation of the first and second floors of the house in Frogner. To film a montage of the house at various historical junctures, from the nineteen-tens to the nineteen-eighties, it had been easier—though not easy, and not inexpensive—to build a replica than to retrofit the actual house. A production-design team had layered the walls of the imitation house with a palimpsest of wallpapers; when the scenes for one time period were done, the team peeled off a layer to reveal the one underneath.

That day's shoot was set at a house party in the sixties, when the place was occupied by Gustav's aunt, Edith, his mother's sister, who lives openly with her girlfriend. Gustav's mother, we've learned, joined the resistance during the Nazi occupation of Norway and was imprisoned by the Gestapo. She later died, by suicide, when Gustav was young. Edith likes to crank up the music at her parties when the neighbors complain—one of them, she's sure, ratted out her sister.

Trier ushered me into the fake house as if *he* were hosting a party, walking me past a table strewn with wineglasses and crumpled napkins. "This is the house at its most lived-in and worn," he said, pointing out the carefully crackled paint on a doorjamb. He and Tuxen discussed a shot they wanted to get of stomping shoes scuffing the wooden floor. The party, Tuxen explained, was "one of the events that has been marking the house with traces of life."

The dancing at the party scene had been meticulously blocked, but Trier urged the performers to cut loose. “This is a beautiful moment of liberation and happiness,” he said. As Trier explained to me later, such gatherings are where the young Gustav learns to be a provocateur “throwing off the old chains of neo-bourgeois postwar consumerism.” It’s a crucial transformation for Gustav, even if, in the film’s present day, the “provocations have become kind of stale and chauvinistic.”

The actress playing Edith, Mari Strand Ferstad, told Trier that she had to “remember even during this party about my sister that I lost.” Ferstad would convey that mournful awareness with subtly defiant gestures as she turned up the record player. I knew that Trier would capture this silent subtext. His films have an abundance of closeups, and he has an unusual patience for lingering on an actor’s face in the interstices of a conversation, allowing viewers to infer, or imagine, what’s inside a character’s head. Trier told me, “People say that movies are really all about space and the big picture and the wide shots, but I do feel that I’m deeply moved by being close to people in the cinema in a way that, socially, you are not allowed to be.” In daily life, he lamented, “you’re not allowed to sit and stare at someone’s face!”



Cartoon by Roland High

Trier went on, “I like to sit right next to the camera and look at actors, and that’s what rehearsals are about a lot”—getting them comfortable with his proximity. Because of this intense scrutiny, he said, “I don’t cast anyone I’m not really interested in—because then, halfway in, you get into trouble.” He noted, “There’s a tradition in the Nordic countries of major closeups. Dreyer’s ‘Jeanne D’Arc’ is maybe the most famous example.” It was also true of Ingmar Bergman’s films, where a “central theme is being

so close, in romantic or family relationships, and yet feeling that you're still a mystery to others."

When I asked Skarsgård, who is seventy-four and has acted in art films and blockbusters alike, how working with Trier was distinctive, he immediately said, "His fixation with the actors' faces. He sees everything you do. He sits beside the camera, not looking at the monitor. Because that is his material. It's not what you say or the dialogue—it's what happens on the faces. As an actor, it's a gift to have a director who is so interested in what you do when you *don't* do the text."

In the party scene, though, there would be plenty of swooping camera movements as the guests revelled. "I'm *ali-i-i-ive*," Trier sang out once or twice, snapping his fingers along to the raucous Johnny Thunder tune on Edith's turntable. A lifelong lover of music, he d.j.'s at a club in Oslo several times a year, playing soul, funk, and house tracks. He is fond of mentioning that he was thrown out of a punk band for being a bad drummer. His favorite term for the troupe of regulars he assembles around him—from Reinsve to Lie to his co-writer, Eskil Vogt, who has worked with him on all his films—is "my band." Trier puts together the soundtracks of all his movies; they're sometimes culled from playlists he's made for Vogt and himself to listen to while writing. "Sentimental Value" makes potent use of poetic, lushly orchestrated songs from the seventies by Terry Callier and by Labi Siffre. It's the kind of music "you could say veers into easy listening," Trier told me. "But I like that you can take soul music and make it light, create levity with strings and so on. I like that dynamic in movies, too—nice light and colors but, at the core, real sadness."

Trier's début movie, "Reprise," came out in 2006, when he was thirty-two. It's a funny, rueful film about two young friends in Oslo, Erik and Phillip, who become authors. It charts their humiliations, achievements, and romances, as well as Phillip's mental breakdown, all while hopping nimbly through time, both real and imagined. We see flashbacks to awkward teen memories (Erik's progressive mom finding porn on his computer) and exuberantly hypothetical scenarios of the friends' literary triumphs (first books that sell poorly but whose "enigmatic nature would've made them cult classics," as one of Trier's wry narrators tells us). "Reprise" wears its

cinematic influences—from the French New Wave to talky guys-coming-of-age movies like “I Vitelloni” and “Diner”—with a gently satiric charm.

“Reprise” marked the first time Trier worked with Lie, and Trier’s discovery of the physician sealed his determination to find actors who could fully inhabit the kinds of characters he and Vogt created. Trier had told the casting director on “Reprise” that he needed actors who looked as if they could have actually written novels. Many weeks and several hundred auditions later, the casting director asked Trier, “Is it enough for the young men to look like they’ve *read* novels?” Then Trier saw a casting tape that Lie had made. Lie was finishing medical school and preparing to work at a psychiatric hospital. But he had acted in one film as a child, and the script spoke to him. He was also, Lie told me, “very into philosophy and language, and the relationship between language and thought.”

In the auditions, Trier asked each actor to name a cultural artifact—a movie, an album—that they loved and describe what it meant to them. He recalled, “I was looking for dudes who mirrored friends I loved, who cared about weird stuff. And Anders was, like, ‘Well, the film that really made an impact on me was Pasolini’s “Medea.” I saw it and I started studying Greek. Biggest mistake of my life—I wasted a year on that!’ ” Trier was sold, casting Lie as one of the protagonists. (Lie, for his part, remembers being struck by how “a film director could be interested in both French philosophy—Lacan and Roland Barthes, all that—but also punk rock.”)

Lie starred in Trier’s next film, “Oslo, August 31st,” too, giving a quietly devastating performance as a drug addict, also named Anders, who has been released from a rehab center so that he can attend a job interview at an arts magazine. Anders wanders Oslo like a spectre. He visits an old friend, an academic who’s married, with children, and who presents a picture of domestic happiness, though one flecked with the commonplace irritations that Anders seems unwilling to abide. After screwing up his job interview, Anders tries to see his sister, who’s been burned by him one too many times and sends her girlfriend to run interference. He goes to a party and stays up all night with fun-loving strangers, leaves increasingly desolate messages for an ex-girlfriend who never picks up the phone, then relapses and overdoses, intentionally, at his parents’ house. It’s hard to know quite why

Anders can't rally; he's intelligent, good-looking, and loved, however exasperatedly. But most of us have known people like Anders, or felt enough of his frustrated despair, to recognize what plagues him: he's an irredeemable disappointment to himself.

Perhaps the most wrenching scene is one in which Anders, seated alone in a busy café, tunes in to ordinary conversations around him. "It's the core of the film," Knausgaard told me. "What he thinks, and what you think, is, Oh, that's so banal, it's just not important. People just pretending, and so on. But they're *connected* to life, they are actually living, and that's what life is—those little things. Which he isn't connected to."

Knausgaard had been equally gripped by "Reprise." Before Trier, he said, "Norwegian film was O.K., but I never experienced it as thrilling." "Reprise" was "almost shocking—is this possible? For us, it was the world we knew—the jokes that circulated, the ambitions that we had, our way of talking." And it was "very advanced in the way of telling the story. It's not the usual realism."

Norway was not especially affluent until the extraction of oil from the North Sea, in the seventies, began to raise the standard of living dramatically. In part because Norway lagged economically behind its Scandinavian neighbors for much of the twentieth century, it did not develop the kind of robust and heralded film industry that Sweden and Denmark did: no Bergman, no Lars von Trier. Lars Thomas Skare, an Oslo-based producer who was an assistant director on "Worst Person" and "Sentimental Value," told me that Joachim Trier's work represented "a kind of pop-cultural mishmash of ideas from France and from international films while still retaining a Norwegian soul." Part of what made "Oslo, August 31st" so powerful, Skare thought, was its "very specifically Norwegian theme, which is: How can a person be so privileged and still be so broken inside?" Skare explained, "We have it so well off that it also breeds depression, in a way. Because we don't have an immediate struggle in our life and our society that we have to focus on. Therefore, we tend to be very introspective, which also leads to a lot of people's ruin, I think. That sort of first-world-country depression—it really touched upon that."

These themes had resonance beyond Norway, of course, and Trier's films have increasingly found international success. "The Worst Person in the World" was nominated for two Academy Awards—Best International Feature and, unusually for a foreign-language film, Best Original Screenplay.

"Worst Person" tells the story of Julie, a native Osloian who turns thirty in the course of the film, as she puzzles out what to do with her life. After quitting medical school—surgery is "too much like carpentry," she tells her mom—she works in a bookstore while experimenting with photography and writing. During this period of professional confusion, she begins an intense relationship with Aksel, an older graphic novelist with a cult following (played by Lie). But she soon feels trapped in the orbit of his focus and success. "I'm playing a supporting role in my own life," Julie says. He's ready for kids; she's not sure that she ever will be. Julie crashes a wedding party where she meets a guy her own age, Eivind, (Herbert Nordrum), a nonintellectual barista. In a lesser movie, he would be played for laughs as a jacked doofus; here, the character is more nuanced—Eivind seems like a sexy, emotionally plausible alternative to Aksel. In a glowingly flirtatious sequence, they experiment with skirting, but never quite crossing, the line of cheating. (Eivind has a partner, too.) They smell each other's sweat, whisper a secret in the other's ear, watch each other pee. Then they part. In an inventive scene in which Julie runs to find Eivind again, Oslo kindly stops and freezes for her—a sequence shot with extras standing stock still, not with C.G.I.—so that she can capture stolen time with him without having to end things yet with Aksel. "Worst Person" is a rom-com, but its themes are much darker than most: the brutal intrusions of mortality; the way that the passage of time can expose, like a receding tide, the detritus of our plans and dreams.



"Oh, great, just what this polis needs, another hilltop post-and-lintel temple."
Cartoon by Adam Sacks

Julie is a wonderfully complex character: ambitious but indecisive, outspoken but confused, alert and observant, full of mischievous life. Some viewers find her impulsiveness more irritating than endearing. But several women I know told me that the movie captured the illusory open-endedness of modern young adulthood better than any film they'd seen. A colleague remembered seeing "Worst Person" with friends just before college graduation and "dubbing it our generation's 'The Graduate'—but, instead of our anxieties stemming from expectations that we were supposed to get married and have kids, our anxieties were stemming from the fact that we *weren't* expected to get married and have kids, and, instead, we could do whatever we wanted." To me, it felt like an "Annie Hall" for a new generation, with a heroine who is as uncertain as Diane Keaton's character but grows up more.

Reinsve won the Best Actress award at Cannes for "Worst Person." Trier had first worked with her in "Oslo, August 31st," in which she played a small part with just one line—but he had never forgotten how emotionally vivid she could be onscreen. He and Vogt wrote the part of Julie with her in mind. In the film, Reinsve's dark-brown eyes shine brilliantly with tears as well as with mirth, and, thanks to her translucent complexion, she is one of the most eloquent blushers in movie history—the pinkening tip of her nose alone speaks volumes. When "Worst Person" came out, the American director Alexander Payne wrote Trier a note, asking, "Is there nothing she cannot do, no emotion she cannot feel and show?" Payne has cast her in his next film, which will shoot in Denmark next year. "You see thoughts *ripple*

across her face,” he said. “She does the whole transition of one thought to the next with all the micro-thoughts in between.”

Ironically, the only movie of Trier’s that was not critically adored in the U.S. was the one he made completely in English, “Louder than Bombs” (2015). After his first two films, he got plenty of offers to go to Hollywood. He turned most of them down. But he did go to upstate New York, with Norwegian producers and financing, to shoot “Bombs,” a story about a family dealing with complicated grief after the death of the mother, a war photographer (Isabelle Huppert). It’s a well-crafted picture, but it lacks the brio and the insouciant cultural specificity of the Oslo films. *The Hollywood Reporter* deemed the movie “cool and diffuse where it should be affecting.”

Trier returned home to Oslo but, perhaps anxious not to be seen as retrenching, he tackled a new genre. “Thelma” (2017) was a psychological horror movie tinged with a dark eroticism, in the mode of Nicolas Roeg’s “Don’t Look Now,” one of Trier’s favorite films. A college student from a protective evangelical family begins experiencing mysterious seizures, and telekinetic powers, when she finds herself sexually attracted to a female friend. For Trier, making “Thelma” was challenging in an invigorating way. “Some of the stuff in ‘Thelma’ was some of the hardest C.G.I. you can do—ice and fire and human skin,” he said. Somehow, it served as a psychological reset for him. His next feature, “Worst Person,” became the third film in what is now known as the Oslo Trilogy.

In Norway, Trier sometimes gets criticized for focussing on the urban intelligentsia he knows best. A friend who was spending time in Oslo this fall texted me that her friends—mostly from the same cultural stratum themselves—have liked “Sentimental Value,” which has already been released in Norway. But she noted that she was hearing comments “about people being tired of him making movies about well-off white Frogner people.” Trier has obviously heard such complaints. “The biggest tragedies and complexities I’ve seen in human life have been of a quite intimate and internal sort,” he volunteered when we met in New York. “Sometimes people criticize my films for being about more privileged people and for not being social comments on how sociology and class affect people. But I would slightly disagree, to defend myself. I would say different classes also

have different *problems*”—“spiritual and psychological struggles that I do think are O.K. to focus on. That I care deeply about.”

Trier was born in Copenhagen in 1974, into the kind of sophisticated, creative family—richer in cultural than financial capital—you often see in his films. His father, Jacob, a Dane, was a jazz musician and a sound designer for movies, and he sometimes brought Joachim on set. Trier recalled, “I learned to stay silent or you go home—the grownups are playing!” Trier noticed that some directors said hello to him, whereas others couldn’t be bothered. The Swedish director Jan Troell, who made “The Emigrants,” was “gentle and including and nice to the kids that came on set—he became a hero of mine,” Trier said. “Much later, I realized how much that had affected me. I want the set to be a nice place.”

Trier’s mother, Hilde Løchen, had started out as a director herself but ended up in television journalism, eventually leading the news division of Norway’s main broadcaster, NRK. The Triers have Jewish ancestry, but most family members are left-wing atheists who married Protestants. Trier’s paternal grandfather, Ernst, was a talented painter of modernist landscapes who never quite fulfilled his early promise. Trier’s maternal grandfather, Erik Løchen, was a jazz musician and one of Norway’s better-known filmmakers. Løchen’s “The Chasers,” a fourth-wall-breaking feature about a love triangle playing out on a hunting trip, showed at Cannes in 1960, alongside “L’Avventura” and “La Dolce Vita.” Another Løchen work, “Remonstrance,” from 1972, was ostentatiously meta: it’s about a film crew making a political movie, and it was designed so that its five reels could be shown in any order. The film baffled his countrymen, Trier said: “No one in Norway cared about that type of movie then.”

Løchen was bold in other ways, too. Like Gustav’s mother in “Sentimental Value,” he was imprisoned by the Nazis—in his case, for about ten months—for his resistance activities as a university student. Trier, who was eight when Løchen died, remembered him as a joyful companion on skiing trips. Only later, talking to his mother and piecing together that Løchen had likely been tortured in captivity, did he realize that his grandfather had been a “tormented man” who never got over his wartime trauma and tried to “counter it by making art.”

In “Sentimental Value,” there’s a powerful scene in which Agnes, Nora’s sister, goes to Norway’s national archives to review the files on her grandmother’s imprisonment. Trier made a similar pilgrimage to view his grandfather’s files. “It was extremely emotional to see the arrest card,” he said. “And to imagine how scared he was. He was a young man, studying law, someone who believed in a free society and was living under terrible conditions in a totalitarian, Nazi regime. And he lost many friends.”



Eskil Vogt and Trier, in 1997. Even as a teen-ager, Vogt recalled, Trier had been “analytical and eloquent,” and curious about other people in a way that “opened them up.” He said, “You know the cliché of boys and young men not being able to speak about their emotions? Joachim was the opposite.” Photograph courtesy Eskil Vogt

Trier’s parents divorced when he was in his teens but stayed friendly, often spending Christmas together. He never felt any great urge to rebel against them—they made their careers look fun and fulfilling. After his father worked on a film in Brazil, he brought back trunks full of samba and bossa-nova recordings; the young Trier loved it all. He also recalls, “I was playing with cameras before I could write,” adding, “The generation after me had video cameras, but this was Super 8, so I could play around with film and send it to Kodak, and when it came back we’d watch it onscreen. They were

family movies, but, because my father was also shooting real movies, he'd explain to me more about how things worked." (Trier's siblings are also in the visual arts: Emil, who is seven years younger, makes documentaries; Elli, twelve years younger, is a photographer and an exhibition designer.) When Trier got into cinema, as a young teen, he went through a mildly obnoxious spell of challenging his parents' knowledge of film history. "But they actually *had* seen 'Last Year at Marienbad,' so it wasn't so easy," he said.

"I'm the most inbred thing you'll find," Trier told me once, laughing. "It's embarrassing. My rebellion has not been about 'Oh, I'm going to be an artist,' and my family saying, 'Wha-a-at? How will you make money?'" Instead of defining himself against his family, he felt a self-imposed pressure to extend its legacy. In some ways, he said, the "biggest blessing was that I didn't run out of motivation, even though I can see through myself" so clearly. He explained, "I can see all this transference of two grandfathers who felt like they failed artistically in some ways, and how that transferred through my parents," and then to him. Trier added that, "after a couple of films, and a bit of psychoanalysis," he no longer feels troubled "about being so clearly the product of this family dynamic." Now, he said, "*I am grateful* for it."

When Trier was twelve, he got into skateboarding (and, later, making skate videos). The sport was transgressive, in a way—it was prohibited in Norway from 1978 to 1989 for being too dangerous for youth. The year the ban lifted, Trier became the country's national champion, specializing in rugged stunts using infrastructure like rails and stairs. Skating, he said, gave him "a feeling of being part of a society that didn't understand the freedom I was seeking." He still wasn't rebelling against his parents, though; they felt the ban was stupid.



"I got it."

Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

Trier isn't the only skater turned indie director: Mike Mills and Spike Jonze also emerged from this subculture. Jonze and Trier learned how to capture fluid moments on camera by making videos of their friends doing tricks. Mills told me that the D.I.Y. ethos of skating had also been an important influence on all of them. "Many skaters own a company, or make their own boards, or do their own graphics," he said. "It makes for cultural entrepreneurs, which is essentially what an independent filmmaker is."

Trier's wife, Helle, thought that skating had shaped her husband's aesthetic in some additional ways. If you're a skater and you don't remain "aware of both what's ahead and what's beneath you, then you fall and you hurt yourself"—a good metaphor, she thought, for the way a director has to anticipate problems while also staying in the moment with his actors and crew. "But it's more than that," she said. "Being a skater, you're moving around in the city and finding places where you can do your tricks, so it's an incredible way of getting to know a city. That kind of relationship to place has played a major role in how he treats Oslo as a character, as something that almost has a *skin*."

Prefiguring some of the themes of Trier's films, the skating subculture introduced him to "people on the edge," as he put it to me. "I've lost several friends to heroin," he said. "And I can still see them in my skate videos." He went on, "Two of my friends are famous rock musicians of my generation. They developed confidence from skateboarding. But other people didn't know how to find their way to civilian life." When Trier decided to give up skating and pursue filmmaking, he announced as much

to his friends, and it felt “like a little bit of a coming-out.” But “they were, like, ‘Of course.’ ”

In 1993, when Trier was nineteen, he began working as a camera assistant on a TV quiz show—trailing the camera operator to keep all the cables attached and untangled. One day, Eskil Vogt, who was the same age, turned up on set as another assistant. They sized each other up skeptically. Vogt, the son of a banker and a nurse, was understatedly cool, in black jeans and Doc Martens; Trier had on baggy skating pants. “I knew people like Eskil,” Trier recalled. “But he probably thought I was a superficial skater idiot who didn’t care about all the beautiful books he was reading.”

At lunch, though, the two began chatting, and discovered that they were both cinephiles (as well as readers of French theory and fans of “The Simpsons”). “He knew a lot more about Fellini and European art house,” Vogt told me. “I knew a little more about American indies. I had a lot of VHS tapes he wanted to borrow. And we liked a lot of the same books. Immediately we became best friends. After a couple of months, we were spending every day together, going to the Cinemateket”—a film institute in Oslo—“and then renting another film and watching it in the basement of his parents’ house.”

Trier recalled, “Apart from my wife, it was the most radical, important meeting of my life.” There was a kind of “romantic feeling” about their passion for movies. Trier and Vogt compared notes and were thrilled to discover that, before they knew each other, they’d attended some of the same obscure screenings—two of the maybe four people in a theatre for, say, a soulful Japanese gangster movie.

Even as a teen-ager, Vogt said, Trier had been “analytical and eloquent,” and curious about other people in a way that “opened them up.” He told me, “You know the cliché of boys and young men not being able to speak about their emotions? Joachim was the opposite.”

When Trier was in his early twenties, he began studying at the European Film College, in Denmark. In 1998, he moved to England, where he’d been accepted at the National Film and Television School, near London. Both he and Vogt, like the two young writers in “Reprise,” felt they had to get out of

Norway—it was, as they once wrote, a “boring suburb on the outskirts of Europe.” Two years after Trier decamped to England, Vogt moved to Paris, to study directing. (He has since made two of his own features.) Vogt and Trier maintained their friendship by taking advantage of student discounts on the Eurostar train.

While in school, Trier directed three shorts in London but never found a writing partner there whom he really trusted. He had plenty of ideas but didn’t enjoy writing on his own, in part because he has a form of dyslexia. Trier turned to Vogt for help, and they’ve been collaborators ever since.

The two still write together in the same room—these days, in a Bauhaus-style office building overlooking the hilly park where, in “Oslo, August 31st,” the Anders character and his old friend have a charged conversation about mental illness. I was surprised to see how small the room was—perhaps eight feet by twelve feet. Tall bookshelves were packed with volumes of film history and back issues of *Sight and Sound*; there was a standing desk, a small gray couch, and a red velvet chair that looked as if it might have been torn out of a movie theatre. The friends still start on a new project the way they always have—by talking every day, for weeks, about what’s on their minds at that stage of their lives. Before “Sentimental Value,” their touchpoints included the phenomenon of people growing up in the same family but with sharply different experiences of it. Before “Oslo, August 31st,” they discussed the grief and mystery of losing friends to suicide or drug addiction. Vogt called this process an “unprofessional” and inefficient way of working, and observed that it yielded screenplays that weren’t particularly plot-driven. The meandering informality of the approach used to frustrate him, but he’s come to appreciate it, both creatively and otherwise. He explained, “When I’m alone, there are times when I don’t write, or I end up spending hours on the internet, and I ask myself, ‘Ugh, what did I do?’ ” But he could go home after a day when he and Trier had talked about movies, music, and life without writing a word and still feel that he’d been productive.

Trier’s collaborators often say how loyal he is, and he often speaks about his artistic partnerships in familial terms. So it’s perhaps not surprising that he and Helle both mentioned how intertwined their creative and domestic

lives are, and how much they like it that way. They met in 2019, when she successfully interviewed for a job in the art department on “Worst Person”; she turned it down, suspecting that they might fall in love. But Helle, who projects a calm, grounded intelligence, has read and given feedback on the last two Trier-Vogt scripts, and she often goes on set. She teaches architectural-design courses in Oslo, and she and Trier have invited her students over to watch films. “That’s a choice that people in quite intense creative jobs have to make,” Trier said. “How, or how much, we will include each other?” As someone who preferred “inclusion,” he had been relieved and delighted to partner with someone who preferred it, too.

I asked Helle if she’d ever consider leaving Oslo, where she and her husband seem so comfortably nested among friends and students and collaborators, not to mention well served by Norway’s benevolent parental-leave policies and subsidized child care. “If you’re indirectly asking, ‘Are we going to move to L.A.?’ then no,” she said, laughing. “At least for now, this is where he makes films.” She mentioned that Trier doesn’t develop a lot of projects simultaneously, with stars “attached,” as in Hollywood. “He does one project at a time, and that project has a life of its own, and it wants things like a child would, and we just have to make that work in our family —structure our lives around that. If the films take us somewhere else, then of course we will go.”

One morning in May, when the lilacs were already blooming in Oslo, I met Trier and Renate Reinsve at Kunstnernes Hus, or Artists’ House, a gallery and a screening room housed in an attractive functionalist building from the nineteen-thirties. It’s one of Trier’s favorite places in the city—the epilogue of “Worst Person” was filmed there. Kunstnernes Hus has a café, and that day it was filled with groups of hip-looking mothers and their gleeful toddlers; a few lone guys, in jeans and sneakers, tapped on laptops. I was surprised, given the echt-Trier setting, that nobody came over to make a movie pitch, or even nodded in the I-know-who-you-are-but-I’m-not-going-to-bother-you mode of New Yorkers. Trier said that sometimes when he is d.j.’ing a “drunk person will come up to say my last film was shit.” But there was a “discreet boringness” to Oslo, he said, and he had no need to maintain a low profile there.

Reinsve came in wearing a black leather jacket and chic high-waisted gray trousers. She and Trier hugged. After expressing jittery excitement about Cannes, which was imminent, they launched into deeper territory. “In our working relationship, I understand, on a profound level, what you want to express,” she said.

“I know you do,” said Trier, leaning over to clasp her hand.

“But I also get the space to express something,” she said. “I was very moved by that again, when I saw the movie.”

The two are close—Reinsve told me that she planned to visit a bookstore down the street to buy Trier something by Carl Jung, as part of an ongoing campaign to prove that Jung was more insightful than Freud. Reinsve, who grew up in a village southwest of the capital, had acted mostly on the stage before getting the small part in “Oslo, August 31st.” “Worst Person” was her first leading role in a film, and she went into it with her theatrical training in mind. “I remember talking with Joachim about how can I really find the character, should I do this or that choice, should I do something specific with her body here that’s significant? And then he talked to me about letting go and just being me, almost going into it like we were making a documentary.”

This made sense to her. Reinsve told me that she had “watched a lot of documentaries to see how people would react not when they’re creating something but when they’re *observed*—their micro-expressions.” Animation similarly interested her, “because you have very clean emotions, you don’t have the ego of the actor layered on top.”

While filming “Worst Person,” Reinsve said, Trier often talked to her about “going to zero”—not “preparing *anything*, not feeling *anything*” beforehand, “and then going into the scene and just letting it happen.” Under these circumstances, “more complex emotions would arise”—she might laugh in an otherwise sombre scene, or just allow herself to experience the emotions of the dialogue as if for the first time. “If he saw me straining a little, he would say, ‘Go back to zero,’ ” she recalled. At times, this approach created the disorienting sensation that she wasn’t really

acting at all. “That was really scary,” Reinsve said. “But it also created an honesty.”

Trier told me that he dislikes it when he senses that an actor has “the intention of showing me, at the camera when I’m sitting there, ‘Look, I’m telling your story.’ That’s what I want to get rid of.” He is fond of quoting Goethe, in German, on this point: *“So fühlt man Absicht und man ist verstimmt.”* (“You feel the intention, and it bothers you.”)

Trier insists on having final cut on his films, primarily because it allows him to protect actors who have given unguarded performances. He once mentioned to me how grateful he was that Anders Danielsen Lie had been so willing to participate in depictions of male shame and defeat, such as the scene in “Worst Person” when Julie and Aksel have sex for a final time just after she’s broken up with him. Afterward, “he is standing there in a T-shirt with his dick out, feeling vulnerable. It’s not the heroic guy at *all*. It’s ‘I’m being left! I’m lonely! I feel like a loser!’ ” As Trier told me in another conversation, “The way you look at a body, a person, the emotions, how you treat all that—I’m the one they trust. So if I can’t make the final call on it? . . . The actors have brought their lives, their emotions—they’ve taken the risks.”

To further push against artificiality, Trier said, he has leaned on his experience making skate videos. The key to those early experiments had been to remain quietly recording while friends hung out and practiced stunts, so that he’d be ready when a memorable event spontaneously happened. “Luck favors the well prepared,” he’d said to me on set. The actors in his films rehearse for weeks, in the exact locations where they’ll be filming, but once shooting begins he urges them to try what he called “jazz takes”—looser, often weirder riffs on the readings they had rehearsed. These might or might not end up in the film, but the emotions in them, he believes, usefully rumble beneath the surface of straighter takes.

Stellan Skarsgård told me that “all directors are control freaks,” and that Trier is no exception. But Trier has the virtue of knowing what he can’t and shouldn’t control. He “prepares very, very well,” Skarsgård said, noting that Trier can effortlessly “discuss the essence of your performance.” But then

“he lets go, because he knows that’s the only way to give the actors freedom enough to create real life, believable life, *irrational* life.”

The conditions of filmmaking in Norway favor this intimate and relaxed approach to working with actors. Public funding is generous, and the money comes in early if the Norwegian Film Institute considers a script to have artistic value. Trier spent sixty-four days shooting “Sentimental Value.” A comparable indie film in America would likely be shot in less than a month.

Perhaps the most touching performance in “Sentimental Value” comes from Inga Ibsdotter Lilleaas, who plays Agnes, Nora’s younger sister. Whereas Nora has acute stage fright and other obvious signs of anxiety, Agnes is more self-contained: she’s a historian with a husband and a son with whom she shares a contented home life. Lilleaas makes clear, though, that Agnes is exquisitely attuned to the shifting moods of her less stable sibling.

Lilleaas told me that, when she auditioned for Trier, she was a little startled to find that the first thing he did was sit down and chat with her for half an hour—“about who we are, and what we think about our family, about being parents. We could immediately talk about things that normally take me a long time to be able to share with people.” If she didn’t get the part, she thought, she’d at least treasure the conversation. On set, he talked to her about the importance of making “mistakes” in her performance. “*Please make the mistakes,*” he said. It made her feel freer and safer, she said, “because you know if you fail your failure will not be rejected, or held against you.”

At one point in “Sentimental Value,” Agnes visits Nora’s apartment and gets her to read the script their father wrote for her. To both sisters’ astonishment, Gustav’s script reveals an empathy he had rarely shown them in real life. Talking afterward, Nora asks Agnes why she emerged from their family in so much sturdier shape than Nora had. “I had you,” Agnes says, weeping.

Lilleaas told me that, when they were filming, “in that moment I wanted to hug Renate. That was my impulse. But I was holding back.” That very second, Trier whispered, “*Just hug her.*” She went on, “I also said ‘I love you,’ which wasn’t in the script. It doesn’t necessarily need to be said, but I

felt so much in that moment that it was true.” The hug, Lilleaas recalled, led Reinsve to improvise, too: “First she says ‘Likewise,’ and then she realizes that’s too impersonal, and she has to say ‘I love you’ back. She *wants* to say it back. I love that detail.” Lilleaas said of the hug, “I’m so happy I did it. And that was because I feel like Joachim saw me in that moment. That made it possible.” ♦



Margaret Talbot joined *The New Yorker* as a staff writer in 2004. She is the author, with David Talbot, of “[*By the Light of Burning Dreams: The Triumphs and Tragedies of the Second American Revolution.*](#)”

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Takes

- **[Ed Caesar on Nick Paumgarten’s “Up and Then Down”](#)**

A story about a man trapped in an elevator for forty-one hours has just the right amount of anxiety.

[**Takes**](#)

Ed Caesar on Nick Paumgarten's “Up and Then Down”



By [Ed Caesar](#)

November 2, 2025



April 21, 2008

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

The shortest magazine pitch of Nick Paumgarten's life actually took place in an elevator, which the writer was sharing with an elevator-phobic editor, and consisted of a single word: "Elevators!" The article that followed, in April, 2008, is titled "Up and Then Down." It is the story of a man named Nicholas White—who was trapped in an elevator in the McGraw-Hill Building, in midtown Manhattan, for forty-one hours—and also a study of "elevatoring," a delicious word for the discipline of designing vertical transportation.

A long piece about elevators might sound a little dry, even for a magazine that once published a forty-thousand-word article about oranges. ("What is there to say, besides that it goes up and down?" Paumgarten asks, coquettishly.) But, as Gerard Manley Hopkins nearly said, there lives the dearest freshness up down things. Paumgarten's story is a parade not only of fascinating facts—there are, or were, fifty-eight thousand elevators in New York City; the super-fast elevators in the Taipei 101 Tower are pressurized to prevent ear damage; all door-close buttons in elevators built after the early nineteen-nineties are designed not to work—but also of indelible similes. In speeded-up CCTV footage of White stuck in the elevator car, he looks "like a bug in a box." At thirty-two hundred feet, a hoist rope will snap "like a stream of spit in a stairwell."

In one passage, Paumgarten notes that passengers "know instinctively how to arrange themselves in an elevator. Two strangers will gravitate to the back corners, a third will stand by the door, at an isosceles remove, until a fourth comes in, at which point passengers three and four will spread toward the front corners, making room, in the center, for a fifth, and so on, like the dots on a die." Ever since Paumgarten's article came out, I have not shared an elevator without remembering the dots on a die and feeling a jolt of pleasure.

"The elevator, underrated and overlooked, is to the city what paper is to reading and gunpowder is to war," Paumgarten writes. (Pretty good, that.) When I first read those words, I was twenty-eight and living in London. Except for two copies of skyscrapers in which our financiers—and finances—go up and down, London remains a fairly horizontal city. It's easy to

spend a busy week there without riding in an elevator. To Paumgarten, elevators were ostensibly banal; to me, they seemed exotic.

His narrative structure, too, contains tensile strength. The reader is introduced to White's entrapment, and then, just as White is contemplating his own death, diverted to learn about elevating before returning to his story, and so on. The subject matter goes up and down; the narrative breathes in and out (with just the right amount of anxiety). I am not the first or the last writer to have borrowed Paumgarten's template.

Lurking behind the vertical fun is tragedy, which lends the piece an unexpected power. "Up and Then Down" mentions 9/11: we learn that some two hundred people were killed in elevators on that day. But, in a broader sense, the article is about the fear of being trapped up high. People who work in skyscrapers have always found it psychologically necessary to forget about the physicality of towers. September 11th reminded us, horrifically, of what a tall building is; in its playful way, "Up and Then Down" does, too. It's striking that "Man on Wire," the gorgeous and vertiginous documentary about Philippe Petit's wire walk between the Twin Towers in 1974, was touring film festivals when Paumgarten's piece was published.

When I'm in New York, I often feel like the pig in "Babe: Pig in the City." I'm continually baffled by American tipping protocol; I get on an express when I need a local. Imagine my gratitude to Paumgarten, then, when I first visited *The New Yorker*'s current offices, at One World Trade Center. The elevators there are "destination dispatch," which, per "Up and Then Down," assigns "passengers to an elevator according to which floor they're going to." I'd never ridden a destination dispatch before. A fresh opportunity for humiliation awaited. But, thanks to Paumgarten's sideways instruction manual, I knew what to do. ♦

[Read the original story.](#)



Up and Then Down

Late on a Friday night, Nicholas White got stuck on an elevator in a nearly empty office building.



[Ed Caesar](#), a contributing staff writer, received a Foreign Press Award in 2021 for his New Yorker article on the rise of North Korea's cybercriminals.

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **The Doctor's Plan**

I know why I'm here today, Mr. Secretary. An inquiry? Right. It's a setup, but I got this place surrounded with nurses, and every last one knows how to apply a tongue depressor.

[**Shouts & Murmurs**](#)

The Doctor's Plan

By [Cora Frazier](#)

November 3, 2025



Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

My plan worked. A liquid injected into the veins of children—yes, children, unwilling, screaming, crying children—to prevent them from contracting communicable diseases. Hate me if you want to. I never asked for your forgiveness. When I was just a boy, I watched my parents die before my eyes. Polio. I vowed to get my revenge. And I didn't care who I helped or how many lives I saved along the way.

This surgical mask is my disguise and my means of shielding myself from *covid* spittle. I don't need to show my face. I have no face to show. I am no longer a man. I have become what you call me, a give-no-shits Doctor, out here running cold water on the world's burns.

Where is my conscience, you ask? Never had one. I've been too busy dressing wounds. Conscience is for cape-wearing amateurs who haven't yet recognized that they are, at their core, just like me. Broken. Weary. Numb. Band-Aid toting. Come and get me, so-called heroes. Because I'm about to

strap you to a gurney and apply an ice pack to your throbbing head. And the whole time I'm going to laugh while asking what your kid has been up to.

Don't call it a costume. Call it scrubs. I wear them because of bloodstains. Yeah, Mr. Secretary, the blood from your nose when you forget to turn on the humidifier at night. Dry heat from a radiator will do that to you. Take a lollipop from my assistant. It's poison-apple-shaped, and I'm not sorry.

I'm about to point this gun at your forehead and take your temperature. Ninety-eight point six. Just as I predicted. I document it. I document everything—yes, everything. I got files on you going back years. Even you, Mr. Secretary. The time you broke your ankle in ninth grade? I was there, fitting you into a moon boot and estimating your insurance company's allowable fee.

I know why I'm here today, Mr. Secretary. An inquiry? Yeah, right. It's a setup, but what you suits don't realize is that I got this place surrounded with nurses, and every last one knows how to apply a tongue depressor. You bureaucrats have decided that I'm the problem. Seen me for what I am—an eccentric with a taste for rare sharks and the *Journal of the American Medical Association*. But you don't scare me. I've got a crash cart and a drawer full of gauze pads and an inexplicable British accent. Let's go, federal government.

You say that I will save millions of lives this year. Next year. Each year in perpetuity, until I am stopped, once and for all. "Really, that many lives?" I ask, coyly. After you've saved one, let me tell you, the rest get a lot easier. And now? I sleep like a baby. I didn't have regrets when I was just a resident, giving stitches to children who fell off jungle gyms. Now that I've developed an mRNA vaccine? I don't block anything out—no, I remember. I remember every mother's scream, every photo of a newborn baby, every balloon, all while I stroke a white-haired cat. An evil cat.

What do I want? Nothing less than world domination. The eradication of the H.I.V., Ebola, and tuberculosis pathogens. Yeah, I said it. Do I shock your delicate constitutions? Deal with it. I want fewer preterm-birth complications. Clean drinking water. My smiling face on every poster for sleep-apnea studies. And my own fleet of special-capability vehicles with

sirens and lights and the word “AMBULANCE” written backward, so that other drivers can read it in their rearview mirrors.

You want to fire me, Mr. Secretary? Go ahead and fire me. You hide behind your institutions and believe in social order. But I *am* the institution. No one in this whole public-hearing room can find a vein like I can. And when I do find it? I stick a needle right in there, and I draw enough blood to determine whether you need to take an iron supplement. And then I lean back and admire the human bones that I’ve collected as part of my anatomy model.

Take me to court. Imprison me. But you can’t imprison an idea. You can’t imprison the idea of me administering my fellow-inmate’s insulin. I will shoot him in the arm multiple times a day, and, trust me, Mr. Secretary—in the darkest moment of the night? He will thank me.

You ask if I will go quietly. Have you not been listening? Of course I will go quietly.

After I fill this entire chamber with laughing gas. Regretting turning down that KN95 now, aren’t you? I’ve got a helicopter waiting on the roof to take me back to my lair, the Cleveland Clinic. And don’t even think about getting to me there, unless you’re willing to set up an appointment with our office a month to six weeks in advance. And don’t think that you won’t be getting a text reminder. Because you will.

What you don’t realize is that you need me. You need me for balance. For annual checkups. For dinosaur stickers.

And believe me, fools, I’ve got plenty. ♦

Cora Frazier has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2012. She is a creator and writer of the podcast “*I Think You’re Projecting*. ”

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Fiction

- **“Mother of Men”**

I saw someone coming toward me through the twilight on the road ahead, a skinny man in a glowing white shirt, and dread rushed into me.

[Fiction](#)

Mother of Men

By [Lauren Groff](#)

November 2, 2025



Photograph by Bryan Schutmaat

There are men in my house, too many men, I am being driven mad by the men who are always in my house. There is my husband, a man I can't resent because he's grandfathered in, and there are also the four men who have been building the bathroom addition to our bedroom downstairs, a tall and wiry Italian guy from New Jersey who talks a great deal and wears so much cologne that he seems to linger in the rooms even when he's gone, plus three quiet Venezuelans who often have to quickly redo the things that the Jersey guy has done while he's taking a break. In and out of the house the workmen go all day, their boots crunching on the Ram Board over my rugs. They slam the kitchen door, sit on my bed to stare at their work, cover all surfaces with fine white dust. It has been five months already, but the addition is somehow still hypothetical, an open wound, a tarp-covered construction leaking air-conditioning, allowing a scattering of palmetto bugs as shiny as polished buttons to stream inside. Once, I woke up at midnight to a disturbance in the addition and squinted into the dark of the construction and saw the weird pointy pale head of a possum looking at me from a hole that remains open to the outdoors, where the bathtub's drain line is supposed to go. Of course, of all the men in my house, the most shocking are my own boys, who are no longer boy-size but have somehow become man-size, the younger one slender as a whip though he towers over me, the older one so huge and muscled that I often wonder if he'll fit through doorways, which he does in the manner of that children's toy where you pound little wooden shapes through their corresponding holes with a mallet, which is to say, just barely, my doorway-shaped man-child.

I am frequently disturbed when I dream at night of the boys when they were little and they smelled like soft organic soaps and crackers and kiwi fruit, both of them nestling against me, the smaller boy's golden curls under my chin, the bigger boy wrapping his legs around my waist, his arms around my chest, clinging there like a koala, already so strong. I dream of walking at dawn on a beach with my small boys holding fast to my body, and I feel that keenest of happinesses coursing once more through my bloodstream as the dream waves wash softly against the dream shore. Even within this happiness, when I half awaken to pee and stumble through the night to the sole working toilet, I am seized by terror because an enormous man is coming out of the bathroom into the pitch-black hallway, a man who brushes up close to me on his way to his own bed, pats the crown of my head with his huge hand and murmurs, Mama.

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

Grief hits me then, sudden and piercing, for I must have done something wrong, I must have fumbled this, and all that luxury of time, what once felt like endless swaths of hours during the awe-shot and screaming drudgery of babyhood, has somehow slipped away from me; all that time is gone, and where has it gone?

And these days I can no longer find any relief from my house's infestation of men by fleeing outside because other men, distant men, men who are growing fat on their own cruelty, are making the sky collapse on our heads; every day the sky comes a bit closer, oppressive, so low in some places that it has been swallowing people up out of their lives. My long walks with the dog in the dusk are no longer calming. In fact, they are enervating, not only because of the low sky that is now pressing against the rooftops and causing the air to thicken but also because the dog currently has six pounds of stones in her bladder. She is waiting for her vet to return from a vacation to remove them, and she must pause every three to ten steps to squat and fail to relieve herself, poor soul.

A week ago, the dog and I were halting and jerking our way down the jungly road near the Sweetwater Branch, where the thick foliage was dark in the dusk, the shadows darting with birds and lizards and squirrels, the black water of the creek coursing after an evening downpour that had cooled the world off and tinted the corners of the low horizon magenta. Even with the sky actively falling on our heads, this earth of ours can be so delicious, I was thinking, as I heard the cicadas in the oak trees and an owl hooting so gently nearby, and I watched the earth steam in delicate, dissolving curls. And then I saw someone coming toward me through the twilight on the road ahead, a skinny man in a glowing white shirt, and dread rushed into me. I knew his shape, the movement of his body, even before I saw his face. Swiftly, I put myself in the middle of the street, far from the jungle and the stream into which I could perhaps be pulled, and I put my dog between the man and me, though even when she's healthy and not lugging around six pounds of bladder stones she's useless as a guardian; she'd cuddle any would-be attacker to sleep. I kept my phone in my hand and thought, Fist to the throat, knee to the nads, tear out his eyeballs with my thumbs, because here coming

toward me, grinning with all his teeth, was my old stalker, this man who had caused my family ten years of anguish.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice

[Listen to Lauren Groff read “Mother of Men.”](#)

He had been in his early twenties when he started stalking me, a renter in a house around the block from ours, and we'd had very little to do with him except for one time when my husband was coming back from the brewery on a Wednesday evening and found him blacked out in a parking lot and lugged him home to sleep off his drunkenness in the privacy of his own porch swing. Also, once, we had a Sunday brunch for our friends in the neighborhood, and he came in and ate some eggs and muffins, though nobody had invited him. Soon it got back to me through the finger-wagging disdain of the local gossip—a retired bartender who walked miles through the neighborhood every night—that my stalker had started to tell people that he and I were in a romantic relationship, which we thought was embarrassing and very strange but which we ignored until my stalker started leaving unhinged letters in the mailbox and showing up in the middle of the night to watch me reading on the living-room couch through the upper glass of the Dutch door. I would look up, see him on the porch glowering down at me, and freeze like a mouse in the corner of the snake case, and then finally the world would start to spin again and I'd run to shake my husband awake. No amount of calm reasoning by my husband, who has infinite patience, got my stalker to relinquish his delusions, and in fact things intensified: my stalker requested three hundred thousand dollars from me on Venmo, he argued angrily with each of my social-media posts, and I found a grilled Barbie doll on our front steps, which may or may not have been his work. He positioned himself on the sidewalk opposite our driveway, and I had to run to the car when leaving for tennis in the early morning so that I could avoid having him shout at me like the spurned lover he was not, waking the neighbors. We called the police when he started to follow our younger boy up the street, but the police verbally shrugged and told us they could do nothing until my stalker actually harmed one of us or our property. Sorry, they said. It's the law.

That was when we asked my stalker's roommate for help in contacting his family, and the roommate blushed and couldn't look at me and said she'd

kind of suspected something wasn't right, she'd always thought it was totally weird that I'd be having, like, a hot and steamy affair with her roommate, who, she said, often forgot certain crucial elements of personal hygiene and stank like the four packs he smoked every day. She gave us his sister's number, and the sister was suitably horrified, though not surprised—it turned out that he'd done something similar in his teen-age years, down in Jupiter—and she drove north in a pickup truck the very next day and moved him out. That evening, the roommate came over and said she was so relieved, she was shaking with relief. She showed us her trembling, pale hands. She said that she hadn't wanted to tell us because she didn't want us to panic, but a few days ago my stalker had shown her a gun—he'd got it from somewhere—and she'd spent the past few nights barricaded behind her dresser, she'd been so scared he was going to do something bad with his weapon.

Jesus Christ, my husband said grimly, and bought a second baseball bat so that he could sleep with one under his side of the bed, and it would not be only me rising up out of sleep already swinging.

We had a period of relief, but every two years or so the stalker comes back to town and falls into his old ways. We see him loitering on the sidewalk opposite our driveway, or I'll forget to lock the car and will discover a bouquet of magnolia flowers ripped off our trees disintegrating in the passenger seat. Then, whenever my husband, a very tall and muscular man, sees the stalker, he will go outside without a shirt on, holding his baseball bat loosely in his hand, and warn the stalker off in a voice so quiet it could only be terrifying, because there is nothing more frightening than when the extremely gentle among us, the peacemakers, are pushed until they snap.

This is why, on the night just after the storm, all the world diminished to a tiny point when I saw my stalker coming toward me on the street, materializing like the Cheshire Cat, from grin to flesh, out of darkness.

From about twenty feet away he called my name, his hands outstretched as though we were about to hug, and I said a cautious hello, and did a dance step away, keeping the dog between us, and started walking fast, pulling the dog, who dribbled her urine but waddled as quickly as she could. I kept my voice bright and loud, making myself agreeable, because friendliness when one is a woman is always the first line of defense. I shouted, Yes, what a

beautiful night it is, it's true the dog is acting strangely, she has been having health issues, yes, everyone is doing well, yes, the black swans are back on their island in the Duck Pond, the male had bumblefoot in the spring but he's doing better now. Finally, we reached the upper part of the road which glowed with street lamps, and I saw at the corner our neighbor with her two Afghan hounds, and I practically ran to her, shouting goodbye to my stalker over my shoulder so he had no choice but to walk away.

Oh, God, he's back, the Afghan-hound lady muttered, because word of our predicament had got around and all our neighbors knew. My dog grovelled on her back before the elegant blond hounds, who each raised an eyebrow at her.

The neighbor and her dogs kindly walked us home, and when I reached our back yard I threw up, and I spent the entire night circling the dark house, checking that our windows and doors were locked, unable even to lie down in my bedroom because the addition was still open to the night, the tarp was still breathing crunchily in the wind, each noise made me feel that the world was grinding me down a millimetre more.

Though I am a woman who prides herself on never giving ground to the bullies—my middle-school years were streaked rainbow-bright with pain—in the morning, when the workers showed up, I hid upstairs in my office, my baseball bat under the chaise longue, startling with every slam of the kitchen door below. The windows showed the dark sky pressing so hard against the points of the rooftops that they stretched it, like fists pushing into a blown-up balloon. And when I stood on my desk and looked down past the crape myrtle in pink bloom below I could see my stalker sitting on the curb opposite our driveway, loitering there with a tall boy of energy drink. I called my husband, who couldn't get out of meetings to chase him off. When I went downstairs to tell the workers about my stalker, the Jersey guy was off somewhere getting himself lunch. My Spanish isn't as good as it should be, and the three Venezuelans nodded and smiled, eying my baseball bat, but quietly asked one another questions as I walked away, and I knew it was no good, I hadn't communicated anything, and I couldn't leave the house, I couldn't read a book, I couldn't sleep, I could barely breathe.

Whoa, Mama, you're looking rough, the younger boy said when both of my sons walked in from rowing practice in the evening. The older boy said, Poor little Mama, don't worry, I'll walk the dog tonight so you don't have to. The younger one said, Do you want to sleep in my room so I can protect you? The older one said, Bro, you couldn't protect squat with your noodle arms, she should sleep in my room, I'll kick that guy's ass. Then he flexed in the glass of the kitchen door, beyond which night was falling, and my younger son, inspired, went off to the unfinished bathroom downstairs to flex in the mirror there. And then both boys forgot about flexing and about my stalker, too, because my husband came in the door with two rotisserie chickens and a Caesar salad and roasted potatoes, and it is shocking when this happens, when a film of food lust comes down over my boys' eyes and they become pure animal. The three men in my house fell on the food as if they hadn't eaten in weeks. But I couldn't eat, I couldn't concentrate enough to eat, I was listening so hard to the sounds beyond the kitchen, in the rest of the house.

And this was another night when I couldn't sleep, and I lay on the chaise longue in my office and counted my breaths. When the builders arrived, they came in quietly. Only two Venezuelans were kneeling to tile the bathroom. They didn't look up at me, though they were normally kind and full of smiles. The Jersey guy's face was stricken; he seemed to be having trouble finding the tools in his toolbox. Where's Héctor? I asked, and the Jersey guy swallowed, his Adam's apple sharp in his neck, his eyes all red and misty, and he said, He vanished in the night. I was so on edge that I nearly lost it, I nearly shouted, He didn't just magically disappear, people took him, you allowed this, this is your fault, you chose this!, because the bumper sticker on his pickup truck had made me feel sick with rage for months. I didn't say anything, though, and my silence was certainly born of cowardice, because it had been hard enough to get this troupe of workers to do the desultory job they were doing, and if they quit we'd have an open hole in our house for years, until we could find someone else to finish the work.

I needed sleep so desperately that for about an hour that afternoon I made a little nest in the upstairs closet where we keep the camping things, and when my husband came home he at last found me there in a cocoon of sleeping bags, the baseball bat propped against the wall, headlamp on, counting the freeze-dried meals I'd bought in bulk during the pandemic and figuring out

how many days we could survive with the boys eating their necessary six thousand calories a day. You doing O.K.? he asked. Did you exercise today? But he quietly closed the door when I yelled.

He had coaxed me back downstairs to eat a few bites of yogurt, to sit in the presence of my boys bent over their homework, and I must have fallen asleep on the couch in the sunroom despite my hypervigilance because I woke to darkness and to the sound of hesitant footsteps on the Ram Board in the kitchen. I knew bodily, first, in the stomach and the throat, that those were not the footsteps of any of my men. I knew that whichever boy last walked the dog had forgotten to lock the kitchen door, and that if I were to get up I would see the stalker standing in my kitchen in the dark. I had stupidly left my baseball bat in the camping closet, but there was a ukulele at hand, and so I seized it by the neck and brandished it with both hands and tiptoed through the sunroom, the dining room. I paused in the butler's pantry to watch the reflection of the stalker in the window. He was standing in the light of the open refrigerator, eating potato salad out of the Tupperware with his fingers. Even in the reflection, I could see the moons of dirt under his nails.

Then I heard the squeak of the office chair in the library and other footsteps on Ram Board, and in the doorway beyond there loomed my older son. The stalker put the Tupperware back and closed the fridge, but insufficiently, so some light leaked out into the darkness. Hey, I'm your mom's friend, he said, and then he laughed.

I could not move. I could not breathe. I could not swing the ukulele so it smashed on his head. I could not stab him in the heart with the broken neck. In that moment, I could see, splintering outward, all the horrific ways that this could end: the stalker's hand so perilously close to the knife block could seize and throw the cleaver, or my son could rush him and take him out with a single punch, or the stalker could take the cast-iron pan from the stove and bash my son over the head, or my son could roar and have my younger son and husband come running and there'd be a bloody four-man fight, or the dog could awaken and summon her inner wolf and leap for the stalker's throat, or the stalker could pull a gun out of his waistband and shoot my son, or the sky could suddenly collapse the last few feet to the ground, crushing all of us at once. Any of these things and a thousand more were happening at

the same time, and every one of them was devastating, and the worst of all was how weak I was, how I could not unfreeze and save my boy, my baby, because the violence was so much larger than I was, it was born at the same time my sons were born; it was a shadow twin, despite the fact that I'd built my boys so carefully, cell by cell, within me. The screaming pundits are not entirely wrong, there really is a dangerous population among us that does the vast majority of the evil that exists in this world, and my sons and my gentle husband belong to that murderous subset, they joined that club when they were born.

But instead my son said simply, in his father's voice, Hey, do me a favor, bro. And my stalker, who had tensed up, relaxed a little and said, Sure, man, what's up. My son said, Can you maybe just head on outside, like, it's not a great time for a visit, it's just that everyone's really stressed out tonight. He took a few steps forward—he really has become a very large man—and the stalker took a few steps backward, toward the kitchen door, and he said as he edged away, Ah, I got you, man, don't worry, I'll head off now. Then he opened the door, and closed it behind him. And he was gone.

My son locked the door. He sighed. You can come out now, Mama, he said. He took the ukulele from my hands. The next morning, I would have raw fret lines scored into my palms. He went to get my phone and with the phone he brought my husband into the kitchen, and my husband was jangling electric with alarm. The police eventually came and took a statement, and my husband was the one to talk because I had lost all my words. When the police were gone, my husband said, Now we'll finally be able to get the restraining order, thank God.

I hugged my son, my beautiful giant son. Where had he learned such diplomacy when he didn't even know how to properly use a fork, when he left his filthy socks like mushrooms in all the corners of the house? He shook me off and filled his gallon-size water bottle and said, Don't worry, I could have taken him, no problem.

At last we were alone in our bed, my husband and I, and he held me as I trembled and he tried valiantly to stay awake, but he couldn't help it when sleep overtook him. He has always had the privilege of sleep. Everything became very quiet in the house, and there was no wind to shake the tarp. The

dog and the boys and my husband all dreamed, and spun their dreams thickly around the house like a warm, dark cocoon, while I, of course, lay sleepless through the long night, because who else was going to watch over them. ♦

Lauren Groff began contributing fiction to The New Yorker in 2011. She is the author of the story collection “[Brawler](#),” among other books.

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Anthony Hopkins's Beckettian Memoir

The actor recalls his life, from provincial Wales to Hollywood, in stop-start rhythms with curt, unflinching reckonings.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

November 3, 2025



“You just have a head full of Welsh saboteurs,” a theatre director once told Hopkins. Photograph from RGR Collection / Alamy

Herod, Hitchcock, Hitler, Nixon, Picasso: pick one of history’s great softies, and there’s a good chance that he’s been played by Anthony Hopkins. Also on the list are Dickens, Danton, Freud, Yitzhak Rabin, John Quincy Adams, Pope Benedict XVI, St. Paul, C. S. Lewis, and the man who—though this is

a matter of crunchy controversy—Invented Cornflakes. Last year, at the age of eighty-six, Hopkins appeared as the Roman emperor Vespasian on TV, in “Those About to Die,” the thrust of his performance being to treat the show’s title with scorn. Even his portrayal of a man with advanced dementia, in “The Father” (2020), which won the Academy Award for Best Actor, emitted a disconcerting power. Vital signs were rampant. Human twilight, with Hopkins in charge, became a noonday blaze.

Those who wish to trace that radiance to its source now have a map to guide them. “We Did OK, Kid” (Summit) is a memoir composed by Hopkins—ghostlessly, it would seem, for there is no mention of a co-author. True, he tells us that “my life has been written by someone else, not by me,” but this is not a professional admission. He is referring, instead, to the all-consuming puzzle of his existence and wondering whether it is something that has befallen him, like an accident or a lottery win, rather than a series of events that he has consciously set in motion. “I look at my life and remember that hapless little boy, and I think, *How did all this happen?*” Hopkins writes. More than a few readers, poring over their own pasts, may find themselves posing the same question.

The little boy, on whose haplessness the older Hopkins never tires of insisting (local kids, he says, used to taunt him as “Elephant Head”), was born on New Year’s Eve, 1937, in Margam, a suburb of Port Talbot, in South Wales. Port Talbot was—and still is, just about—a steel town, but the Hopkins family were bakers. A silver cup bearing the legend “Arthur Richard Hopkins 1924, First Prize for Currant Buns” remains in the possession of Arthur’s grandson Anthony, to go with the gold-plated Oscars that he won for “The Father” and, in 1992, for his performance as Hannibal Lecter in “The Silence of the Lambs.” One likes to think that the fastidious Lecter, whom Hopkins went on to play, to decreasing effect, in “Hannibal” (2001) and “Red Dragon” (2002), would consider bun-based excellence to be as laudable as the butchering of mortal flesh.

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The first chapter of “We Did OK, Kid” begins not at the start of Hopkins’s life but at a boarding school to which he was sent, for a while, at the age of eleven. Like many actors, he revealed (and survived on) a talent for goofing around, diverting his comrades with impersonations that ranged from Bela Lugosi to Elmer Fudd. The chapter concludes with what he calls an “explosive” occurrence: a screening, in the school’s assembly hall, of Laurence Olivier’s 1948 film of “Hamlet.” Much of the language flew over the head of the young Hopkins, yet, as he now says, “a force had broken into the center of whatever I was.” The mixture of brutishness and bafflement in that phrase is very telling, and it sets a tone for what follows; the whole book represents a struggle—not so much to express himself as to sort out a self worth expressing.

Hamlet, to say the least, was in a similar pickle, and it’s almost comically appropriate that Hopkins’s memoir should be so father-haunted. “What the hell is wrong with you? You should get your head examined. Can’t you do anything useful? You’re bloody useless.” Such was the verdict that was handed down upon Anthony by his father, Dick, who was a boozier and a weeper as well as a baker. According to his son, “He had colossal amounts of energy that went nowhere.” The sharpest recollection, in these pages, is incised with a terrified love:

When I was a young boy he’d taken me on his bread rounds in a delivery vehicle with A. R. HOPKINS AND SON, LTD. written on the side; I saw him only in left profile. I sometimes grew afraid sitting there, hearing the car engine and the gears shifting and the *thud-thud* of the windshield wipers because I couldn’t shake the idea that there

was only a left side to my father's face. Through my childhood, I had dreams where he wasn't real, just a walking profile.



Hopkins as a child with his father, Dick Hopkins, a baker from Port Talbot, in Wales. Photograph courtesy Anthony Hopkins

Flick forward a few years, and you come across Dick cheerfully hobnobbing with Laurence Olivier, backstage, at a theatre where Anthony is appearing. When Olivier says that he was born in 1907, Hopkins senior replies, without hesitation, "Same age as me. We're both going down the bloody hill now, aren't we?" Further forward still, you find him shaking hands with John Wayne, at Chasen's, in Beverly Hills, and on the verge of crying. One last flick takes you to Dick's deathbed, where he asks his famous son to recite "Hamlet." The request is granted, and Anthony, indeed, is unable to stop; the lines pour out of him. When the flow finally ceases, his father lifts his head and says, "How did you learn all those words?"

The most elephantine thing about Hopkins is not, as it turns out, the shape of his head but the size of the memory bank that it houses. He is renowned for arriving, at the outset of a production, already knowing his lines (and, as

often as not, everyone else's) down to the last comma. The Hopkins method, as he discloses in the new book, could not be more grounded: "Becoming familiar with a script was like picking up stones from a cobblestone street one at a time, studying them, then replacing each in its proper spot."

Being a quick study is an invaluable knack in repertory theatre, which is where Hopkins, with a two-year interlude for compulsory military service, kicked off his career. Advised to apply to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, he surprised the assessors, at his audition, by reciting one of Iago's speeches, from "Othello," as quietly as possible: a trick that Hopkins defines as "bringing each member of the audience, one by one, into your confidence, then sharing with them, sentence by sentence, your perfectly rational argument for terror." Lecter in waiting. Does this explain, perhaps, why Hopkins would then traffic back and forth between the grand realms of British classical theatre and the badlands of the movies, over the years, with an ease denied even to Olivier? Not since Alec Guinness has a Shakespearean actor cultivated so intimate a rapport with the camera. When Lecter licks his finger, the better to turn the page of a document, and winks at Clarice Starling, who is visiting him in an asylum for the criminally insane, we are the real beneficiaries of the wink.



"It's the 20-20-20 rule. Every twenty minutes, I look up from my screen at something twenty feet away and, for twenty seconds, fantasize about a life so unlike my own that I forget where I am or

what I do.”

Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

Not that Hopkins confines himself to the administration of dread. In a wonderful grace note, he refers to Lecter as being both “*remote* and *awake*,” and he has somehow managed to conjure the same coalescence when wielding very different emotions, such as shyness or despair. Hence the butler, in “The Remains of the Day” (1993), who is reluctant even to show what book he’s reading, and the mousy husband, in “84 Charing Cross Road” (1987), who sits down to dinner with his wife. “Very nice. Very tasty,” he says of the food, and gazes at his glass of water as if it were a cup of poison. For a moment, we can’t tell whether he’s going to murder his spouse or move on to dessert. At issue here, amid the domestic peace, is not only what makes people tick but, thanks to Hopkins, whether the ticking is that of a well-wound clock or an unexploded bomb.

The wife, at the dinner table, is played by Judi Dench, and the joke is that, before long, she and Hopkins would reconvene to star in “Antony and Cleopatra,” at the National Theatre, in London. Dench, in a recent book on Shakespeare, notes how *early* the hero expires, leaving a lover-less queen to command the stage, and tells of Hopkins whispering to her, as she keened over him in the throes of lamentation, “While you do Act V, I’ll go and have a nice cup of tea in my dressing room.”

That story is warmer and more heartening than anything in “We Did OK, Kid,” which feels oddly seized with touchiness and frosted over with regret. A theatre director once said to Hopkins, “You just have a head full of Welsh saboteurs,” and they are still at work, plotting against him, to judge by the texture of this memoir. Much of it unfolds in choppy, stop-start rhythms, and it would be no surprise to learn that Hopkins had dictated the book, pacing to and fro to make his point. So curt are some of his reckonings that they approach the brink of Beckett: “I had to shut the feelings down. No tears. No grief. Nothing. Too much agony.”

For Hopkins devotees, that percussive tone is precisely what marks him out —the hard, peremptory music of his speech. You hear it all over the place. In “Howards End” (1992), he plays a paterfamilias whose barking briskness extends beyond his immediate kin to the wider economy: “The poor are

poor. One is sorry for them, but there it is.” The crack of consonants, especially at the end of a line, is an unwavering treat; when Starling is on the trail of a killer and desperate for guidance, Lecter inquires simply, “What does he do, this man you seek?” He and Starling are conversing one to one, through the bars of a cage, but his diction is as crisp as a breadstick, as if he were addressing somebody in the back row of the stalls. Again, listen to Hopkins, as a richly satisfied murderer, talking to a lawyer (Ryan Gosling), in “Fracture” (2007): “Bring it all on, kiddo, bring it all into court. Except, you can’t.” As a rule, only choral singers can strike a final “t” with such resounding force.

“Fracture,” it should be pointed out, is claptrap. As such, it bolsters my belief that, if you crave some late-night folly, to accompany a tub of mint chocolate chip, almost any thriller with a one-word title and Hopkins in the cast will serve your needs. The menu runs from “Juggernaut,” in 1974, to this year’s “Locked,” taking in “Freejack” (1992) and “Instinct” (1999) along the way. The annus mirabilis was 2015, bringing both “Solace” and “Blackway,” although 2016, blessed with “Misconduct” and “Collide,” offered a comparable feast. The strange fact is that Hopkins has stayed untarnished; ever the pro, he rarely gives the impression of coasting or slumming or phoning it in, even when his movies deserve to be filed under N.A.R.—an acronym, meaning “no acting required,” that he credits to Gregory Peck. The four directors whom Hopkins singles out for their “meticulous eye” are, to be sure, a curious quartet: Steven Spielberg, Christopher Nolan, Guy Ritchie, and Michael Bay. Yet Hopkins’s own eye does not miss much, and, when the chance arises, as viewers of “The Son” (2022) will confirm, he can still take a film by storm.

We must be careful when hailing actors as eminent. After all, eminence can be a solitary business, not least for someone with as tough a hide as Hopkins’s. What rescues him from loftiness, onscreen, is the sheer speed at which he forges a connection with other characters. Watch him sizing them up and plumbing them for depths they may not know they have. Lecter, needless to say, greets Starling with a penetrating stare, no blinking, as if he were taking an X-ray. But don’t forget the tear—just one, for a flood would be unmanly—that crawls down the cheek of Frederick Treves, the doctor played by Hopkins in “The Elephant Man” (1980), at his first sight of the

dreadfully disfigured John Merrick (John Hurt). Milder but equally memorable is the scene in “Shadowlands” (1993), in which C. S. Lewis (Hopkins), the creator of Narnia, stands up and presents himself to Joy Gresham (Debra Winger) in a hotel tearoom. A cock of the head, a courteous half smile, and he looks at her; more than that, he *sees* her, his expectations already confounded. He hasn’t fallen in love, not yet, but his life has perceptibly tilted, and the change of angle delights him. It’s as easy as stepping through a wardrobe. Only a great actor can evoke such transformations with so fleet a gesture, and so little fuss. Who can square up to Hopkins in that clever craft?

Well, one way to get the measure of Hopkins is to set him beside Richard Burton. Both, remarkably, are sons of Port Talbot, which may account for the glint of steel in their voices. Burton was the older by twelve years. In 1976, he was playing a psychiatrist in “Equus,” on Broadway, and Hopkins—who had actually taken the role earlier in the run—went to his dressing room to say hello. Burton said, “I remember you. Yes, from the baker’s shop.” Both men were as steeped in Shakespeare as they were hungry to break into Hollywood. For those of us with a weakness for films based on Alistair MacLean novels, “Where Eagles Dare” (1968), with Burton, sits proudly in the pantheon, far above “When Eight Bells Toll” (1971), which puts Hopkins into naval uniform (and a frogman’s wetsuit) as Philip Calvert, a flimsy alternative to James Bond. “You have a rather questionable attitude towards authority,” Calvert is told. Sounds about right.

There is another overlap between Burton and Hopkins, and it’s not much fun. Neither man hesitated to reach for the bottle. If Burton’s diaries, published in 2012, are awash in alcohol, “We Did OK, Kid” is no less drenched. Both actors were the sons of souses (Dick Hopkins, on retiring from the baking trade, opened a *pub*), and the stuff was in their bloodstream. When Hopkins writes, “I bought myself a whiskey, which was becoming my favorite meal,” it’s a shock to realize that he’s discussing his early twenties. Even sitting alone with a drink, he smelled of trouble; “being quiet and withdrawn brings out something hostile in others,” as he acutely observes. The first of his three marriages, which took place in 1967, was a cataclysm, and inebriation played its part. His description of that time begins with a startling phrase that belongs to an earlier century—“I found a

woman to marry”—and ends with his raging departure two years later. “I fled that life like it was a barn on fire,” Hopkins tells us. In the barn was a daughter, from whom he is still estranged.

What divides him from Burton is that Hopkins, by a miracle, summoned the clarity to renounce his own destruction. Maybe it was the news that he’d driven from Arizona to Los Angeles in an alcoholic blackout. (“We found you on the road,” his agent said.) The upshot is that he hasn’t drunk since the butt end of 1975 and, nearing ninety, is still employable, whereas Burton died at the age of fifty-eight, not long after playing O’Brien, the purveyor of pure bleakness, in a film of Orwell’s *“1984.”* That was one last flourish of self-laceration, and there is definitely a matching strain of masochism in Hopkins—not so much a relish of suffering as a rueful acknowledgment that earthly woe is our due. Both men, being Welsh, would doubtless smile at the words of Hopkins’s Aunt Patty, who, when informed that the young Anthony was unhappy at school, replied, “Oh well, happiness isn’t everything, you know.”

Unlike Mark Antony, Anthony Hopkins *has* hung around for the fifth act of his life, awaiting what he calls “the big skedaddle,” and enjoying himself to a degree that would earn a frown of rebuke from Aunt Patty. “By all logic and common sense I should have died decades ago,” he writes. His memoir is a patchy affair, to be honest, which omits entire swaths of his achievement, yet its wayward momentum exerts a certain charm, as if Hopkins were only just in control of his reminiscences. The book eventually closes, in a dying fall, with a selection of verse that he admires—poems by Auden, Yeats, and Longfellow, among others, and also Gerard Manley Hopkins, who, alas, is no relation. In an epilogue, we hear of Anthony, as a schoolboy, being ordered to read a poem by John Masefield aloud in class and being commended by the teacher, Mr. Codling, for his pains. It’s a lovely sign-off, but is Hopkins aware that he has already told exactly the same anecdote, in detail, three hundred pages earlier? And did nobody at his publishers notice the repetition? I guess they were too afraid to raise it with the author. He might have eaten them alive. ♦



[Anthony Lane](#) is a staff writer at *The New Yorker* and the author of “[Nobody’s Perfect](#).”

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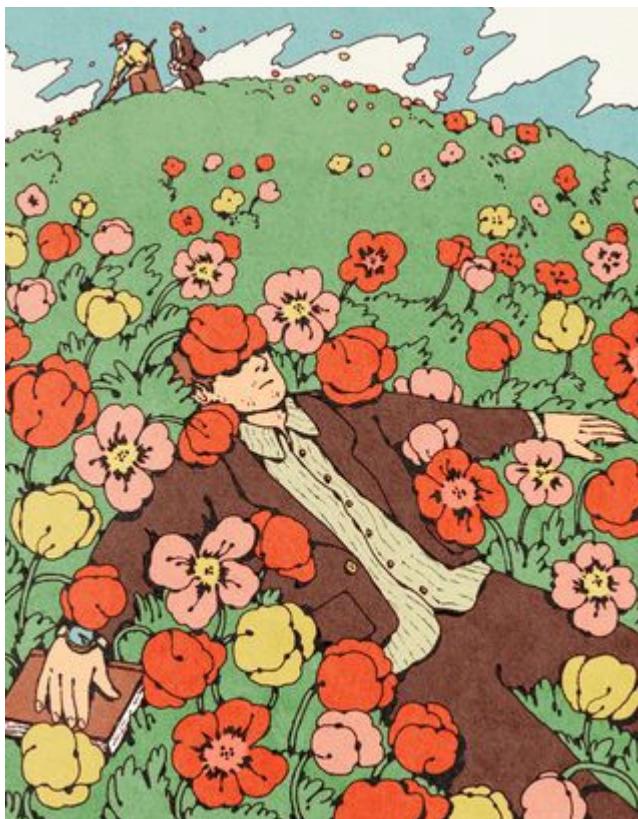
Books

A Bulgarian Novelist Explores What Dies When Your Father Does

Writing about a son's vigil at his dying father's bedside, Georgi Gospodinov examines what parents and their children reap and sow.

By [James Wood](#)

November 3, 2025



“Yes, my father was a gardener,” Gospodinov’s narrator reflects. “Now he is a garden.” Unlike human beings, flowers and other plants have a superpower: “They know how to die in such a way that they can come back to life again.” Illustration by Simone Goder

Grief may or may not have its five stages, but the stages of dying are implacable. We witnesses know the scenes and the atrocious acts that compose them: the first signs (“I’ve been having some funny pains in my

lower back") followed by the medical sentence (a lung cancer has metastasized to the cerebrospinal canal), and then the wary measuring of the distance between sickbed and bathroom. There's the child, now grown, who sits near the bed, pretending to read but in fact is keeping restless watch; the child's awkwardness in front of the parent's nakedness; the fentanyl patches, for the last stations of pain. And then the final night, as the child lies down beside his father and waits for the end: "I was seeing my father off and I wanted to accompany him at least to the doorway, as far as they let the living go." The father dies at 5:17 in the morning, four days before Christmas, and, here again, the journey takes its only shape: "At five o'clock his breathing slowed, with longer intervals between breaths. Inhalation, a pause lasting a second or two or three; exhalation, a long pause; inhalation again, an even longer pause, one-two-three-four, exhalation, and . . . No inhalation followed."

These particular yet universal stages appear in "[Death and the Gardener](#)" (Liveright), a new novel by the Bulgarian writer Georgi Gospodinov. The story it tells—a son's vigil through his father's dying—feels unmistakably autobiographical, in part because the progression toward death is so minutely, possessively rendered. Here is the iron form of the grief memoir, no less powerful for its deep familiarity. That rigidity probably explains why Gospodinov chooses, against all evidence, to call the book a novel. The author, a naturally playful fabulist, is furloughed here into invention and free play. Around the remembered realities, he can weave the digressions, autofictional essays, and genial thought experiments that made such earlier works as "[The Physics of Sorrow](#)" and "[Time Shelter](#)" beautifully unconfining vessels. "Death and the Gardener" doesn't read like a novel, but then neither do those earlier ones. They all read like Gospodinov novelties.

Whatever these constructions call themselves, reading Gospodinov's fiction is like moving through a single domed dwelling: the mind of the maker. Take, for instance, two brief, lovely passages from the new book. (Gospodinov has been fortunate to have the same sensitive English translator, Angela Rodel, for his past three novels.) "My father was a sort of Atlas, holding the past on his shoulders," the unnamed narrator says. "Now that he is gone, I can sense that whole past cracking, quietly collapsing in

on me, burying me in all its afternoons. The quietly collapsing afternoons of childhood. And there is no one I can call to for help.” As he writes these words, “a heavy, constricting sorrow washes over me once again. It’s three in the afternoon. Afternoons will no longer be the same.”

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Afternoon has a steady presence in Gospodinov’s work. “The Physics of Sorrow” offers a list of “cities that look empty at three in the afternoon,” beginning with Graz and Turin and ending with Cabourg and Rouen. In “Time Shelter,” amid one of those drifting passages that make this novelist such a teasing pleasure, the narrator recalls walking in Brooklyn and suddenly realizing that the light was “coming from another time.” It was the light of the nineteen-eighties, he thinks, light “as if from a Polaroid picture, lacking brightness, soft, making everything look slightly faded.” Afternoons are like that, he continues. The past somehow gently contaminates afternoons:

That’s where time visibly slows down, it dozes off in the corners, blinking like a cat looking through thin blinds. It’s always afternoon when you remember something, at least that’s how it is for me. Everything is in the light. I know from photographers that afternoon light is the most suitable of exposures. Morning light is too young, too sharp. Afternoon light is old light, tired and slow. The real life of the world and humanity can be written in several afternoons, in the light of several afternoons, which are the afternoons of the world.

So afternoon, for Gospodinov, is the time for boredom, memory, a kind of weightless solitude—and, now, the time for grief. The heedless afternoons of childhood meet the fatherless afternoons of late middle age, and the bereaved son is in danger of being buried in them.

All Gospodinov's work is time-bound and time-free, haunted by time and fleeing from it. The past is always calling us back, but stories are made out of our journeys away from, as much as our returns to, that past. The *Odyssey*, Gospodinov suggests in one of the mini-essays in “Time Shelter,” is really a tale about returning to the past. And the past “is not the least bit abstract; it is made up of very concrete, small things.” His narrators—never too distinct from the author himself—relish exploring their childhoods in the Sovietized Bulgaria of the nineteen-seventies and eighties, measuring that artificially ossified world against modern consumerist Europe. These investigations are meticulous, tender, palpable: buildings and radios, cars and first kisses, songs and streets are all made newly alive in memory.

Given the choice between erotic immortality with the nymph Calypso and a return to Ithaca, Odysseus chooses the latter—not only because of Penelope and Telemachus “but also because of something specific and trifling, which he called hearth-smoke, because of the memory of the hearth-smoke rising from his ancestral home.” From Ithaca’s orchard to his father’s garden, Gospodinov moves from mythic to mortal soil.

Homer’s tale, the author adds, is also “a book about searching for the father.” So the father—though not only the father, of course; in someone else’s book, the mother—is the past: he holds it on his shoulders like Atlas, and to lose the parent is to lose some of that past, some of that palpable world. Picking up the thread from his earlier work, Gospodinov returns in his new book to Homer. Near the end of the *Odyssey*, after landing in Ithaca, Odysseus travels to his aged father and finds him at work in his garden—a scene that moves both Odysseus and Gospodinov’s narrator. “Upon seeing Laertes crushed by old age and grief,” Gospodinov writes, “Odysseus hides behind a leafy tree and bursts into tears.” Odysseus tells his father that he keeps a good garden but does not take care of himself —“clearly something that all sons tell their fathers.”

Through memories of his late father, Gospodinov's narrator returns once more to a Bulgarian past, now stretching back beyond his own childhood, across several lost generations. The father was a great storyteller, a great smoker ("who learned to smoke from the films of the fifties and sixties"), and, above all, a great gardener. One of his last jobs before the fall of Socialism was as a gardener and occupational-therapy coördinator at a remote psychiatric clinic. "He tended the garden alongside the patients—the mentally ill, alcoholics, drug addicts. They planted tomatoes, cabbages, peppers, flowers." Gardening was the father's own therapy, too. Wherever he lived, he turned his small plot of land into a garden. Seventeen years earlier, he had almost died of cancer, and gardening saved his life; he made the little desert of his back yard bloom. He spoke through the garden, "and his words were apples, cherries, big red tomatoes." The son loved to visit him, especially in the spring, "burying my head amid the branches of a heavily blossoming plum tree, closing my eyes and listening to the buzzing Zen of the bees."

Gardening fertilizes Gospodinov's metaphors; as a writer, he is at his best when he can plant a metaphor and watch it grow. Practically speaking, the father—who receives a new cancer diagnosis in late November and dies at the end of December—leaves his two sons the complicated legacy of the achieved but now wintry garden. In this sense, a garden is no different from any parental inheritance: both blessing and burden. Should we retain it or remainder it? But a garden, unlike an unfinished manuscript, will bloom in the spring almost unaided, and it will bloom for its new owners, or for others altogether, as it bloomed for the father, with nature's green indifference. Yet, if the father truly spoke through his apples, cherries, and tomatoes, then surely he will speak again, after his death, year after year. Hence Gospodinov's plangent formulation: "Yes, my father was a gardener. Now he is a garden." Unlike human beings, flowers and other plants have a superpower, the author muses: "They know how to die in such a way that they can come back to life again." It is what the writer [Marilynne Robinson](#) calls "the resurrection of the ordinary."

In fact, the garden is both metaphor and its opposite. The writer son makes metaphors out of the garden—indeed, out of the very idea of the garden-as-metaphor—while the father, who told great stories but was entirely

unliterary, made a garden out of the earth. Gospodinov sharply turns thought into distilled image: “We need to tend our own garden, Voltaire said, but I wonder whether he ever planted as much as a cucumber? We know that at least two dozen labourers and servants, led by two experienced gardeners, worked in his garden. That metaphor of his is possible thanks to them, to all real gardeners. Our pretty phrases stand upon their stooped shoulders.”

Which roughly translates as: My weak writing stands upon my father’s strong non-writing. He’s the real gardener; I’m a tiller of phrases. Sure enough, “Death and the Gardener” measures not only the distance between the quarantined Bulgarian past of the Soviet era and the comparatively permissive present but also the distance between the austere life of a father who owned very little and who “has not gone anywhere in the last fifty years” and a narrator who writes internationally successful books, jets off to England or India, and who, we learn, spent a year as a fellow at the New York Public Library, where he befriended the late critic [Joan Acocella](#).

How could there not be both pride and shame at the heart of this filial difference? The narrator’s father was a Bulgarian creature of his decidedly patriarchal time. He repressed pain, repressed self-expression. He was always “clinging to the snorkel of a cigarette.” After his death, the son finds a notebook—you wouldn’t call it a diary, Gospodinov says, because there’s nothing personal in it. In fact, he says, there is no great tradition of diarists, or even of epistolary novels, in Bulgarian history: “This is part of our innate muteness about all things personal.” In that antique world, the father was the silent enforcer, or worse: he ran what was known as “the slap factory.” (“*Don’t make me turn on the slap factory.*”) Fathers worked in the slap factory, Gospodinov writes, and mothers “were not above it either.” It was simply the culture, now disappearing. By contrast, the son lives in our blessedly affectionate domestic world, of kisses and hugs and daily “I love you”s. He is himself a very different father. His nine-year-old daughter asks one day, “Daddy, what’s a slap?”

Fortunately, the narrator’s father was so tall and gruff that his natural sternness did all the slapping. For punishment, he might banish his son to the cellar, but he couldn’t really bear it and would release him after fifteen

minutes. The portrait that emerges is nicely complex and contradictory. The father was a stern softie. The son may have travelled far from his parents' lives, but he is proud of them, and they of him. This is inevitably a sad book in places, yet it is lit with remembered warmth, happiness, laughter, and a kind of lightness characteristic of its writer. The joyful novelist got his joy from somewhere—he just happened to till it. Perhaps his father was no writer, but we are told that this same patriarch learned by heart all the "terrible poems" his son wrote when he was young. Gospodinov dedicated his previous novel, "Time Shelter," to his parents: "To my Mother and Father, who are still weeding the eternal strawberry fields of childhood." In 2023, "Time Shelter" won the International Booker Prize. In the new book, that good fortune is autofictionally transformed into this: "In May the novel I had dedicated to my mother and father won a big prize. On that London night, one of those few quickly jotted-down phrases in English was about the two of them, now quietly crying with joy in a little south-eastern town, I said." Indeed, our pretty phrases stand upon their stooped shoulders. ♦

James Wood, a staff writer at *The New Yorker* since 2007, teaches at Harvard. His books include "*Serious Noticing*," a collection of essays.

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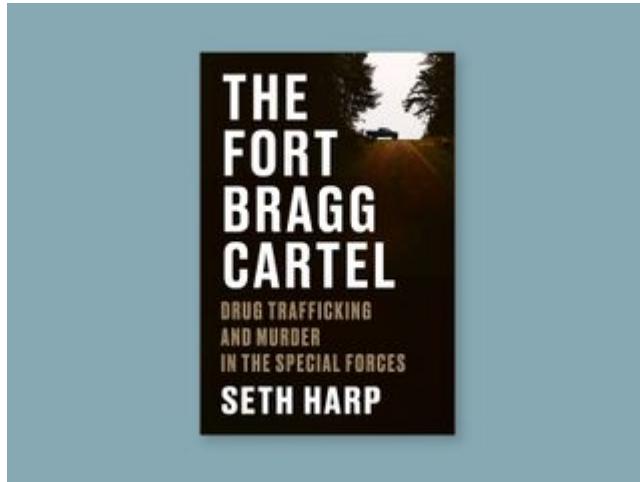
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Books

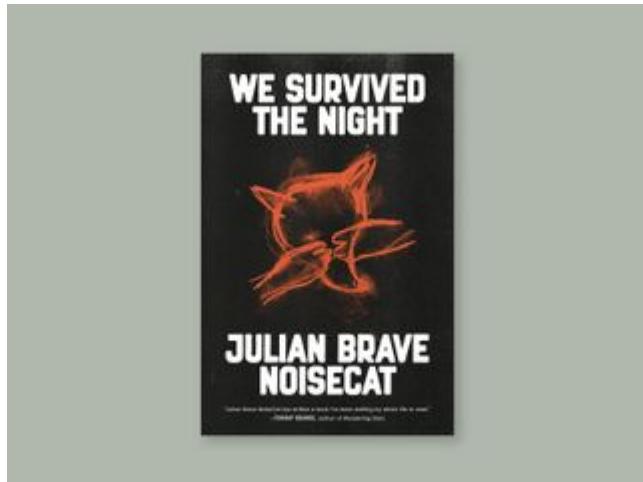
Briefly Noted

“*The Fort Bragg Cartel*,” “*We Survived the Night*,” “*The Mind Reels*,” and “*Pick a Color*.”

November 3, 2025



The Fort Bragg Cartel, by Seth Harp (*Viking*). If the war on terror was “an era of cataclysmic abasement” for the United States, then, this propulsive book suggests, the U.S. Special Forces plumbed that era’s greatest moral depths. Abroad, America’s élite soldiers killed and plundered. At home, their lives could be just as lurid—perhaps nowhere more so than around Fort Bragg, in North Carolina, where the secretive Delta Force is headquartered. Harp opens his story with the killing of one strung-out super-soldier at the hands of a Delta Force operator. Soon, Harp’s aperture widens to a field of death and drug dealing, and to a conspiracy that seems to link the poppy fields of wartime Afghanistan to the U.S. military’s most dangerous fighters.



We Survived the Night, by Julian Brave NoiseCat (Knopf). In 1959, a newborn was discovered in a garbage incinerator outside St. Joseph's Mission, an institution in British Columbia now notorious for the abuse and murder of Native children. The baby, as NoiseCat recounts in this riveting memoir, was his father. NoiseCat weaves the story of his father's upbringing among the Secwépemc people with his own experiences straddling two worlds—his mother is white—to explore the multigenerational effects of trauma. Healing, if not wholeness, is found through acts of reclamation. NoiseCat suffuses his narrative with the playfulness and humor of folklore, refusing to give “colonial amnesia” the final say.

What We're Reading

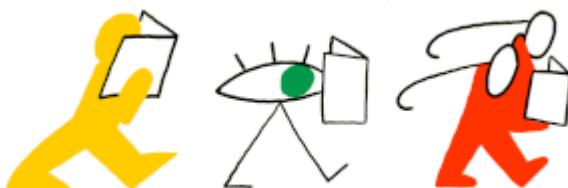
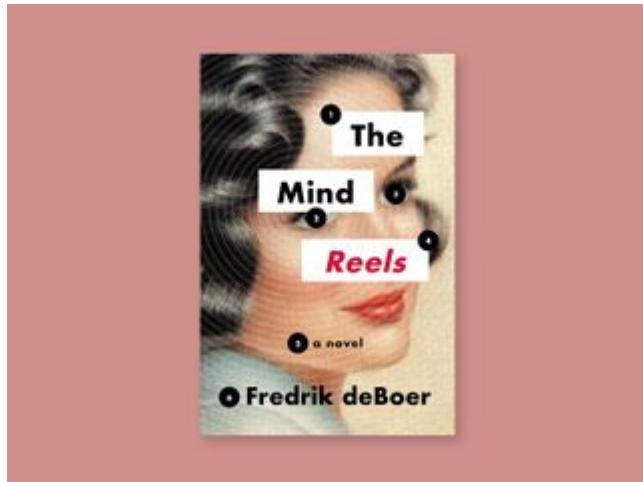


Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.



The Mind Reels, by *Fredrik deBoer* (*Coffee House*). This début novel chronicles a young woman's unravelling with ethnographic detachment. Alice, a middling student at a state university in Oklahoma, drifts from adolescent confusion into sleepless paranoia. Her madness seeps into the everyday: a shower caddy's arrangement becomes proof of conspiracy, and breakdown coexists with term papers, hookups, and trips to TJ Maxx. Avoiding romance and melodrama, deBoer writes in an affectless register that mirrors Alice's dissociation. The novel's power lies in its relentless banality—the mind churning while life's machinery grinds on. During a halting recovery, Alice develops “deep intuitions” about her medications, which, she suspects, interact “like hot-tempered roommates in the shabby apartment of her brain.”



Pick a Color, by *Souvankham Thammavongsa* (*Little, Brown*). “Everyone is ugly. I should know. I look at people all day.” So begins this coolly

observant novel, by a noted short-story writer, which is narrated by the owner of a nail salon. The owner, a forty-one-year-old former boxer, claims to have no interest in other people. And yet she shows herself to be keenly attuned to the desires and anxieties of her clients and to the lives of her employees, four Southeast Asian women whose mischievous characterizations include identical haircuts and nametags. With dark humor and brief touches of tenderness, Thammavongsa's tableau of working-class life casts stock elements—a damaged narrator, a workforce composed entirely of nonwhite women—in an alienating glow.

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[On and Off the Menu](#)

The Surprising Endurance of Martha Stewart's “Entertaining”

Home-cooking culture has leaned into the loose and unfussy. Stewart's 1982 classic, newly reissued, makes the case for hosting as an endurance sport.

By [Hannah Goldfield](#)

November 3, 2025



Stewart's first book includes menus for occasions including a midnight omelette supper, a Chinese banquet, and a holiday-cookie party for children. Photo illustration by Jason Fulford and Tamara Shopsin

A few weeks ago, when I got an e-mail from Martha Stewart's publicist, informing me that Stewart had agreed to a phone interview—"tomorrow at 11:15 for ten minutes," he wrote, in response to my request for "as much time as she is willing to give"—my heart began to pound. I'd find it disorienting to talk to any very famous person, to bring the intimate, illusory relationship between celebrity and civilian rudely crashing down to

earth. But this felt like something more. The issue wasn't only the magnitude of Stewart's celebrity but also the nature of it. In the first two decades of her media career, which began in the early eighties, Stewart's lavish, ruthlessly overachieving approach to the domestic arts—advanced in such austere titled books as “Weddings” and “Great Parties,” and also in syndicated newspaper columns, a cable show, and her eponymous magazine—made her a totalizing cultural figure, one whose suggestions tended to come across as commands. I was terrified that the conversation would somehow lay bare my own incompetence, my failure to comply.

More than a century into the debate about whether a corporation is a person, Stewart affirmed that a person can be a corporation—a public one, as of 1999, when shares of Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia surged to almost two billion dollars in value. And though the insider-trading scandal that landed her in prison, in 2004, dinged her reputation, it ultimately proved that she was untouchable, paving the way for a winking, irreverent iteration of her persona. In the past decade, Stewart has cannily embraced her status as a kitsch object—the chilly, aging doyenne of “homekeeping” who hangs out with Snoop Dogg and poses for *Sports Illustrated* yet can seemingly do napkin origami in her sleep.

The occasion for the call was the reissue of “Entertaining,” Stewart’s first book, from 1982, long out of print. In the wake of two 2024 documentaries about Stewart, copies had become scarce, sparking bidding wars on resale websites. In response, Clarkson Potter released a facsimile edition, with not a word changed—not even “Oriental,” which recurs in reference to Asian cooking, or the dedication to Stewart’s now ex-husband, Andy, whom she divorced in 1990. In the introduction, Stewart writes, “As I read all the classics, what remained most vivid in my memory were the banquet scenes in Sir Walter Scott, the Roman punch dinners in Edith Wharton novels, and the country weekends in Tolstoy’s ‘Anna Karenina.’ ” Her own book trades on a similarly absorbing, escapist allure. Warm, gauzy photographs depict a rustic kitchen hung with antique baskets and gleaming copper pots; militantly tidy arrangements of canapés; and a radiant young Stewart in a spotless white dress.

The book is organized into menus for events that are hard to imagine attending, let alone hosting, in 2025. A four-page spread gives instructions for a “midnight omelette supper for thirty,” featuring a pound of herb butter, an array of pastries with homemade jams, and two quarts of chocolate mousse. For that occasion, Stewart recommends that one begin making omelettes at 11 P.M. and “serve undersized rolls, because they are lighter and daintier at night.” For a “*soirée dansante*” (dance party) with desserts for forty—palmiers, poached pears topped with crystallized violets, kiwi tartlets—she wonders, Why not “add champagne; add ballgowns and black tie”?

To most readers, this will seem like fantasy. To Stewart, it was a snapshot of real life. She grew up in a large, middle class Polish American family in New Jersey, with parents who often received guests; she honed a taste for fine things while working as a stockbroker in Manhattan. In the seventies, she and her husband, a book publisher, decamped to Westport, Connecticut, where they restored an old farmhouse and she started a catering business. Stewart regarded her social scene as less fussy than that of the “fancy Park Avenue, Fifth Avenue matrons,” she told me over the phone. “I was a little bit more casual. I liked antiques and I loved beautiful things, but I was not a fanatic about butlers.”

Yet in the past three decades much of home-cooking culture has developed in revolt against what many see as Stewart’s punctilious ethos. Ina Garten, whose career was buoyed by an early shout-out in *Martha Stewart Living*, distinguished herself as breezy and laid-back, conspiratorially assuring her audience that “store-bought is fine.” Nigella Lawson, endearingly prone to sloshing and spilling, made her name with the archly titled “How to Be a Domestic Goddess,” in 2000. In 2010, the same year Garten published “How Easy Is That?,” Vintage reprinted Laurie Colwin’s “Home Cooking,” from 1988, in which Colwin recalls throwing dinner parties in a studio that didn’t have a kitchen or a sink.

Alison Roman, who has sometimes been hailed as the anti Martha Stewart, made “unfussy” the gold standard of millennial hosting with her purposefully louche cookbook “Nothing Fancy,” in 2019. “I have always been allergic to the word ‘entertaining,’ ” Roman wrote, “which to me

implies that there's a show, something performative at best and inauthentic at worst." A theme of Samin Nosrat's new cookbook, "Good Things," published in September, is letting go of perfectionism when cooking for guests. "You're not always going to have the very best ingredients, the right platter, or a lime instead of a lemon," Nosrat writes. "It doesn't matter. No one will remember."

When I mentioned to Stewart the fact that "you don't have to be Martha Stewart" has become a cliché, she laughed. She sees herself less as a cold-blooded micromanager than as a creative, scrappy person who takes pleasure in executing a specific vision. One of the events that first got her noticed as a caterer was a reception for an American-folk-art exhibition at the Park Avenue Armory, to which she brought her own live chickens, their cages perched on mounds of hay. When I asked if the room had smelled like a coop, Stewart seemed to recoil. "Oh, no! No, no," she assured me. "My chickens—they don't poop in public."

Such is life in Marthaland, where homemaking tasks are plucked from the realm of everyday drudgery and elevated to a pure pursuit of excellence. Stewart talks about cooking, gardening, and decorating with the equanimity of an endurance athlete. "Entertaining, by its nature, is an expansive gesture, and demands an expansive state of mind," she writes in "Entertaining"—a line that recalls the vaguely philosophical memoirs of retired tennis players. She never claimed that her approach was easy, inexpensive, or suited to everyone, only that her guidance was there for anyone who heard the call. "It was totally doable, what I was doing," Stewart told me, "if you put in the time and the energy, and didn't mind getting exhausted."

Not long after my call with Stewart, I felt moved to attempt some ambitious entertaining of my own. I wanted to achieve perfect synchrony as dishes went in and out of the oven, to retrieve infrequently used platters from their high cabinets, to have my guests ooh and ah over my efforts. "Entertaining provides a good excuse to put things in order," Stewart writes, a mantra that struck me as both practical and profound.

Among this season's new cookbooks are a number devoted to hosting, written by millennials who seem fairly Stewart-minded. "Dinner Party

Animal,” by the social-media darling Jake Cohen, is helpfully type A, complete with detailed prep schedules and “game time pep talks.” “It’s time to step it up,” Cohen writes. “You don’t have to turn into Martha Stewart overnight, but you very well may end up following in her footsteps.”

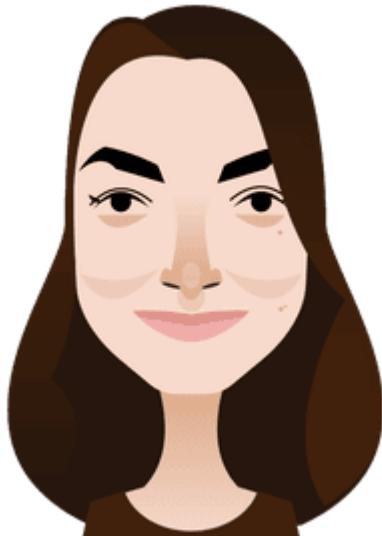
A few days before the L.A. Dodgers were set to play the Toronto Blue Jays in the first game of the World Series, I found a menu for the occasion in another new book, “Let’s Party,” by Dan Pelosi, an Instagram star who self-identifies as a “gay male Pinterest mom.” For screening a big game or an awards show, Pelosi prescribes a “spread of perfect apps”: coconut shrimp; honey-mustard chicken wings; pineapple-and-fennel pulled-pork sliders; steak nachos with homemade pico de gallo and two types of cheese; a creamy crab dip capped with Ritz crackers; and caramelized banana pudding. Pulling it off would require trips to three different grocery stores and untold hours of exacting, minute tasks. It sounded perfect.

On Thursday, the day before the game, I braised the pork shoulder and mixed the crab dip, feeling triumphant in my preparedness. On Friday afternoon, I found myself in an exhilarated fugue state. Doors and drawers flew open and shut as I broiled bananas covered in brown sugar, grilled steaks, and roasted pounds of wings. I chopped scallions, toasted sesame seeds, wrenched lids off of cans of beans and condensed milk. For hours, I thought of nothing but my next move, the narcotic draw of my phone blissfully suppressed. It didn’t go without a hitch. Fifteen minutes before my guests were due, the point at which Pelosi suggested I deep-fry the shrimp, I had failed to so much as set up my dredging station. I noticed that the black T-shirt I’d been wearing since 7 A.M. was smeared with whipped cream. The doorbell rang.

In “Entertaining,” Stewart describes the role of a host as similar to that of a theatre director. My friends played their parts, crowding over the buffet, piling their plates with sliders and wings, shouting at the television. But Stewart also knows that the moments that truly make a party—in “Entertaining,” she recalls an impromptu piano concert of fifties ballads—can’t be planned. Those moments “were unpredictable, and yet they had something to do with the way a hostess had organized each gathering,” she

writes. “She had . . . made everyone comfortable enough to be his own natural, impulsive, expressive social self.”

Somewhere around the seventh inning, the gaggle of small children in the house conspired, without adult aid or input, to turn off the lights in a bedroom, plug in a strobe light, cue up a trance song on the speaker, and begin to mosh. Food was served at this party-within-a-party: each small raver carried a sleeve of Ritz crackers, pilfered from an enormous box I’d gotten at Costco; the floor practically glittered with crumbs. By the end of the night, I was thoroughly exhausted, and ready to do it again. ♦



Hannah Goldfield, a staff writer covering restaurants and food culture, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her [*Profile of the chef Kwame Onwuachi*](#).

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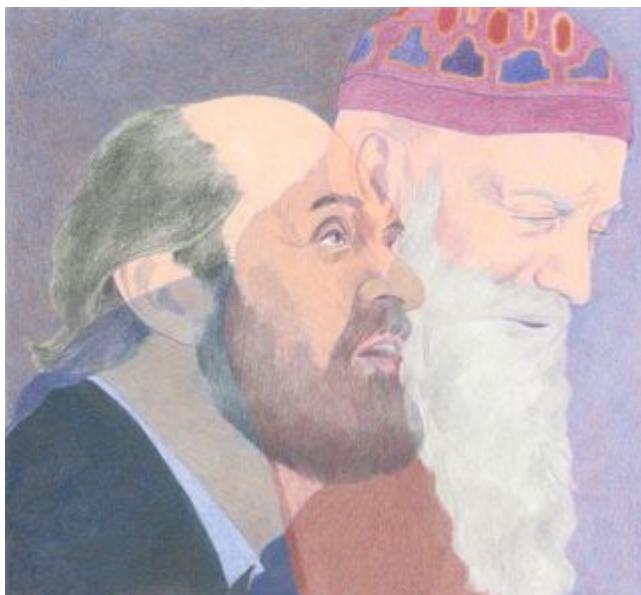
[**Musical Events**](#)

At Ninety, Arvo Pärt and Terry Riley Still Sound Vital

Both composers remain intriguing outliers, notable for the stubbornness with which they have held to their youthful convictions.

By [Alex Ross](#)

November 3, 2025



For both men, the musical language of minimalism allowed a radical reinvention of fundamentals. Illustration by Camille Deschiens

In the spring of 1976, a Latvian architecture student named Hardijs Lediņš organized a music festival at the Riga Polytechnic Institute. The venue was a disused Anglican church where Lediņš had been hosting a discothèque. The festival's repertory ranged from thorny avant-garde creations by Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage to Terry Riley's mesmerically repetitive "In C," which had first been heard in San Francisco in 1964 and had more or less launched musical minimalism. Within this offbeat milieu, there arose an extraordinary new sound, one that combined minimalist tendencies with the sacred formulas of Gregorian chant. The Estonian

composer Arvo Pärt presented a work titled “Sarah Was Ninety Years Old”—an austere ritual involving percussion and wordless voices. The scholar Kevin C. Karnes, in his 2021 book, “*Sounds Beyond: Arvo Pärt and the 1970s Soviet Underground*,” writes that nonconformist Latvians embraced Pärt’s music as an “uncompromising sort of spiritual practice.”

The conjunction of Riley and Pärt at a Latvian discothèque was not as unlikely as it might seem. To be sure, the two composers had little in common, beyond being born in 1935. Riley was a pioneer of West Coast counterculture, whose ecstatically looping patterns had influenced psychedelic rock. Pärt was a devout individualist who had emerged from the Soviet cultural system and tested its strictures at every turn. But the Californian and the Estonian converged on a radical reinvention of fundamentals. Both zeroed in on age-old scales and harmonies, extracted them from their usual contexts, and transformed them into objects of contemplation. The resulting music required new ways of playing and new ways of listening.

Nearly fifty years on, minimalism has become the stuff of cliché, its devices endlessly exploited on film and television soundtracks. Yet Riley and Pärt, who are marking their ninetieth birthdays this year, remain intriguing outliers, notable for the stubbornness with which they have held to their youthful convictions. Riley remains active as a composer and an improviser, collaborating with performers six or seven decades his junior. Pärt, who has apparently retired from creative work, offers an output that is far more complex and contradictory than his monkish public image suggests. Recent celebratory concerts dedicated to the two have been sites not of reverence but of restless rediscovery. Both retain the power to make the familiar strange.

Pärt is receiving the grand treatment. Carnegie Hall hosted two all-Pärt events in October, with more to follow later in the season. The Estonian Festival Orchestra, the Tallinn Chamber Orchestra, and the Estonian Philharmonic Chamber Choir, under the direction of Paavo Järvi and Tõnu Kaljuste, travelled from Estonia to honor their compatriot. Alar Karis, the President of Estonia, came with them, posting on social media, “Arvo Pärt’s music brings people together beyond language & faith.” It struck me that

Pärt is probably his country's most famous representative on the world stage—an unusual status for a contemporary composer to hold.

It would have been easy to emphasize the audience-friendly side of Pärt's œuvre—the hushed, hovering harmonies of “Frates,” “Cantus in Memory of Benjamin Britten,” and “Tabula Rasa,” any of which, when played at mid-volume on a home stereo, wrap the listener in a cocoon of comforting melancholy. Järvi presented these three pieces at Carnegie, but in a way that emphasized their inner tensions and hidden furies. The dynamics of “Cantus” range from triple-piano to triple-forte; Järvi made the former borderline inaudible and the latter visceral to the edge of violence. In “Tabula Rasa,” Midori and the young Estonian virtuoso Hans Christian Aavik brought a manic intensity to the solo-violin parts, hinting at Paganini-like diabolism. The audience burst into applause after the first movement. The vast stillness of the second movement, with spectral arpeggios chiming on a prepared piano, was all the more potent in contrast.

Just as important, Järvi included music from Pärt's early, pre-1976 period, when he had not yet found his minimalist-inflected voice and was experimenting with a riotous array of avant-garde techniques. In “Perpetuum Mobile,” from 1963, strict serialist procedures accumulate into an impression of barely controlled bedlam. “Credo,” from 1968, pits the Prelude in C from Bach's “Well-Tempered Clavier,” Book I, against upwellings of orchestral chaos and a variously chanting and shouting choir. Such apocalyptic moods also characterize contemporaneous scores by Alfred Schnittke, Shostakovich's contrarian successor. Schnittke supported Pärt's turn toward an outwardly simpler, religiously oriented style and played the prepared piano in several early performances of “Tabula Rasa.” At Carnegie, the role was taken by Nico Muhly, one of countless younger composers who have felt Pärt's influence.

A great irony hangs over Pärt's career: the music that insured his later fame in the West wrecked his career in the Soviet Union. His urge to address religious subjects made his work largely unperformable, except in underground contexts such as the Riga discothèque. In 1980, he and his wife, Nora, were strongly encouraged to leave by the authorities; Schnittke helped the couple find refuge in Vienna. The Pärt's first years in exile were

desperate, but then, in 1984, the German label ECM issued a recording of “*Tabula Rasa*,” now a perennial best-seller. Critics who accused Pärt of catering to a “holy minimalist” marketplace had no clue what he had endured.

The fact that “*Fratres*,” with its endlessly shimmering arpeggios, exists in eighteen different instrumental arrangements shows that Pärt is not indifferent to commercial considerations. But, early in the new century, in scores such as “*In Principio*” and “*Lamentate*,” the level of dissonance began to rise again. A darkening of atmosphere is palpable in the astringent parallel tritones of “*La Sindone*,” or “*The Shroud*” (2005/2022), the most recent item on Järvi’s program. None of Pärt’s music is easy listening, though, when you give it your full attention. “*Tabula Rasa*” ends with a glacially descending D-minor scale that fails to land on the expected D. The manuscript, which ECM reproduced in a 2010 deluxe reissue of its recording, reveals that Pärt crossed out a final resolution, leaving the listener suspended over a chasm of silence.

Much less attention has fallen on Riley in his ninetieth year, even though he did as much as anyone to reformulate musical language in the latter part of the twentieth century. In the nineteen-sixties, he essentially took up a challenge that Arnold Schoenberg had once posed to his students: “There is still plenty of good music to be written in C major.” The question was: How could such music escape the shadow of the past? “*In C*” was Riley’s epochal reply. The score consists of fifty-three melodic cells in and around the key of C; the performers are directed to move through these cells at their own pace, repeating them at will before moving on to the next. It is a piece that anyone with a modicum of ability can play, and it is ever renewable. No two renditions will be the same; none will replicate a fixed conception of the past.

In early September, I attended a Riley celebration at the Ford in Los Angeles, an outdoor venue near the Hollywood Bowl. The program inevitably included “*In C*,” in a beautifully shaped, perhaps too finely controlled performance by members of the Bang on a Can All-Stars, in league with the tabla player Salar Nader, the sitar player Rajib Karmakar, and the guitarist Gyan Riley, the composer’s son. Vicky Chow gave a

crystalline reading of Riley's Keyboard Study No. 2, from 1965. An attempt at a new arrangement of Riley's 1969 studio creation "A Rainbow in Curved Air," which the Who emulated in their song "Baba O'Riley," fell flat, but it honored Riley's merrily noodling spirit. The man himself did not attend—he has been living in Japan since the pandemic and no longer travels—but he supplied a buoyant recorded greeting, his voice sounding as miraculously youthful as his music. ♦



Alex Ross has been *The New Yorker's* music critic since 1996. He is the author of "[Wagnerism: Art and Politics in the Shadow of Music](#)."

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[The Theatre](#)

Laurie Metcalf's Stunning Return to Broadway in "Little Bear Ridge Road"

The playwright Samuel D. Hunter tailors a family drama to the actress's specific gifts; at Powerhouse: International, the artist Carolina Bianchi explores violence against women.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

October 31, 2025



Laurie Metcalf and Micah Stock star in Hunter's poignant drama. Illustration by Matt Bollinger

Samuel D. Hunter's "Little Bear Ridge Road," directed by Joe Mantello at the Booth, on Broadway, is a small, quiet drama set in a large, quiet corner of the country. We're somewhere in rural Idaho, far from light pollution and the people who cause it—and, even if you've never been up among the Idaho buttes, this vision of a dark, empty world may feel familiar. Hunter conceived much of "Little Bear Ridge Road" during the pandemic, and the

show's vast stillness, more than the actors in masks brandishing sanitizing wipes, evokes that isolating era.

It's 2020, and Ethan (Micah Stock) has come back home to sell his late father's house. Ethan can't grieve, exactly; the two hadn't spoken in years, their relationship shattered by his father's decades of drug use. But Ethan is nonetheless adrift: he's left an abusive boyfriend in Seattle, and his plans to be a writer have come to nothing. When he drives up the remote Little Bear Ridge Road to check in with his estranged aunt, Sarah (Laurie Metcalf), she brusquely installs him in her guest room. Two *COVID* years then come and go in odd hops and skips, the passing months registered by the undulating stream of television shows they watch together. (Hunter captures how slippery time felt in that period—infinity measured out in season finales.)

Hunter was raised in Moscow, Idaho, not far from the setting of Sarah's house. A gifted realist and an excavator of a particular American loneliness, he often names his slice-of-alienated-life plays after towns in his home state: "A Bright New Boise," "Lewiston," and the recent "Grangeville," which premiered in February at the Signature. For "Little Bear Ridge Road," which was originally a commission for Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre and now marks Hunter's Broadway début, he pushes another pin into the map, though I can't find an actual street by that name. Perhaps this pin is just *off* the map, at the border where a remembered landscape shadows into something like a Beckettian here-but-not.

Scott Pask's set is certainly severe enough for a Samuel Beckett play: it's a circle of white carpet in an expanse of black emptiness, furnished only with a faraway ceiling fan and a huge, plasticky gray couch. When Sarah and Ethan sit on this bulbous seating system to watch TV, they look like astronauts readying for launch. Their existence is suspended, lunar, and bleak, though there is, they agree, a beautiful night sky. "Yeah, well, we got a good view up here," Sarah says grudgingly. Ethan's new boyfriend, James (John Drea), is—in a rather tidy coincidence—an astrophysicist in training, and, at one point, the scale of the glittering universe sends Ethan into a panic attack. "The, like, whatever, galaxy is like *right there*," he says.

Hunter wrote the play specifically for Metcalf, and Sarah is an unforgettable character, a no-bullshit pepper pot who's most exasperated when she feels

the tug of sentiment or, worse, need. Metcalf rarely jokes but is always hilarious. The best moments of the play consist of her exquisitely timed physical reactions, like her eye roll at learning that James is from Coeur d'Alene, which, I guess, does sound suspiciously fancy and French. Sarah has been hiding a cancer diagnosis; she doesn't want help, though, which is lucky, because Ethan barely knows how to give any. Sarah couldn't save him from his grim upbringing, and now, past thirty, he seems arrested in the childhood he never had. Stock lets his mouth go slack and tugs at his drooping pants like a toddler.

The play operates best as a fine-grained character study, but its thinnest element is Ethan's relationship with James, an oddly two-dimensional figure whose devotion becomes bizarre in the face of Ethan's petulance and insults. I wondered if James's saintliness represents another aspect of our lost *COVID* years, when intense relationships blossomed out of nothing. Hunter is interested in what flawed people can offer one another, the difference between saving and helping. There's another dark-night-of-the-soul reckoning implied here, too: "Little Bear Ridge Road" is Hunter's second play this year that suggests ambivalence about mining one's background for material. In "Grangeville," a sculptor wants to stop building miniatures of his home town, even though they've made him famous; in "Little Bear Ridge Road," Ethan says that he quit writing autofiction because "I realized I didn't like my main characters." There's a whole world of self-doubt in that sentence, a fear of something deeper than even the endless sky.

For just three days, during the Powerhouse: International festival (held at Powerhouse Arts, in Gowanus, Brooklyn), the Brazilian artist-writer-performer Carolina Bianchi also navigated elements of autobiography with palpable ambivalence. But "The Bride and the Goodnight Cinderella," a transgressive performance-art piece that was one of the major productions at the 2023 Festival d'Avignon (and was co-produced in Brooklyn by L'Alliance New York), addresses this tension with a searing blaze of anger and despair. In performance art, the lines between reality and pretense are different than those in conventional theatre. A performance artist might inflict real injury on herself, for instance, and that can be unbearable to watch or, as I've realized, even to remember.

The beginning is almost professorial. Bianchi, dressed in a white suit, strolls onstage with a microphone, sometimes sitting at a table to consult a stack of papers. She starts with an art talk in Portuguese, showing us slides of a quartet of Botticelli paintings: “The Story of Nastagio degli Onesti,” from 1483, inspired by a story from Boccaccio’s “Decameron.” Nastagio, a jilted lover, is sulking in a pine forest when he witnesses an “infernal hunt” in which a knight chases and kills a naked woman. The pair are actually already both dead; the pursuit recurs on a kind of Sisyphean loop, an eternal torture for the woman who dared to reject the knight’s love. Nastagio then throws a banquet in the forest, inviting his former beloved so that she can witness the “hunt,” which duly terrorizes her into marrying him. In “The Decameron,” this counts as a happy ending; Botticelli’s paintings were likely commissioned as a wedding gift.

Bianchi connects Nastagio’s tale to countless true stories of violence against women, including the 2008 rape and murder of the Italian performance artist Pippa Bacca, appalling femicides in Mexico and Brazil, and oblique references to Bianchi’s own traumatic experiences. As she lectures, we watch her mix herself a cocktail laced with sedatives—referring to it as a Goodnight Cinderella, the Brazilian nickname for a drink spiked with date-rape drugs. Once the drink takes effect and she falls asleep, a downstage screen drops away and we see a nightmare landscape with a car parked near piles of sand containing partly buried skeletons. Even though Bianchi is silent, her words continue to flash on another screen—musings about art, misogyny, the use of rape as a tool in war, and a description of something that happened to her a decade ago that she can’t quite remember. Members of Bianchi’s company, Cara de Cavalo, emerge, and, as they dance and sing, they use Bianchi as a kind of delicate prop: they caress her, or shut her into the trunk of the car, or—carefully, tenderly—cut away her underwear and appear to insert a camera into her vaginal canal. The sight of the inside of a woman’s body, which plays on yet another screen, is undeniably shocking yet paradoxically reassuring; Bianchi might actually be demonstrating for us that, in an upside-down, terrible way, her only “safe space” is in the hands of her company.

It feels somehow disrespectful to write about this show as a “show.” It’s one of the most astonishing and harrowing pieces I’ve ever seen, but I also find

myself desperately wishing Bianchi would not perform it. Beneath the dread of hearing her many accounts of horrific violence lies a persistent fear that Bianchi is wounding herself irreparably with these serial druggings, and that, because we are her audience, we are complicit. Bianchi is Nastagio, summoning others into the woods; she is the naked woman in danger; and she is also the knight, who wields the weapon. But we are the guests at Nastagio's feast—the people who watch rather than rush in to help. ♦



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

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Poems

- **“The World Was All Before Them”**

“I wasn’t fooled by these walls of my body / but loved them touched.”

- **“On Being Watched from Above”**

“They see everything not only from the air but from the side and rear. / To help you stay invisible these tips have been compiled.”

[Poems](#)

The World Was All Before Them

By [Maya C. Popa](#)

November 3, 2025

I wasn't fooled by these walls of my body
but loved them touched, like a seed
that germinates in fire; shy slide of pressure,
tally of cries. I am my first and oldest system,
a figment of that first imagination
set running, but I concede to your vision:
that look you give me like nothing
other than my throat will do. Your affair
with my ankles is legion, an emperor
thumbing his ostrich plumes, a moon
drawn down with string to delay a debt.
You have made me an Eden, the veins
of my wrist the twin rivers of Heaven,
an altar where neck meets spine. Eden,
by which I mean, you will leave me.

This is drawn from “[If You Love That Lady](#).”

[Maya C. Popa](#) is the author of the poetry collections “[American Faith](#),” “[Wound Is the Origin of Wonder](#),” and “[If You Love That Lady](#).” She is the founder of Conscious Writers Collective and teaches at New York University.

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[Poems](#)

On Being Watched from Above

By [Carolyn Forché](#)

November 3, 2025

They see everything not only from the air but from the side and rear.
To help you stay invisible these tips have been compiled.
There are no secrets to staying completely invisible so they are not included here.

Dig in. Everything is watched, everything from buildings to trees.
Camouflage yourself and your dwelling.

All changes in placement, color, or design are noticed.
They are above you nevertheless and will not disappear.

They will notice anything of interest.

There must continue to be nothing of interest about you.
Make use of what you have.

In the forest there are branches, turf, and grass.

In the settlements there are bricks, slate, and boards.

In the open, consider the time of year.

Use sand, snow, or leaves typical of the season.

Do not draw attention to yourself by throwing anything away.

Bag, bottle, wrapper, paper, all will make you visible.

If you are already in a littered space, there is no need to tidy up.

Avoid trampling new paths. Use the paths that were there before you.

Avoid straight lines. There are no straight lines in nature.

Avoid movement on roofs, between buildings, and near windows.

Do not stand where you will stand out.

Don't rush to cover the windows with blackout paper or blankets.

This changes the building's façade.

Use hidden routes that are difficult to see from above.

Leaves, branches, moss.

Hide the generator under a canopy.

Keep the fuel in a separate place.
Do not hide together with the fuel.
Keep increasing the number of hidden rooms.
Having one safe place where everyone can stay together is a big mistake.
Never gather more than three together.
Always have a second entrance in case the first is destroyed.
Backpacks, boxes, and zinc draw attention.
Do not smoke, use flashlights, or light bonfires at night.
Make sure your phones are in flight mode.
This helps you to stay invisible but don't be fooled.
If your phone is on, they can learn everything about you.
Your position can be detected with radio signals, Bluetooth and Wi-Fi.
More than three devices is considered a cluster that arouses interest.
If possible, create false clusters away from your positions.
Avoid moving. Avoid moving in groups.
They are looking for a human face.
Move tree to tree with spacing between yourselves.
Stop only in the shade. Hide only in the shadows.
Remember that rooting in a place kills.
Do not become predictable.
Do not become rooted.
Watch the air.
All objects in the air should be considered a danger to you.
The sooner you detect them, the more time you have to prepare.
During the day, they are first detected by sound.
At night, they can be seen in the thermal imager at a distance.
It is better to change your position at dawn or dusk when there are fewer in the air.
If you see them high in the distance, do not run.
If they hover above you, you are in their sights.
Take shelter or run in a snake but do not forget other threats.
Touching one that has fallen is not a good idea.
In the event of an attack, use of smoke may be necessary.
With a smoke screen you can hide movement or simulate damage.
A well-applied smoke screen can hide a position for some time.
Never however be in the center of the curtain of smoke.
Set the smoke screens differently depending on the wind.

Frontal, oblique, or flanking.
Here the tips end.
Watch the air.
Do not forget about the wind.

Based on *Advice Portal of the Territorial Defense*

This is drawn from “I Witness: An Anthology of Documentary Poetry.” Carolyn Forché is the author of “Otherwhere: New and Selected Poems, 1976-2026,” “In the Lateness of This World,” and “What You Have Heard Is True: A Memoir of Witness and Resistance,” among other books.

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A moderately challenging puzzle.

[Crossword](#)

The Crossword: Tuesday, October 28, 2025

A moderately challenging puzzle.



By [Aimee Lucido](#)

October 28, 2025

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Aimee Lucido, a crossword constructor and the writer of the Bloomberg news quiz “Pointed,” is also the author of children’s books including “[Words Apart](#)” and “[Pasta Pasta Lotsa Pasta](#).”

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