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THE

THE NEW YORKER



Kate Beaton

The New Yorker Magazine

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By Helen Rosner | Andrew Tarlow is known for Brooklyn spots with low lighting, tattooed servers, and hunks of meat. Now, across the East River for the first time, he shifts the vibe toward stately elegance.

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Criterion Channel’s Thrillingly Evolving Roster

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December 13, 2024

[Richard Brody](#)

Staff writer

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

The Criterion Channel, the foremost moveable source for art-house and repertory cinema, thrillingly expands its offerings each month, and has vigorously embraced a wide range of movies, spotlighting rare independent films and movies from around the world that have recently been restored and reissued. Some of this year’s prime theatrical rediscoveries have already turned up there, including David Schickele’s 1971 docufiction **“Bushman,”** in which Paul Eyam Nzie Okpokam, a Nigerian student in San Francisco, plays a version of himself (and augments the action with interviews), until his real life is seen to overtake the fiction; and the Mauritanian-born director Med Hondo’s 1979 political fantasy **“West Indies: The Fugitive Slaves of Liberty,”** which features musical sequences—staged on a set that’s a replicated slave ship—about a popular uprising, in an unnamed Caribbean island nation, against French colonial overlords and corrupt local leaders.



Spencer Tracy and Loretta Young in “Man’s Castle.”

Photograph courtesy Criterion Collection

Earlier this year, a MOMA retrospective of the classic-Hollywood auteur Frank Borzage, who reworked Christian themes of redemption through all the genres he touched, presented a long-unseen cut of one of his greatest films, the Depression-centered romance **“Man’s Castle,”** from 1933. It stars Spencer Tracy and Loretta Young as two unhoused New Yorkers, scuffling to survive, who meet on a park bench and start living together—before marriage—in a shanty town. (Criterion streams the extended cut; the previously available version had been reedited to comply with the moralistic Hays Code.) Another crucial restoration unveiled recently and on Criterion is **“Not a Pretty Picture,”** from 1976, one of the most significant of all American independent films, in which the director, Martha Coolidge, a survivor of rape, constructs a dramatization of the crime and the events leading up to it, while depicting herself working with the actors in an attempt to film the experience both truthfully and ethically.

The actress Pascale Ogier is one of the meteoric presences in modern cinema. She died in 1984, on the eve of her twenty-sixth birthday, and one of her most powerful performances is in Jacques Rivette’s **“Le Pont du Nord,”** from 1981, in which she acts alongside her mother, Bulle Ogier, in a comedic mystery involving corporate espionage and radical politics, government surveillance and the rugged charm of Paris’s decaying industrial zones. It now appears on Criterion, as does a newly programmed batch of Czech New Wave films, including **“Case for a Rookie**

Hangman,” from 1970, Pavel Juráček’s delightfully strange and surrealistic updating of “Gulliver’s Travels,” in which antic absurdities and obscure threats reflect daily life under oppressive conditions.



About Town

Dance

Fifty years ago, Arlene Croce, then this magazine’s dance critic, heralded the advent of “the parody company we’ve been needing,” a troupe of men in pointe shoes called **Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo**. The ensemble, Croce noted, was the creation of ballet fanatics, and its jokes were accurate, affectionate, and hilarious. In the decades since, the group has kept up the gags as its technical acumen has risen and risen. A three-week season at the Joyce, to celebrate the company’s golden anniversary, is heavy on old favorites, such as its classic sendups of “Giselle” and “Swan Lake,” but the first of two programs includes a première by the up-and-coming choreographer Durante Verzola.—*[Brian Seibert](#) (Joyce Theatre; Dec. 17-Jan. 5.)*

Ambient

The multi-instrumentalist **Laraaji** is among the most significant figures in all of electronic music. A New Age practitioner who found his way to the zither in the nineteen-seventies, Laraaji’s path forward was revealed through kismet: as he was busking in Washington Square Park in 1978, the ambient titan Brian Eno was drawn to his playing, leading Eno to produce Laraaji’s shimmering masterpiece “Ambient 3: Day of Radiance,” from 1980. In the decades since, Laraaji has released dozens of majestic albums, none more divine and blissful than “Vision Songs, Vol. 1.,” from 1984. To celebrate the album’s fortieth anniversary, he brings its restorative sounds to an ideal setting, a Brooklyn Heights church, with accompanying visuals that

only amplify an ethereal experience.—[Sheldon Pearce](#) (*First Unitarian Congregational Society; Dec. 20.*)

Art



Cindy Sherman, Springs, East Hampton, New York, 2024.

Photograph by Annie Leibovitz / Courtesy the artist / Hauser & Wirth

After five decades as the busiest and most versatile of editorial photographers, **Annie Leibovitz** is still anxious to impress us with her skill and range. Her ambition is a given. “Stream of Consciousness,” a crowded, compressed retrospective of modestly scaled photographs from the past twenty years and a wall of small, push-pinned images, some of which date back much further, includes landscapes (Robert Smithson’s “Spiral Jetty,” Edward Hopper’s childhood home), still-lifes (Lincoln’s top hat, Elvis’s bullet-shattered TV), and interiors (many of artists’ studios). But the majority of the images are engrossing, sensitive, and often startling portraits of famous people, including Joan Didion, Brice Marden, Kara Walker, Salman Rushdie, Billie Eilish, and Cindy Sherman. None of these pictures feel quickly or easily made; most are simply, and not so simply, beautiful.—[Vince Aletti](#) (*Hauser & Wirth; through Jan. 11.*)

Off Broadway

The title of Kallan Dana’s “**Racecar Racecar Racecar**” is a palindrome, as is almost everything about this sharp, swift, silly tragedy, directed by Sarah Blush with an eye for maximum discombobulation. A dad (Bruce

McKenzie) and his grown daughter (Julia Greer) take a road trip across the U.S., playing word games; then they drive back, repeating their journey state by state, in reverse. All is not well, or even necessarily real: their speech garbles and slips; they pick up a hitchhiking pair (Ryan King and Camila Canó-Flaviá), who seem like their own, distorted, reflections. A more pedestrian symmetry emerges, too, when we see how alcohol affects them both. “The less I care, the better I am,” the daughter says brightly, and her father smiles in dreadful recognition.—*[Helen Shaw](#)* (A.R.T./New York; through Dec. 22.)

Cabaret



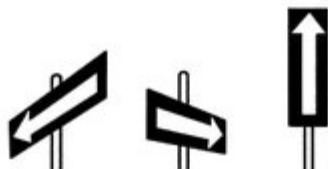
Bridget Everett and the Tender Moments.

Photograph by David Andrako

Grab your tinsel and gird your loins, people, louche-but-sweet holiday programming is coming to town! The **Joe's Pub** lineup this year contains the traditional smorgasbord of beloved Pub habitués, many with recently gussied-up national profiles. The newly minted MacArthur “genius” grant diva **Mx. Justin Vivian Bond** offers “Flakes,” a snow-themed cabaret of naughtiness, Dec. 12-22. And two of the stars of the beautiful HBO comedy “Somebody Somewhere” glitter in their own variety shows: **“Murray Hill: A Murray Little Christmas”** spreads Hill’s waggish cheer around to a rotating group of guests, Dec. 12-20; and the outrageous vocal powerhouse **Bridget Everett** returns with her band, the Tender Moments, for another of her wine-soaked musical ragers, Dec. 17-21.—H.S.

Movies

Pedro Almodóvar's melancholy new melodrama, “**The Room Next Door**,” about two New York-based writers, confronts ultimate matters with a conflicted blend of candor and evasion. Ingrid (Julianne Moore), a novelist, reconnects with a once-close friend, Martha (Tilda Swinton), a war reporter, who has cancer. When Martha takes a turn for the worse, she asks Ingrid for help: Martha rents a lavish house upstate, where the two friends stay until Martha takes a pill that ends her life. Their emotionally fraught complicity, complicated by the involvement of Damian (John Turturro), a former lover of both women, is amplified by the grim and fascinating legal complications that result. As for death, Almodóvar renders it sanitized and decorative, embellished by luxury and taste—a worthy subject, if only had he explored it.—*Richard Brody (In limited release.)*



Pick Three

[Sarah Larson](#) on some of the best podcasts of 2024.



Illustration by Daniel Jurman

1. “The Belgrano Diary,” a *London Review of Books* series hosted by the Scottish writer Andrew O’Hagan, sustains an irresistible mood as it relays the horrific story of Britain’s 1982 sinking of the General Belgrano, the second-largest ship in Argentina’s Navy, during the Falklands War, and the political opportunism surrounding it. Amid O’Hagan’s thoughtful and intrepid interviews, stunning archival clips (“Rejoice!” Margaret Thatcher says), diary excerpts, and tasteful, evocative sound design, a masterly sequence of the attack embodies the series’ unforgettable blend of elegance and savagery.

2. In “Embedded: Supermajority,” the Nashville-based journalist Meribah Knight ([“The Promise”](#)) brings us inside the volatile Tennessee state house of 2023. Knight follows three Covenant Moms—conservative Christian mothers of students at the Covenant School, where a [mass shooting](#) had recently killed six people—as they attempt to influence their own party to pass gun-control measures and then experience one rude awakening after another. The sounds of everyone’s voices, constituents and politicians alike, convey as much as their words do, and the intimacy enhances the maddening implications.

3. *The Economist’s “The Modi Raj”* paints a vivid portrait of India’s strongman Prime Minister, [Narendra Modi](#), tracing his rise to prominence.

The savvy host, Avantika Chilkoti, talks to everyone from Modi's tailor to a political consultant who recalls beaming Modi's hologram to rural campaign rallies in 2014. (The hologram, he says, made Modi seem "omnipresent and capable of doing the unthinkable.") The story's details are edifyingly specific, its themes grimly universal.

P.S. Good stuff on the Internet:

- [One-minute park](#)
 - [Carolina Gelen's cinnamon-swirl sheet-pan pancakes](#)
 - [Doechii's Tiny Desk Concert](#)
-

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[The Food Scene](#)

Borgo Is Worth the Trip to Manhattan

Andrew Tarlow is known for Brooklyn spots with low lighting, tattooed servers, and hunks of meat. Now, across the East River for the first time, he shifts the vibe toward stately elegance.

By [Helen Rosner](#)

December 8, 2024



With Diner and Marlow & Sons, Andrew Tarlow defined an era of Brooklyn restaurants. Borgo is his first venture in Manhattan. Photographs by Lanna Apisukh for The New Yorker

[You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. Sign up to receive it in your in-box.](#)

Once upon a time, long, long ago, Brooklyn wasn't considered hip, or interesting, or even, for those who lived and dined and died in Manhattan, a socially appropriate place to go out to eat. In the late twentieth century, Williamsburg was nothing like the condo-filled, tourist-thronged, Epcotified theme park of brand-approved "coolness" it is today. The charming repurposed warehouses that now promise flagship retail opportunities were simply warehouses. People lived in Brooklyn, sure, but they were just people; restaurants fed them, but they were just restaurants. The cultured people, and the moneyed people, and the people who chronicled them, all stuck to their little island, maybe bravely venturing across the bridge every

couple of years for a steak at [Peter Luger](#), on a gruff block of the other Broadway, in the shadow of the faraway end of the Williamsburg Bridge.



The Martini No. 2 gets an elaborate tableside preparation.

In 1999, catty-corner from Luger, two former Odeon bartenders named Andrew Tarlow and Mark Firth opened the restaurant Diner, in a retrofitted old diner car, and more or less created what the entire world now thinks of as a “Brooklyn restaurant.” Before it was a cliché—low lighting, tattooed servers, garlicky greens, hunks of meat from local producers, sturdy glasses filled to the brim with oddball wines—it was Diner, and shortly thereafter it was [Marlow & Sons](#), which the duo opened, right next door, in 2004, and further refined their sincere, austere, hand-hewn vision. This was, if you remember, the era of bright colors and neon lights and the “metrosexual,” the heyday of “[Sex and the City](#)” and the social scene it both mirrored and shaped—a prevailing cultural aesthetic at which Tarlow and Firth’s restaurants, with their earthy insouciance, was decidedly at odds. Marlow & Sons became famous for buying a whole cow, butchering it in-house, and serving only what one animal could provide. Want a hanger steak? There’s one on each animal. Good luck.

As the years passed, and Brooklyn became *Brooklyn*, Tarlow remained one of the architects of the reimagined borough’s cultural identity. (Firth left the partnership in 2008.) His business grew into a bit of an empire, with more restaurants—[Achilles Heel](#), Roman’s, the now-closed Reynard—plus a butcher shop, a bakery, and more, all in Brooklyn. Each place was distinct in its own way, but all bore the candlelit, scratchy-wool, Shaker-goth

aesthetic that marked a place as a Tarlow joint, or (both in New York and elsewhere) a Tarlow knockoff.

Now, in a somewhat disorienting narrative reversal, Tarlow has come to Manhattan, just as twenty-five years ago those breathless Manhattanites spilled out of their yellow cabs into the wilds of Williamsburg. Borgo, which opened in September, on East Twenty-seventh Street, is his first new restaurant in eleven years, and his first ever outside the borough with which he is so inextricably linked. For Tarlow, this is, without a doubt, a vibe shift; it was also, perhaps, inevitable. Manhattan today is, bizarrely, often more affordable than Brooklyn. The never-outer-boroughers and the illegal-loft artists of an earlier era have colonized the brownstones of Carroll Gardens and Boerum Hill; they've got kids now, they're in couples therapy, they're prepping for colonoscopies. Tarlow's fans have, in one way or another, grown up. His restaurants remain wonderful to eat at, but they also remain dim, cramped, and loud. Borgo, which occupies a double storefront, is more brightly lit. There's more space between the tables, fine serviceware, tailored linens—a sense of stately elegance and offhanded ease. I wouldn't call it a quiet restaurant, but you can definitely hear yourself better than you can in the Sturm und Drang of Achilles Heel or Roman's, with their packed tables and hard surfaces. The menu, too, is very grown up—fundamentally Italian, as much of the cooking in the Tarlow universe is, and built around a live-fire oven that crackles in the open kitchen, which fills the front section of one of the restaurant's two rooms.

You don't need to know any of this history; if you're willing to make the trek to Nowheresville, upper-downtown Manhattan, it's enough just to know that Borgo is excellent, full stop. Tarlow has brought over his most reliable lieutenants to staff the kitchen, the bar, and the dining room, and imported some of his most charming tricks and dishes as well: a fava purée straight out of Roman's, a crisp-skinned half chicken that harks back to old-school Marlow & Sons, which has in recent years pivoted, with the interests of its chefs, away from the semi-Germanic, semi-Catskillian mode of its ultra-influential first decade. You might arrive at your table to see the first name of the reservation-maker scrawled in loopy cursive on the white paper that tops the white linens, evoking the kooky dramatics of Diner's menu, which servers scribble on the table as they recite each item. The recitation-

as-gimmick, too, is echoed at Borgo in an elaborate tableside preparation of the Martini No. 2, whose impeccably artisanal components arrive via wheeled cart and are jiggered and poured into something smooth and Vesper-like, with hints of tomato and a little zing from the skewered garnish of pickled *aji dulce* peppers.

If you're in the bar, or in the main dining room just beyond it, you might miss the kitchen's wood-burning oven. It's used to cook, among other things, the "focaccia Borgo," which is not the lofty, bubbly slab you might be imagining but an unassuming disk of bronze-blistered flatbread that, like an Italian quesadilla, hides a layer of nutty, melty robiola and Fontina cheeses. The oven's smoke suffuses the flame-orange flesh of sweet, tiny beets piled in a quasi-salad atop a swoop of garlicky potato purée. Its heat caresses a skewer of marshmallow-tender veal sweetbreads shining beneath a lip-sticky demi-glace. It crisps the skin of a whole branzino, served with bones removed but head still on, beside a rousing, Sicilian-ish pile of greens with sweet onions and pine nuts scented by the ferric kiss of saffron.

None of this is terribly groundbreaking, but I don't think it's intended to be. Tarlow and his chef Jordan Frosolone seem focussed instead on precision—the food is exciting not for its novelty but for its proximity to perfection. Chicken-liver mousse, another Tarlow classic (his restaurants were instrumental in bringing the dish back from gastronomic Siberia), is here smeared lustily on flame-darkened toast and ornamented with jammy slivers of fig. Order it alongside the wood-fired, golden-skinned half chicken and—if it weren't for the serene sophistication of the room around you—you might as well be in the twilit back room at Marlow & Sons circa two-thousand-oh-something, hotly debating with your date if that's really Narciso Rodriguez at the next table. An appetizer of radishes and turnips *bagna cauda*, presented not in the familiar way, as crudites with dip, but—surprisingly, delightfully—with the little root vegetables sliced in half and carved with fingertip-size divots, into which the warm, anchovy-rich *bagna cauda* has been poured. I haven't had so much fun with a raw-root-vegetable appetizer since the NoMad restaurant (R.I.P.) exploded the whole hors-d'œuvres game with a plate of radishes enrobed, like chocolate-covered strawberries, in tempered butter.

There are a few pastas on the menu—a fettuccine in a wildly rich guinea-hen ragù, a slightly one-note baked cannelloni with braised beef cheeks—but, unlike at other Italian-inflected fancy restaurants, these seem more like technical obligations than culinary showpieces. And, uncommonly for pastas, the portions at Borgo seem a little large, especially given their forceful flavors. A pile of precisely stamped ravioli filled with sunchoke and mushrooms is, on first bite, a thrilling explosion of mycological umami, but by the time I made it to the bottom of the plate I felt like the point had been somewhat over-made. Desserts, overseen by the pastry chef Adam Marca, are gracefully simple: a nutty riff on affogato, with the espresso poured into a soft pillow of pistachio gelato; a bittersweet sliver of fudgy Sachertorte (Tarlow's grandfather is Viennese), dressed in jewels of candied apricot.

Helen, Help Me!

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

The room, like the food, is sophisticated without trying too hard. It's decorated in shades of wood and white, with gently curving ceilings (a little cavelike, a little nautical) and walls dotted with interesting, mismatched pieces of art. When I asked a server about one painting I particularly liked —a Cézanne-ish still-life of fruit—Tarlow, who had been making the rounds, appeared tableside to proudly inform us that it had been painted by his daughter, and that it hangs directly on the other side of the wall, back-to-back, from an abstract work done by Tarlow himself. A double-sided fireplace connects the two dining rooms, a holdover from the Italian restaurant that occupied the space before. (A server told me that they hadn't yet quite figured out how to light it without either overheating the space or tingeing the air with a smoky haze.) The mood and the menu evoke not only Tarlow's own spots but a certain sort of warm, sophisticated, fancy-but-not-fussy Italian restaurant of a slightly earlier Manhattan era: the roaring fire at Beppe, perhaps, or the intimate idiosyncrasy of the Upper West Side's Cesca. Tablecloths, a nice cheese selection, a bit of grandness, never snooty. Is it too soon to be nostalgic for twenty years ago? Maybe I've grown old, too. Maybe Manhattan's worth a second look. ♦



Helen Rosner, a staff writer, received a 2024 James Beard Award for her weekly restaurant-review column, [*The Food Scene*](#).

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- **[Syria After Assad](#)**

By Robin Wright | The scramble is on to define the future of Syria, quickly, to avert a war even more divisive than the conflict that has riven the nation for thirteen years.

- **[The Joseph Pulitzer of the Young Thug Trial](#)**

By Charles Bethea | Bliv, the anonymous non-lawyer behind ThuggerDaily, reveals how he scooped the mainstream press and influenced the proceedings in the longest trial in Georgia's history.

- **[With a Clip-Clip Here: Sewing Up Oz for “Wicked”](#)**

By Zach Helfand | Paul Tazewell, a former wizard himself, commanded a staff of a hundred and forty people to dream up and sew the costumes that Ariana Grande, Cynthia Erivo, and company wore over the rainbow.

- **[The Sonic Youth Literary Canon Gets a New Entry](#)**

By John Seabrook | Thurston Moore, who has a memoir, “Sonic Life,” and is completing a novel, “Parsnip & Boomerang,” visits the Strand and discusses the band’s bookish leanings.

- **[Bad Dog! The Stuntwoman Who Taught Amy Adams How to Snarl for “Nightbitch”](#)**

By Dan Greene | Before signing on to Marielle Heller’s film about postpartum distress, Taylor Krasne ape-walked through Malibu and impersonated a “crab-alien” thing.

[Comment](#)

Syria After Assad

The scramble is on to define the future of Syria, quickly, to avert a war even more divisive than the conflict that has riven the nation for thirteen years.

By [Robin Wright](#)

December 15, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

The Iranian foreign minister, Abbas Araghchi, was ashen-faced in Doha, on December 7th, as he met with envoys from Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, and Qatar to confer about Syria. Rebels were on the doorstep of Damascus just ten days after they had launched a sweeping offensive. By midnight, the representatives of the nations—with disparate political systems and conflicting regional goals—had concurred that the

government of President Bashar al-Assad could not survive. They called for an urgent political transition. By dawn, Assad had departed Damascus for Russia, without a word to the people his family had ruled—and gassed, imprisoned, tortured, and murdered—for a half century. “No one believed it could happen,” Araghchi later told Iranian television. “What was surprising was, first, the Syrian Army’s inability to confront the situation, and, second, the rapid pace of developments.” Syria, a geostrategic centerpiece in the Middle East, was abruptly upended. So, too, was the region.

Now the scramble is on to define the future of Syria, quickly, to prevent ethnic, political, and sectarian rivalries from triggering a war even more divisive than the conflict that has riven the nation for thirteen years. Syria’s twenty-three million people include multiple Muslim sects, Christians, Druze, and Kurds. Both Ramadan and Easter are legally celebrated. Its history after declaring independence from a French mandate in 1946 was volatile. There were twenty coups before 1970, when Hafez al-Assad, the defense minister and the father of Bashar, ousted members of his own Baath Party. The next year, he became President.

“The conflict is not over,” Geir O. Pedersen, the U.N. special envoy for Syria, warned. Regional and global players want to be “positive and supportive, but many are nervous” about a government created by Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, a Sunni militia that led the uprising and whose leaders previously had ties with Al Qaeda and *ISIS*. “They see an Islamist group come to power and wonder if they’ll really deliver on what they promise.”

The danger, Pedersen noted, is the Libya scenario. After the ouster of Muammar Qaddafi, in 2011, rival governments fought from Tripoli and Benghazi. Other transitions after the Arab Spring uprisings have not gone well, either. Tunisia’s democracy has eroded since 2011, as democratically elected leaders have been imprisoned or silenced. Egypt’s democratically elected government was removed in a military coup in 2013. Yemen was split after the Houthis seized power, in 2014, during a civil war that now targets international shipping. The question is whether Syria’s uprising—which also started in 2011—is the Arab Spring, Part Two. Six diverse political and ethnic groups now claim territory. Pedersen reflected, “It will

require a new miracle in the days and weeks ahead to insure that things don't go wrong in Syria."

The charismatic H.T.S. leader, who is known by the nom de guerre Abu Mohammed al-Jolani, has vowed not to repeat the mistakes that led to civil war in Iraq, where the U.S. occupation, in 2003, dismantled the military and banned the Baath Party from government. Those moves spawned anti-American militias, including groups that Jolani joined. He fought with Al Qaeda of Iraq, and in 2005 he was detained by U.S. forces at the notorious Camp Bucca, where he met Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the founder of *ISIS*. Baghdadi later dispatched him to establish a Syrian branch of *ISIS*. In the ever-evolving world of jihadism, Jolani has since distanced H.T.S. from both Al Qaeda and *ISIS*. In a symbolic gesture, he has returned to his given name, Ahmed al-Sharaa. Yet he heralded Assad's fall as "a victory for the Islamic nation." The U.S. still has a ten-million-dollar bounty on his head, and H.T.S. is on the list of foreign terrorist organizations.

In Doha, the envoys called the Syrian crisis a "dangerous development" for international security. They pleaded for an end to military operations that could slip into chaos. Hakan Fidan, the Turkish foreign minister, said that the new government should treat all faiths and ethnicities equally. It should tolerate "no revenge." As the main supporter of H.T.S., Turkey is the winner among regional rivals, just as Iran and Russia, who backed Assad, are the losers. The Biden Administration said that it is prepared to recognize a new government if it is "credible, inclusive, and non-sectarian." Syrian forces toppled Assad, however, so it's unclear how much influence any foreign government will wield in Damascus, except economically. The U.S. has crippling sanctions on Syria for terrorism and repression.

As a first step, H.T.S. appointed Mohammed al-Bashir, an engineer who had run the provincial H.T.S. government in northern Idlib, to be Prime Minister for about three months. For the rest of the world, U.N. Resolution 2254 remains the legal premise for a transition. It calls for a new constitution and free elections stretched over eighteen months. But it was written nine years ago. Time is moving much faster now in a country where the economy is collapsing and millions have been displaced or forced into exile. "We should accept instability, because it is part of the process,"

Sawsan Abou Zainedin, who leads Madaniya, an umbrella organization for two hundred Syrian civil-society groups, said. “We’re all standing on good will, but we can’t stand on good will for long.”

That sense of uncertainty has spread across the region. *ISIS* has a growing underground presence again in Syria; the U.S. launched more than seventy-five air strikes to prevent it from exploiting the turmoil. Tensions are escalating between Turkey, a *NATO* member, and the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which are backed by a U.S.-led coalition. The S.D.F. now controls a third of Syria. As Assad fell, Israeli tanks and troops crossed into Syria and seized a hundred and fifty square miles of the Golan Heights, a demilitarized zone patrolled by the U.N. since 1974, as part of a U.S.-brokered ceasefire after the last war between Israel and Syria. Israel also launched nearly five hundred air strikes on the Syrian Navy, Army, and Air Force. “We have no intention to meddle in Syria’s internal affairs, but we certainly intend to do whatever is needed to guarantee our security,” the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said. “As I promised, we are changing the face of the Middle East.” The tectonic shift in the balance of power was apparent when Iran pulled its last diplomats out of Syria as the meeting in Doha wrapped up. The rebels, in one of their first acts, stormed the mausoleum of Hafez al-Assad and set his coffin ablaze. ♦



Robin Wright, a contributing writer and columnist, has written for *The New Yorker* since 1988. She is the author of “[Rock the Casbah: Rage and Rebellion Across the Islamic World](#).”

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[The Wayward Press](#)

The Joseph Pulitzer of the Young Thug Trial

Bliv, the anonymous non-lawyer behind ThuggerDaily, reveals how he scooped the mainstream press and influenced the proceedings in the longest trial in Georgia's history.

By [Charles Bethea](#)

December 16, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

When the longest trial in Georgia's history ended recently, its chief chronicler reflected on the past two years. Bliv, as he's known on Discord, is a twenty-five-year-old Texas resident with a corporate job and a Young

Thug obsession. “Like, him and Future are pretty much the only two artists I listened to in high school,” Bliv said the other day, over the phone. Bliv does not have a J.D. and, as far as he knows, has never met a lawyer in person. He’d never watched a legal proceeding, either—except bits of Johnny Depp v. Amber Heard—until Jeffery Lamar Williams, a.k.a. the rapper Young Thug, was indicted in May of 2022, along with twenty-seven co-defendants, for allegedly engaging in a criminal enterprise involving drugs, guns, and a murder. “I was, like, what?” Bliv recalled. He and a few dozen other people huddled on a Discord channel devoted to Thug to parse the legal arcana.

“We were trying to figure out the whole story the state was alleging,” Bliv went on. “What Thug’s chances were. Was he cooked? The media said he was on wiretaps ordering hits, stuff like that. Nobody on the Discord had ever read a whole indictment before.” They considered the accused. “We’re big fans, so we knew, like, eight names—but not all twenty-eight,” Bliv said. “Some seemed like randos.” Good analysis was hard to come by. “So I kinda stepped up,” he said. He found hearing calendars, pulled court documents, and, in late 2022, noticed a Zoom link left on one of them—a way in.

“It happened, like, three times,” Bliv said. “I screen-shared these private motions hearings on Zoom, so it wouldn’t show the, like, eighty people watching on our Discord.” He added, “I dunno if I broke any laws.” The defendants usually joined the Zoms from confinement, “labelled, like, Booth 5C,” Bliv continued. “I’d name myself Booth 6F or whatever and keep my camera off.” The Discord channel was riveted. Maybe others would be as well? Bliv took over a friend’s inactive Twitter meme account called ThuggerDaily. He posted pleadings, answered legal questions, speculated about suppressed phone calls, and noted names on witness lists (Lil Wayne, T.I.). He also watched the eventually live-streamed proceedings while “working” from home—or, more discreetly, in the office—and posted about the dramatics: a witness firing his lawyer from the stand; another witness admitting to being high while under oath; a defense attorney arrested on gang charges; a bungled drug exchange in the court room; and a nude man appearing during a hearing via Zoom alongside the message “*FREE YOUNG THUG.*”

Bliv sought to be entertaining and informative, but not exactly impartial. “The state claimed Thug had said he had put, like, a twenty-million bounty on somebody’s head,” Bliv recalled. “I knew that was a lie. He was talking about a different rapper”—Lil Uzi Vert—“having a twenty-four-million-dollar diamond surgically installed in his forehead.” Bliv relayed this insight to one of Williams’s managers early on. “Months later, it was in his lawyer’s opening statement,” Bliv said. He helped out other defendants, too. (One later posted on X, “Fun fact: @ThuggerDaily was my third lawyer!”) The account’s following surpassed a hundred thousand people, including the manager (“This is attention to detail on another level,” he D.M.’d), the court reporter, defendants, future witnesses (“They’re not supposed to follow the case,” Bliv said), Williams’s family, and many lawyers. “I assumed he was a lawyer,” one said. Another said, “His understandings of beefs and lyrics were incredibly useful in certain cross-exam situations,” adding, “I’m sixty. I don’t listen to rap music.”

Bliv’s identity was—and remains—a mystery. At one point, an *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* reporter messaged him. “We’re trying to figure out who you are and who is your source cause sometimes you get stuff before us,” the reporter wrote. He appended three crying emojis. Bliv laughed: “I screenshotted that for the Discord and everyone there went crazy.”

Bliv even offered guidance, once, to the court videographer. “I said, ‘Pan over to Thug’s face the next time they play one of his songs as evidence,’ ” he said. The camera did so, catching Williams smiling. “Good content,” Bliv said. “And it went viral.” A recent Bliv post announcing that Williams received fifteen years’ probation “AND IS GOING HOME TODAY” got a hundred thousand likes. “I’m just glad he’s free,” Bliv said. The stardom of the anonymous stan-journalist raises a few questions, including: Will he go to law school now? “I think the bar exam would be fun to do,” Bliv said. He paused. “But I guess that’s not, like, a normal opinion.” ♦



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[Wardrobe Dept.](#)

With a Clip-Clip Here: Sewing Up Oz for “Wicked”

Paul Tazewell, a former wizard himself, commanded a staff of a hundred and forty people to dream up and sew the costumes that Ariana Grande, Cynthia Erivo, and company wore over the rainbow.

By [Zach Helfand](#)

December 16, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

A week or so ago, the ruby slippers worn by Judy Garland in “The Wizard of Oz” sold at auction for thirty-two and a half million dollars. Expensive

slippers. For thirty-two and a half million dollars, you could buy the Wicked Witch of the West's hat, which sold at the same auction, plus Marilyn Monroe's dress from the subway-grate scene in "The Seven Year Itch," and still have twenty-five million left over. How to spend the rest? "I would go for the gingham dress on Dorothy, but that's for the resale value," Paul Tazewell said the other day. "I'd think about Gene Wilder's coat and hat from 'Willy Wonka & the Chocolate Factory.' The green velvet dress in 'Gone with the Wind.' Any of Vanessa Redgrave's costumes from 'Camelot.' Those were very magical."

Tazewell is the costume designer for the new "Wicked" movie and is considered a favorite for an Oscar. He was out for a walk in the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, which is around the corner from his home, and whose flora had provided inspiration for a lot of his designs—bluebells, Fibonacci spirals, ferns. "Nature seemed really appropriate," he said. A gown for Glinda, Ariana Grande's character, mimics the ombré of roses in Regent's Park, near an apartment in London where he lived while working on the film. The elaborate pleating in a dress for Elphaba, Cynthia Erivo's character, resembles the gills of a cremini or a portobello. "I happened upon a documentary on mushrooms and funguses," he said. "I was just scrolling on Netflix."

Tazewell wore a navy-and-orange plaid jacket, a dark tie-dyed scarf, and blue Lululemon pants—"my comfortable walking trousers." He found a seat on a bench by the water garden which faced a grove of catalpa trees. "Wicked" was the biggest film production he has worked on. The marketing budget alone was estimated to equal the cost of five pairs of Judy Garland slippers. For big scenes, the costume department employed a hundred and forty people. "We had tailors, and each of those tailors had a staff of assistants and stitchers," Tazewell said. "There was a team of machine embroiderers and hand embroiderers. A team of hand beaders, too. We had an in-house weaver who also did the hand felting. There was a machine knitter and a hand knitter. There were belt-makers and jewelry-makers and the armorers for our guards. There was a whole staff of milliners. And then there was the 3-D printing and laser cutting for the crown and the crystal shoes." The bodice for one of Grande's dresses took two hundred and twenty-five hours and twenty thousand beads. Single set pieces required

enough costumes to fill a warehouse. He also designed C.G.I. suits for animals.



"You know who you should really meet is whoever walks by next so I can get out of this conversation."

Cartoon by Jon Adams

Tazewell has spent most of his career in the theatre: “Caroline, or Change” (with Tony Kushner), “The Color Purple,” “Suffs.” He did “In the Heights,” on Broadway, and became a Lin-Manuel Miranda collaborator. Miranda asked him to join “Hamilton.” “My biggest priority was to not fuck it up,” Tazewell said. (He won a Tony for the show.) Later, Steven Spielberg hired him for the “West Side Story” movie. “Tomorrow I’ll be starting the first day of a new Spielberg film,” Tazewell said. “I can’t say what it is.”

Without planning to, he has repeatedly found himself designing Oz. He did the televised version of “The Wiz” in 2015, for NBC; he’d done the musical years earlier, too, in Akron, Ohio. “It was my first fully realized design of a show,” he said. “I also played the Wiz!” He was a junior in high school. “I was leading it, but my family pulled together the costumes. I was thinking ombré even during that first production, because I wanted the Glinda cape, which was gold lamé, to be ombré’d in a rainbow pattern. I asked my dad”—a research chemist for Firestone—“if he could spray these colors in a certain order. It wasn’t the ombré that I was hoping for. But I was, like, I can manage.” He went on, “The fact that ‘The Wizard of Oz’ is the one fairy tale that we embrace as Americans is pretty wonderful if you think about what Baum was saying about power.”

He strolled past the children's garden, where a scarecrow stood among denuded stems. Tazewell's a Botanic Garden member, and he comes often. "My husband passed away right before I moved here," he said. "So I started going to the park and using it as a place to grieve and express." He'd never been to the bonsai greenhouse, so he went to check it out: closed. He headed for the Japanese gardens: closed, too. But he could stand outside the gate and watch a water show from some fountains. It's his favorite spot in the park. "The asymmetry is really beautiful," he said. "The different textures of the trees. It's all manipulated. But it's manipulated in a very thoughtful way." ♦

Zach Hefland is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff.

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[Hyphenate Dept.](#)

The Sonic Youth Literary Canon Gets a New Entry

Thurston Moore, who has a memoir, “Sonic Life,” and is completing a novel, “Parsnip & Boomerang,” visits the Strand and discusses the band’s bookish leanings.

By [John Seabrook](#)

December 16, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

At the Strand the other day, Thurston Moore was working his way through a stack of hardcovers, signing copies of “Sonic Life,” his 2023 memoir and history of Sonic Youth, the band he co-founded. The “T”s and “M”s in his signature were tall and lanky like he is, with a dense thatch of lowercase lettering that evoked the sixty-six-year-old’s never-changing Shaggy-from-

Scooby-Doo haircut. The quiet was occasionally interrupted by the boxcar roar of a cart full of books being wheeled across the strip-wood flooring.

“I just wanted to write,” Moore said, hefting his five-hundred-page book, which goes deep into the esoterica of the downtown musical avant-garde of the eighties. It is scant on dish about the breakup of Moore’s marriage, in 2011, to Kim Gordon, Sonic Youth’s bassist and vocalist, which also ended the band. Gordon wrote at length about their creative and romantic partnership and its dissolution in her well-received 2015 memoir, “*Girl in a Band*.”

“When I got a book deal, it was all about writing a personalized memoir,” Moore said. “I wasn’t interested in that so much.” Moore speaks like he writes, in well-formed sentences delivered in a professorial tone, with the same earnestness he brings to his onstage experiments in artful noise, such as the show he played recently at the Stone, in Greenwich Village, with Lee Ranaldo and Steve Shelley, his former bandmates. His father was a philosophy professor, who also taught music appreciation; his death, in 1976, when Thurston was eighteen, was a life-changing event that led to his leaving college and moving to a tenement in the East Village.

“I wanted to be part of this whole world that I’m just enamored by,” Moore said, of his later-life turn to prose. He gestured around at the rare books lining the walls of the third floor of the Strand, the lower-Manhattan bookseller that opened in 1927, on now vanished Book Row on Fourth Avenue, and moved around the corner to its current location, at Broadway and Twelfth, in 1956. “It was very similar to being young and saying, ‘I want to make records, too,’ ” Moore went on. He is nearing completion of a second book, a novel called “*Parsnip & Boomerang*,” for the two main characters. “Of course, it’s about a couple on the Lower East Side in the early eighties, who live in a tenement building. It goes off into light surrealism, and there’s interaction with the downtown early-eighties hardcore scene.” Mainly, he said, “I wanted to write a story about two young people with very modest lives who find each other in the community of downtown punk rock, and their connection to each other is nothing but utter beneficence and pleasure. Even when things get out of hand, such as

the pets escaping, and they have to search in the streets of New York, *every moment is amazing.*”

Moore surveyed the wall of first editions, and made his way past Joyce’s “Ulysses,” O’Connor’s “Wise Blood,” “Candy,” by Terry Southern and Mason Hoffenberg, and a James Schuyler novel called “Alfred & Guinevere.” “I find there’s great meditational value in browsing libraries and books, even online,” he noted. “I’m all about first editions. I am constantly perusing secondhand-bookseller sites.” He lives in London with his wife, Eva Moore, formerly Prinz, a book editor who was the other woman in the Moore-Gordon split. “I go into every thrift store and charity shop,” he said. “I am really into small pamphlets of postwar avant-garde poetry, like the stapled mimeos from the Poetry Project and Ted Berrigan’s C Press. I’m not so interested in buying a three-thousand-dollar edition of a John Ashbery book. I find that a little distasteful.”

He resumed browsing. “The band was sort of defined by the literary interests that each of us had,” Moore observed. They shared an interest in the Beats, Philip K. Dick, Jim Thompson, and Harry Crews. “Everyone was reading Harry Crews books,” he said.

On the shelf, there happened to be a first edition of Crews’s 1969 novel “Naked in Garden Hills.” Moore picked it up. He recalled that decades earlier Gordon had a side project with Lydia Lunch, the New York no-wave star, and after writing a song with Crews’s title they decided to call the band Harry Crews. Sonic Youth played a gig in a bar in northern Florida. “We walk in and Harry Crews is sitting there, cowboy hat tucked over his eyes, boots up on the table. He said, ‘I just wanted to meet somebody who named themselves after me.’ ” The author stuck around to watch the show. “Later I saw an interview where Crews was asked what he thought,” Moore said with a chuckle. “‘They were nice people, but that’s the worst music I ever heard,’ ” he drawled. “‘Who the hell listens to that stuff?’ ” ♦



*[John Seabrook](#) has been a contributor to *The New Yorker* since 1989 and became a staff writer in 1993. He has published four books, including, most recently, “[*The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory*](#).”*

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[The Pictures](#)

Bad Dog! The Stuntwoman Who Taught Amy Adams How to Snarl for “Nightbitch”

Before signing on to Marielle Heller’s film about postpartum distress, Taylor Krasne ape-walked through Malibu and impersonated a “crab-alien” thing.

By [Dan Greene](#)

December 16, 2024



Illustration by João Fazenda

For stunt doubles, direct contact with a film’s director is rare; usually they’re brought in by a stunt coördinator. For “Nightbitch,” the new movie in which a depressive mother escapes her ennui by nocturnally transforming

into a red husky, the director, Marielle Heller, took a more deliberate approach. A movie in which Amy Adams becomes a dog has to nail the part where Amy Adams becomes a dog, after all. “I was on all fours in this office, digging a hole in the rug,” Taylor Krasne, Adams’s stunt double, said the other day. “Marielle wanted me to do this stuff”—Krasne mimed a dog pawing its ear—“and make noises.” She got the job. “It was my favorite hiring process,” she said.

Krasne was in town from Los Angeles, spending a morning at the Bull Moose Dog Run, beside the American Museum of Natural History. A decade or so ago, she lived around the corner, before leaving to study at the National Institute of Circus Arts, in Melbourne, Australia. “I would just sit on this bench, bring a book, watch the dogs,” she said.

Quadrupedal movement has become one of Krasne’s specialties: she’s played canines, primates, creatures from various fictional realms. The hardest? A “crab-alien thing” she portrayed in motion capture as part of a sci-fi project. “The easiest one for me is ape, but I had to earn that,” she said. “You always have one shoulder leading”—she stood and hunched to demonstrate—“and pretend like there’s a string here,” from the non-lead arm to the opposite back foot. “A lot of people have their butt down, and it looks a little light in the arms, which was my biggest mistake for the first year.”

A Yorkie-bichon in a coral cardigan trotted over and sniffed Krasne’s boots. “Oh, hi!” she said. “I like your sweater!” She explained that she had stumbled into the world of quadrupedality after a chance meeting with the brother of Terry Notary, a stuntman and movement coach who has worked on the rebooted “Planet of the Apes” franchise. She attended Notary’s workshops in L.A., not-quite-knuckling—the participants use handheld arm extensions—breathlessly across dunes. “Two miles there, two miles back, without standing,” Krasne said. Once, on Malibu Beach, they ape-walked past Jennifer Garner. “She was, like, ‘What is this?’ ” Krasne recalled.

Dogs are more straightforward: back foot on one side, front on the same, then opposite side. Human impersonators struggle more with the psychophysiology. “The difference between us and dogs is they are one hundred per cent in the moment,” she said, and pointed at a sandy Malinois

mix pressing its front paws against a tree trunk, staring rigidly at a squirrel. “That dog is not worrying about anything other than what’s in front of them,” Krasne said. “That’s something I try to remember and take with me everywhere.”

A scruffy terrier presented itself for petting. A middle-aged woman in a fleece approached and asked Krasne which dog was hers.

“Oh, no dog,” Krasne said. “Just here for the cuddles.”

“Same here,” the woman said.

Krasne’s biggest “Nightbitch” scene was not as Adams’s character but as another human woman—minor spoiler alert—who is shown, in one faraway shot, dropping to all fours and bounding into a field. “They were looking out for rattlesnakes and I was, like, ‘Um, I’m not wearing shoes or gloves,’ ” Krasne said of the shoot. “But they took care of me.” She filmed around seven takes—snake-free, but not without some damage. “Part of the job is to get scratched up and bleed a little bit,” she said.

In preparing for the film’s pivotal transition sequence, Krasne and the stunt coördinator, Timothy Eulich, who worked on the Oscar-winning movie “Everything Everywhere All at Once,” focussed on honing the shoulder movements. Heller, Krasne said, “really wanted me to figure out this very specific intricate movement of, like, each scapula, whether it was one at a time or both in which direction, and really accentuating that.”

When the big day arrived, Krasne did a run-through for camera blocking. When it came time to shoot, Adams gave it a go herself—and proved a natural. “She had her own little flair to it,” Krasne said.

A corgi-Australian shepherd scurried by, eyes wide with bright white irises. “He looks very stressed out,” Krasne said, laughing.

“I was basically like a crash-test dummy,” Krasne said of her “Nightbitch” experience. Adams, who has a background in gymnastics, pulled off most of the action takes herself. But Krasne did man the prosthetic paws shown digging in the transition scene, and in the movie’s trailer, when Adams’s

character slips and pratfalls across kitchen tiles, Krasne recognized her own work. “You see half my face,” she said, “if you pause it!” ♦
Dan Greene is a member of *The New Yorker’s editorial staff.*

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Reporting & Essays

- **The Secret History of Risotto**

By Anthony Lane | The dish is governed by a set of laws that are rooted in tradition, rich in common sense, and aching to be broken or bent.

- **Brady Corbet's Outsider American Epic**

By Alexandra Schwartz | “The Brutalist,” the director’s nearly four-hour study of immigration, identity, and marriage, flowed from his own struggle to create art without compromise. “You really have to dare to suck to transcend,” he said.

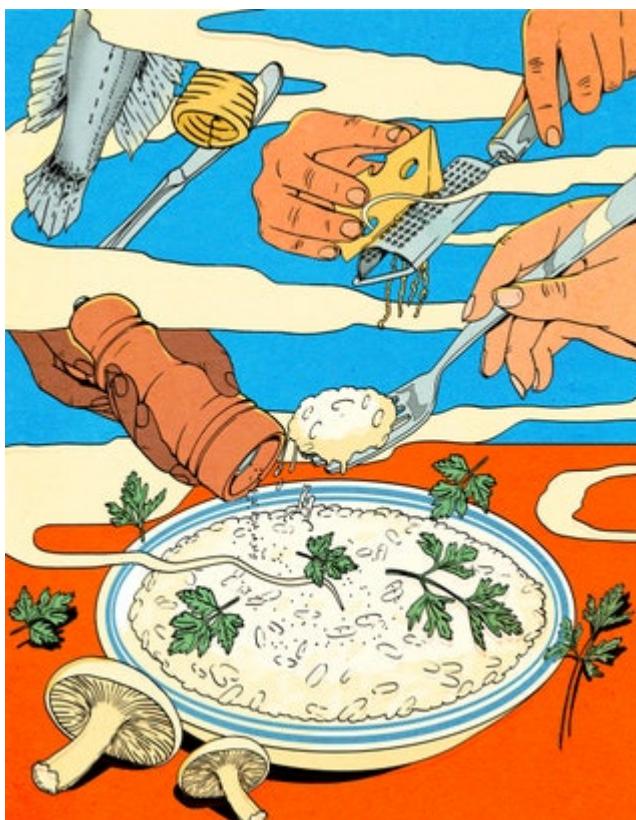
[**Annals of Gastronomy**](#)

The Secret History of Risotto

The dish is governed by a set of laws that are rooted in tradition, rich in common sense, and aching to be broken or bent.

By [Anthony Lane](#)

December 16, 2024



Nobody is quite sure where risotto came from or when it first appeared. Illustration by María Jesús Contreras

In the autumn of 1984, my parents and I paid our first visit to Venice. They flew, and I joined them there, having gone happily astray on European trains in the preceding fortnight, arriving at Santa Lucia station in a dawn that appeared to be steeped in mother-of-pearl. One day, we took a boat to the island of Burano, three-quarters of an hour from the city's heart, and lunched at the Trattoria da Romano. Ordering at random from the menu, I

chose risotto, and, after a puzzling delay, it was placed before me. Off-white, unobtrusive, and modestly freckled with parsley, it was as plain to the eye as it was revolutionary to the palate. Never had I tasted such a thing. The flavor, far from strong, was mysterious and mild. As a young fool, recently graduated from college, I neglected to ask how, or of what, the risotto was made. Instead, I feasted, almost cracking the plate with my scraping, and silently vowed that I would try to re-create such food—or a ghost of it, however dissatisfying—for the rest of my life. I would wander the earth, seeking out one risotto after another, in search of the ideal. Forty years later, the folly has worsened, and the quest goes on.

The good news is that making risotto is a breeze. The fundamental things apply. You melt a bit of butter, sauté some chopped onion, add rice, stir it around, add wine, stir, then add hot stock, ladle by ladle, while you stir and stir again. Remove the pan from the heat. Throw in grated Parmesan and more butter. Stir. Wait. Serve. Eat. Feel your immortal soul being warmed and suffused with pleasures both rare and immeasurable. Lick the spoon. Wash the pan. Done.

On inspection, however, the fundamentals melt away. This is where trouble starts. Some recipes are onion-free. Others drop the wine. As for the dairy products, they ought to be non-negotiable, and I was once advised never to order risotto south of Rome, because that is where butter country peters out. To anyone who can't or won't eat anything predicated on the existence of a cow, risotto should surely be off limits. Or so I believed until I met an experimentalist chef, a few years ago, who argued that, when we praise the creaminess of a risotto, all we are really doing is confirming the omnipresence of butter and cheese. His dream was to create a risotto using nothing but stock and rice. Trapped within each grain, he told me, and secretly waiting to be released, was all the texture we would ever need.

Risotto, in other words, is governed by a set of laws that are rooted in tradition, rich in common sense, and aching to be broken or bent. These include:

1. The finest rice is grown in the Po River Valley. There are varieties other than Carnaroli, Arborio, and Vialone Nano, but stick to those—and quibble

fervently, by all means, as to which of them is most suited to which particular risotto—and you won’t go far off track.

2. “Nothing in a risotto should be larger than a grain of rice.” So I was told, albeit “with slight exaggeration,” by Ruth Rogers, the co-founder of the River Café, which has been serving the most desirable Italian food in London since 1987. “If you want rice with big pieces in it, have a paella,” she said. The actual process of cooking risotto—“so focussed and so calming”—is part of the appeal and, rice being gluten-free, the outcome is seldom heavy. “I feel better after a plate of risotto than I do after pasta,” Rogers said.

3. Risotto will usually be listed on menus among the *primi piatti*; that is, as a first course. You should, in principle, be served antipasti and then risotto, followed by a main course, probably of meat or fish. (In the 1996 movie “Big Night,” the clueless customer who orders risotto with spaghetti on the side—starch plus starch—reduces the chef to rage.) Such a procedure can be tough going, it must be said, on the schedules, wallets, and intestines of people who, for whatever reason, can’t hack a two-hour lunch. Recently, in Verona, I revelled in a risotto with anchovies, capers, lemon, and toasted pine nuts, only to cause grave disappointment in my waiter by not moving on to the specialty of the house, *pastissada de caval con polenta morbida*. Or, in plain English, horse.

4. Risotto is not for the swift. The patiently phased addition of the stock, lasting seventeen minutes or so, cannot be rushed. In a restaurant, therefore, raise a quizzical eyebrow at any risotto that reaches the table in less than twenty-five minutes. That means it has been sitting around, awaiting liftoff, and surreptitiously reheated.

5. Make it at home if you can, in line with the rhythms of a working kitchen. This will insure a steady supply of *brodo*, the stock without which your risotto will have no meaning. Having roasted a chicken on Sunday, say, I tend to spend Monday in vulture mode—circling the remains, descending to pick at the cold carcass for scraps of meat, and seeing off other scavengers with a cruel eye. On Tuesday, I cover the bones with water, add the requisite vegetables, bring everything to a boil, simmer, and

skim. Enter the rice. A substantial meal is thereby generated from almost nothing, with no waste. Risotto, among its many other virtues, is cheap.

If you can't be bothered to cook risotto, do not despair. You can read all about it. Now and then, culinary writing threatens to become a branch of moral philosophy, and a severe one at that; recipes showing what you should do are overshadowed by grim-visaged warnings about what you should *not*. This is true of baking, and even more so of risotto. The queen of interdiction, as of much else, is Elizabeth David, whose "Italian Food," first published in 1954, is a banquet of bans and commands, steering us toward the correct strains of rice, "for which there is no, repeat no, substitute." An imperious, not to say Napoleonic, hand is waved at the map of Europe:

In a good and conscientious restaurant, say in Milan or Venice or Turin, you must wait for your *risotto* just as in a French restaurant you would expect to wait for your soufflé. (Don't, by the way, look for good *risotti* in Florence and Tuscany. Tuscan cooks, at any rate in my experience, don't know how to make a correct *risotto* any more than do French or English ones.)

On the subject of *risi e bisi*, a comforting Venetian hodgepodge of rice and peas, David, in a blizzard of negatives, writes, "It should not be stirred too much or the peas will break. It is to be eaten, however, with a fork, not a spoon, so it must not be too soupy." The same dish compels another writer, Marcella Hazan, to take an ethical stand. With a wag of the finger, she alerts us to the consequences of picking the wrong pea: "You may use frozen peas, if you must, and this recipe shows you how, but until you have made it with choice fresh peas your *risi e bisi* will be a tolerable but slightly blurred copy of the original."

It is Hazan whose books on Italian cookery are the ones to which I have clung for decades, and whose recipe for risotto is a matchless fusion of the preacherly and the poetic. "You must be steadfast and tireless in your stirring," she proclaims, before descending from the pulpit and adding a note of caution: "Do not 'drown' the rice." What matters at the end, we learn, is to bring the risotto "to its final tender but firm-to-the-bite stage so that it is creamy but not saturated." Thus, with rapped knuckles and a watering mouth, we set about following orders.

The word for the fifth-act climax of risotto—the scene in which the butter (preferably cold, from the fridge) and the Parmesan are brought onstage and obliged to mingle with the other characters—is *mantecatura*. Though mellifluous to the ear, it’s not exclusive; you can apply it to pasta as well. The phrase that is used for risotto, and risotto alone, is *all’onda*, or like a wave. It describes the motion of the rice in the pan as it laps at the brink of readiness. Is there a more beautiful encounter between language and food? All too often, the words that emerge from our lips are no match for the deliciousness that goes in. You may be partial to German garlic sausage, but requesting *Knackwurst mit Knoblauch* somehow murders the appetite before the first munch. Risotto cooks, on the other hand, wielding their spoons like conductors’ batons, are free to make music at the stove, taking their cue from “The Winter’s Tale”:

When you do dance, I wish you
A wave o’ th’ sea, that you might ever do
Nothing but that; move still, still so,
And own no other function.

And that’s the point. A good risotto *has* no other function. If you want to be mean, you could argue that it’s nothing more than grownup baby food. But what’s wrong with that? As simple as the bowl of mush in “Goodnight Moon,” it nourishes, consoles, and makes lenient demands on the digestion. To the infant eye, it may resemble oatmeal, but its savor surpasses the bland and puritanical thud of porridge. The growing child is cheered, not merely filled, by a dose of risotto. A British company called Ella’s Kitchen makes a salmon risotto for apprentice chewers aged ten months and up. It comes in a handy sachet, from which the contents must be squeezed. The ingredients, organic to a fault, read like a proto-induction into the proudly wholesome appetites of the bourgeoisie. Hey, it’s never too soon to start your kids on dill! I tried a smear or two of Ella’s concoction; not to be indelicate, but it doesn’t look *that* different from what comes out the other end of a baby. The risotto is not too yucky, though, and I would have polished off the whole sachet if I’d remembered to wear a bib.

The elderly, likewise, are a target audience for risotto, as their powers of mastication decline. Long after they’ve given up shrimp tempura and

locked their jaws on one last bar of NutRageous, they and their vulnerable gums should still be able to cope with risotto al dente. That celebrated phrase refers to the state—not much longer than a moment—at which the dish is done. Until then, the rice is crunchy; afterward, it's gloop. But how, precisely, do you test for such consummation? The best answer I've received was a wordless one, proffered by a chef who lightly clicked his teeth together, twice.

So, to sum up: thanks to David, Hazan, and other cognoscenti, we know that risotto must never be chalky, gluey, sticky, runny, dry, or swamped. We are aware of what it should precede. (Horses for courses.) We understand what sort of rice to use, and how to ride the wave. But let's be honest. Next to the rivers of food that flood the modern appetite, risotto is a minor tributary. Specialist restaurants such as Risotteria, in Greenwich Village, and a suave London eatery named All’Onda have opened and closed, unmourned. “The Rice Book,” an encyclopedic global study by Sri Owen, devotes only nine of its three hundred and eighty-four pages to risotto. Who but a madman would become obsessed with the stuff?

Nobody is quite sure where risotto came from. There is a recipe for *riso giallo in padella*, or “yellow rice in a pan,” that dates from 1809 and features an enriching dash of bone marrow, but did that mark an innovation or codify a long-held custom? The raw materials, after all, had been around for ages. Rice has been planted in Italy since the fifteenth century, if not earlier, though whether it was imported by the Aragonese, the Moors, or the Saracens, or whether the Venetians brought it from Turkey, is a conundrum not easily settled. What we do have is a letter from 1475, in which the Duke of Milan undertakes to send a dozen sacks of rice to Niccolò de Roberti, an ambassador of the Duke of Ferrara, but of ladling stock he says nothing. To this bare fact may be added a pinch of myth, as recounted by the food writer Anna del Conte, who was born and raised in Milan:

In 1574, the daughter of the craftsman in charge of making the stained glass for the windows of the Duomo was getting married. One of the apprentices, who had a passion for adding saffron to the molten glass, hit on the idea of making the plain risotto for the wedding dinner turn gold like his windows. He gave some saffron to the host of the inn

where the dinner was to take place and asked him to mix it into the risotto. The result was a most beautiful golden risotto.

Any leftovers, one imagines, were carried by a woodcutter's daughter to her grandmother in the forest. I bet she wolfed it down. To this day, saffron is the defining mark of *risotto alla milanese*, and residents of the city will snort at the thought that a respectable version of the dish can be located anywhere else. Indeed, the further you dig into it, the more you realize that risotto, *per se*, does not exist—that there are only *risotti*, scores of them, native to their respective regions, and that you confuse them at your peril. Long ago, I had an earnest conversation with a maître d', in Milan, who revealed that he and his cousin, having grown up in different valleys, held vehemently opposed views on what type of onion, white or brown, should go in a risotto. He also said that no risotto could improve on his grandmother's, but that is par for the course. Everyone's grandmother's risotto is the best.



Cartoon by Rich Sparks

Only since 1861 has Italy been a unified nation, and the history of food, like that of painting, has a curious way of dividing the country, anew, into its constituent parts—the city-states from which it was bound together. One of the joys of Pavia, for instance, a brief hop south of Milan, is risotto with frogs. For this you need frog stock, which sounds like a grunge band or a running gag on "The Muppet Show," and if I have failed to cook it at home it's not because of the recipe, which is thrilling to contemplate ("Create a

chain by threading the frogs with undyed string”), but purely because of a lack of willing amphibians. No Italian gourmet, however, would dream of ordering frog risotto in Mantua, where *risotto alla pilota*, made with ground pork, leads the pack, let alone in Verona, where the throne is occupied by *risotto all’Amarone*.

Amarone, one of the beefiest of red wines, gives rise to the most potent of risottos; I was privileged, recently, to watch it in the making. One of the prime spots to do so is Bottega Vini, in central Verona. People have been tippling there for more than four hundred years, and the wine list has the heft—and the persuasive majesty—of a Gutenberg Bible. The kitchen, by contrast, is the size of a galley on a fishing smack. In order to observe the chefs at work without causing a pileup, I had to scrunch myself into a corner, stand very still, and pretend to be a stick of celery.

To judge by what I saw, this is how *risotto all’Amarone* is summoned into being: Butter, then rice, which toasts for a short while. No onions at all. Two and a half ladles’ worth of wine, which hisses like a serpent as it hits the pan. (The chef exclaimed, “*Sempre con un fuoco vivace*”—“Always with a lively fire.”) Lean in close enough, inhale, and you might, if your head is weak, begin to get vaporously drunk. As the alcohol boils off, add simmering water, followed by vegetable stock. Do not be startled by the simplicity of the thing. Scrape around the sides. Remove from the stove. A dab more butter, a strewing of Parmesan, and then, unexpectedly, *another* glug of Amarone, too late to be steamed away. It is there to throw a punch. The result is something to behold: glossy and purplish, darker and deeper than blood. Mark Rothko would have asked for seconds.

Go eastward and coastward and you will sail into *risi e bisi*. During the Venetian Republic, this used to be dished up to the doge on April 25th, St. Mark’s Day, to coincide with the first crop of peas: a typical marriage of homeliness and ceremonial grandeur. Another, more challenging forte of Venice is *risotto al nero di seppia*, which is made with the ink of cuttlefish. The cowardly cook will turn to squid as a replacement, but only cuttlefish deliver the essential alien squirm, and the relevant recipes are a treat. (“Pop the beak out of the head and slice it above and below the eyes. Save the tentacles and throats.”) What ensues is the black hole of Italian cuisine,

sucking in both gravity and light. At my initial tasting—in 1984, again, with my parents as horrified spectators—I made the mistake of wearing a white shirt. Anyone seeing me in the aftermath must have thought that I’d been under attack from a calligrapher with a grudge.

Notice that all these recipes—the Veronese, the Venetian, the Mantuan, and so forth—are thoroughly grounded in the what and the where. Cuttlefish, by and large, don’t bum around in Milan. And don’t forget the when; one of the chefs in Verona carefully separated a portion of *risotto all’Amarone* and made a quick spinoff, folding in a purée of pumpkin and explaining that he was able and willing to do so only because it was autumn. To ring that sweet change in a pumpkinless season would be against the grain of nature. In “The Wonders of Italy” (1939), the Milanese writer and poet Carlo Emilio Gadda, a playful soul, was yet more exact in his advice: “When the first September rains fall, fresh mushrooms will end up in the pans; and after St Martin’s Day, dry truffle flakes cut with a special instrument in the shape of a clover leaf may be spread on the risotto.”

To insist upon these unities of time and place is not to imply that the act of eating risotto outside Italy is scarcely worth the gamble. It’s not like going to a bullfight in Denmark. If hunger beckons in the East Village, go ahead and book a table at Supper, where a daily risotto is on offer. (Wednesday is “Mushrooms and Pancetta with Crispy Egg.” Sunday is “Beets and Burrata.” Hmm.) I have long been amused by the extent to which risotto—more, perhaps, than any other dish—is greeted by chefs as a blank canvas on which to daub their edible art. It thus provides an object lesson in human error, however harmless, and in the undying delusion, found not only in kitchens but also in classrooms, bedrooms, and the corridors of government, that the way to make things better is to mess around with them.

You want strawberry risotto? Coming right up. How about cheesy risotto-filled poblanos with pickled onions, or black-rice risotto with dashi, scallops, and furikake butter (“When the foam subsides, add the furikake”), both described by Caryl Levine and Ken Lee in their book, “Rice Is Life”? The fact that All’Onda closed its doors, in London, in June, means that I will never get to sample its artichoke risotto with coffee, black lime, and sweetbread. A tragic loss. On the other hand, in a fancy hotel, I *did* meet a

vegetarian risotto that still disturbs my sleep: a cow pie of brown rice crowned with a glade of greenery, menacing fungi, and a pungent mattress of Taleggio. It was the kind of thing you discover on the floor of a garden shed at the end of a long damp winter. Staring at it, aghast, I couldn't help recalling the prudent wit of Ruth Rogers. She confided to me that what she most dreads hearing from any chef are the words "I have an idea."

There is another way to make risotto. It is unrefined, frills-free, and a lot more fun than foaming. Also, you get to build up your triceps. The method has no official name. I call it *risotto brutale*.

To try your hand at this exciting sport, the place to go is not Italy at all. Chug north along Lake Maggiore and you will, at some imperceptible point, cross the border into Swiss waters. You are now in Ticino, a squat triangle that juts downward from the underbelly of Italian-speaking Switzerland. At the top of the lake lies Locarno, and there, as every summer dies, an annual risotto fever takes hold. This year, it lasted from August 19th to September 8th. At the Caccia al Risotto, or risotto hunt, multiple restaurants across the region unveiled creations of their own devising. Some of these I was glad to observe only in photographs, not least the *risotto alla barbabietola*, a wide, wet Frisbee of candy pink. Technically, the name refers to the cream of beetroot that is added halfway through, but the payoff looked like a high-camp homage to Barbie, far beyond my ken.

The climax of Locarno's celebration is a risotto-making contest, which unfolds over two days in the Piazza Grande. This is an ancient rite, dating back to the mists of 2014, and rivalries have already grown amiably intense. On Friday, August 23rd, in a vast tent, a number of restaurant chefs, backed by sweltering assistants, wrought their magic. What they conjured up was doled out to the public, who stood patiently in line, like genial descendants of the boys in "Oliver Twist," to be given a helping in a cardboard bowl. Having scarfed down my *risotto al pesto di limoni e Merlot bianco con bocconcini di pollo croccanti e pepe Vallemaggia*, which took longer to say than it did to eat, I could hardly suppress a plaintive cry: "Please, signor, I want some more."

Nearby, at a table in the square, sat a bunch of thoughtful folks with paper, pens, and forks. This was the jury, whose task was to assess the evening's

inventions, and to decide whether the risotto with blue cheese, hazelnut butter, port, and lime, for example, did or did not trump the *risotto alla faraona ubriaca*, which means “risotto with drunken guinea fowl.” Watching the jury members as they sniffed each bowl in turn, like skeptical cats, I was told that they would be judging not only whether each risotto was well cooked, and how it tasted, but whether it possessed “equilibrium.” Appearance, reportedly, was not an issue—a smart move, given some of the risottos on parade.

The following day, it happened again, with a twist. This time, the competitors were not professional chefs but *gruppi carnevale*—guildlike associations from the area, essaying their risotto-crafting skills. I stopped at a workbench staffed by members of an amateur culinary club, based in Locarno, that goes by the name Ratatouille. “Like the movie!” they exclaimed. I gave them my name. “Like Anton Ego!” they said, referring to the lean, implacable critic who looms over the Pixar film. Thanks for the reminder. Then, somehow, I was press-ganged. Having asked what was cooking, I was ushered into the tent. Without warning, an apron was tied around my waist, a large implement was placed in my hands, orders were issued, and the stirring commenced. “I’ll only stay five minutes,” I said. Two and a half hours later, I was still there.

When you make risotto en masse, you say goodbye to fiddle and fuss. None of your regular pans and spoons. Instead, the risotto is cooked in cylinders the size of oil drums, heated by portable gas burners, and stirred with long wooden paddles that resemble oars. The latter could easily be repurposed for rowing on Lake Maggiore. On duty, at the appointed vat, I hooked up with Hermann Moosbrugger, who had taught for forty years in a village school in St. Gallen, in German-speaking Switzerland, before retiring to Locarno, and who radiated charm and calm. Not once did he complain as we clashed oars. Gradually, we got the hang of the two-man stir, which will stand me in good stead if I ever graduate to mixing cement.

Overseeing the action was Thomas Schnarwiler, who merrily poured the ingredients into our cauldron. Sack after sack of Carnaroli rice. Chopped leeks by the bagful. (These gave me a surge of fellow-feeling, for I often use them, risking a visit from the risotto cops, in lieu of onion.) Quart upon

quart of wine, from a plastic bottle. Eye of newt and tongue of dog, presumably, when I wasn't looking. And the *brodo!* To hell with the subtle translucence of chicken stock, or a muted vegetable broth. Here was a murky and unfathomable pond. Wallowing in its depths, like a walrus, was a joint of beef as big as a Wellington boot. At the close of the day, it was fished out, carved, and shared among the workers.

To be fair, it was well earned. What we produced, given how freely I perspired in toiling over the pot, was basically *risotto al porre con sudore dello scrittore*, or risotto with leeks and writer's sweat, but it was surprisingly palatable, and nobody seemed to object. People lapped it up, and even the jury was taken in. We had achieved equilibrium. At the prize-giving, the Ratatouille team came second, and each of us, including the last-minute recruit, was handed another sack of rice. The reward for making risotto, in short, was the chance to make a fresh heap of risotto. The stirring never ends.

Is it wise to revisit the site of an epiphany, or hazardous? What signs of impact, if any, can be seen on the road *back* from Damascus? It's difficult to say what is more vexing: the idea that we may be prostrated, all over again, by what felled us in the first place or the fear that we won't. Thus it was, in September, that I found myself in Burano forty years on, pretty much to the day, from the earliest tremor of my risotto craze.

Come the end of the world, which, at the present rate, could be as soon as next week, I plan to hole up at the Trattoria da Romano. By repute, it is a welcoming haven. From the nineteen-thirties onward, clusters of artists were drawn there, paying bright and mischievous tribute to it in ink and paint. (In 2022, some of their works were exhibited at the Querini Stampalia Foundation, in Venice.) The pictures that hung on the walls of the restaurant in 1984 are still in place, and the menu is no less enduring in its roster of delights. The same risotto is on offer, thank heaven, though only now have I learned its name—*risotto di gó*. This does not mean you can buy it as takeout.

Gó is the Venetian dialect word for *ghiozzo*, which is an ugly, slimy, sardine-size, dung-colored fish that looks like Jean-Paul Sartre's less attractive cousin. Under the surface, it's mostly bone, so on no account

should you attempt to eat it. You'd be better off chomping on a hedgehog. Nothing more unlovely inhabits the Venetian lagoon, and there's the rub: the beast is notably loyal to that neighborhood. Given that a stock made from *gò*, strained through a sieve onto the rice, is what bestows the particular shade of flavor on the risotto, I have to conclude that the joke is on me. What I held to be a sacred mystery is nothing but geographic logic. The reason that I was never able to unearth my perfect risotto elsewhere, let alone to refashion it at my own stove, was that it *can't* be made elsewhere. The holy grail will stay put forever, right where it always was, because the *gò* won't go.

Backstage at the da Romano, the *mantecatura* was in session. The risotto, taken off the heat, received its buttery blessing. The chef gave it one last beating, with a kind of loving ferocity, and then, suddenly, lofted the contents upward, so that they flew into the air, to a height of almost two feet, before returning to the pan. Not a speck was spilled. This was done with a springy flick of the wrist; any passing squash player would have stopped to applaud the gesture. You *could* try it in your own kitchen, but I wouldn't recommend it. The geyser of hot rice would either hit the ceiling or land on the cat. The purpose of the upfling, I guess, was aeration, though the artistry alone made it worthwhile.

It was not until later, after returning from Burano, that I wondered about the source of my pilgrimage. Why risotto, and why there? A truth struck home. My mother's journey, in 1984, had not only been her first time in Venice; we also knew, though nobody said, that it would be her last. She was already sick, and she died eighteen months later. If we enjoyed a fine meal, in a melancholy city whose stones, like grains of rice, are forever softening into the liquid that surrounds them, what I ate was, in the end, of no consequence. Heavenly though it tasted, it was not the food of the gods. It was a small earthly pleasure, shared in a life-giving and unrepeatable moment that would grow, over the years, into a memento mori. It happened to be risotto. It could have been something else. ♦



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Brady Corbet's Outsider American Epic

“The Brutalist,” the director’s nearly four-hour study of immigration, identity, and marriage, flowed from his own struggle to create art without compromise. “You really have to dare to suck to transcend,” he said.

By [Alexandra Schwartz](#)

December 13, 2024



Corbet drew on his industry experience to make “The Brutalist” for just ten million dollars, working largely in Hungary. Photograph by Pat Martin for The New Yorker

The filmmaker Brady Corbet lives in New York City, but he is not often at home. He estimates that he has been away for all but five months of the past

two years; for reasons both artistic and financial, he prefers to work abroad. On an overcast Saturday afternoon in late September, though, Corbet found himself back in town. His latest movie, “The Brutalist,” had just screened at the New York Film Festival, and an after-party was under way at the Leopard at des Artistes, a restaurant near Lincoln Center. Hors d’œuvres circulated, golden arancini and small white dishes of fregola studded with zucchini and roasted tomatoes; wine was poured, red and white. Adrien Brody, who stars in the film as the eponymous László Tóth, a Jewish Hungarian architect who attempts to rebuild his life in the United States after the Holocaust, made his way through the crowd of well-wishers, holding the hand of his mother, the photographer Sylvia Plachy, who herself emigrated from Hungary following the Soviet repression of 1956.

Applause broke out as Corbet walked in, accompanied by his partner and collaborator, the filmmaker Mona Fastvold, and their ten-year-old daughter, Ada, festive in a pink party dress. The family had returned two weeks earlier from Budapest, where Fastvold had spent the summer shooting her latest feature, only to discover that they had mistaken the dates of their sublet agreement and could not actually go home. After a sleepless period spent crashing with friends—“they have toddlers,” Corbet explained darkly to the group that had gathered around him—they had finally moved back into their apartment the previous evening. Corbet wore a black sweatshirt and Prada loafers; his round face was framed by shoulder-length ringlets. “I’ve just been scrubbing toilets,” he said.

Corbet, who is thirty-six, began his career as a child actor. Early on, he realized that the work he wanted to pursue was with independent directors with passionately strong points of view. By his mid-twenties, he had appeared in films by Gregg Araki, Michael Haneke, Olivier Assayas, Mia Hansen-Løve, and Lars von Trier, but he gave up acting a decade ago to commit to a life behind the camera. Corbet’s directorial début, “The Childhood of a Leader,” premiered in 2015; in haunting, enigmatic episodes, it depicts the troubled family life of a temperamental little boy who will grow up to be a fascist strongman. His second film, “Vox Lux,” which came out in 2018, stars Natalie Portman as a self-destructive pop diva—the head of a different kind of cult of personality. These works, which, like “The Brutalist,” Corbet co-wrote with Fastvold, earned him a

reputation as a budding American auteur, precise and uncompromising in his artistic vision, fiercely ambitious about the kinds of stories he wants to tell and the way in which he wants to tell them.

What they have not tended to earn is money. “Any of the movies I’ve made, people are just really concerned about them not fitting in the box financially,” Corbet told me recently. “*The Childhood of a Leader*” cost three million dollars to make and grossed less than two hundred and fifty thousand; “*Vox Lux*,” which cost eleven million dollars to produce, brought in one and a half.

Corbet’s response was to go bigger. “*The Brutalist*,” which deals with themes such as artistic drive, Jewish identity, postwar trauma, addiction, sexual abuse, and the promise and perils of the American Dream, is an epic of more than three and a half hours, divided by a fifteen-minute intermission. To achieve a period-appropriate feel, the film was largely shot on VistaVision, a high-resolution 35-mm. format that was created at Paramount, in 1954, and used by directors like Hitchcock and Powell and Pressburger before becoming obsolete. The last American movie released in VistaVision was “*One-Eyed Jacks*,” from 1961, Marlon Brando’s first—and, as it happened, final—foray into directing. “You work yourself to death,” Brando said, of being a director, and “*The Brutalist*” gives a similar impression of the architect’s vocation. Tóth, played by Brody with transfixing, perfervid intensity, is a visionary perfectionist who would sooner shovel coal, as he does in one early scene, than make aesthetic concessions on a project to which he has attached his name. To unwind, he dabbles in heroin.

“Cinema is frequently associated with glamour, but the reality is that it’s labor,” Corbet told me. In the case of “*The Brutalist*,” his work seemed to be paying off. Initial reactions had been ecstatic. At Venice, where the film premiered, in early September, viewers had applauded for somewhere between twelve minutes (according to *Variety*) and thirteen minutes and five seconds (according to *Deadline*), longer than for any other festival entry but Pedro Almodóvar’s, and Corbet won the Silver Lion for Best Director. The film, which will be released in late December, was already being discussed as a Best Picture contender, and Brody as a Best Actor

front-runner. (This week, it was nominated for both awards, plus five more, by the Golden Globes.)

Corbet found the swell of advance enthusiasm gratifying, if bewildering. “Historically, if something is really radical, people initially don’t like it,” he said. “What’s very unusual about ‘The Brutalist’ is that people are connecting with it much faster than I expected them to. I’m very touched, but I’m also completely confused.” Before the start of the New York Film Festival screening, Corbet took the stage to greet the audience and thank his collaborators, among them the production company A24, which had bought “The Brutalist” at Venice for distribution. “As recently as just, you know, a few weeks ago, I had many people telling me that the film was undistributable,” he said. “They didn’t ask me to change a single frame.”

Corbet makes no secret of the fact that, in telling a story about architecture, he is also telling one about his own relationship to filmmaking. Much of “The Brutalist” is devoted to the construction of Tóth’s first American building, a community center in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, which comes to be known as the Institute: a hulking rectangular structure built from concrete, containing a chapel, a library, and a swimming pool, and punctuated by two towers. But making buildings is a costly enterprise, as well as a collective one, and Tóth is repeatedly called on to submit to the kinds of compromises that he feels undermine the integrity of his work. “Everything that is ugly, cruel, stupid—but, most importantly, ugly—is your fault,” he rages at a stolid rival brought in to keep costs in check. When he learns that the height of his towers must be lowered from fifty to forty metres for budgetary reasons, he declares that he will forgo his own fee to pay for the necessary materials.

For Corbet, too, creative control is of the utmost importance. Even though most of “The Brutalist” takes place in Pennsylvania, he shot the film in Hungary. “It was very important for me to get outside of the U.S. system,” he said. “It’s not a director’s medium; it’s an executive’s medium.” He went on, “The worst kind of film is an exquisite corpse, where you’ve got, like, the face of an elderly man and the body of a mermaid.” Corbet is known as a sensitive and enthusiastic collaborator, but he believes that the director’s ultimate responsibility is to the finished work of art. “I think it requires a

truly obsessive level of devotion that is borderline unhealthy,” he said. “It’s like an affliction.”

Corbet was born in Tempe, Arizona, in 1988, the only child of a single mother who worked in the mortgage industry. His cinephilia started young. As a little kid, he told me, “I was obsessed with Turner Classic Movies.” For an early graduation—kindergarten or first grade—his grandfather gave him a VHS of “Citizen Kane.” If he admired a movie, he would seek out everything the director had made.

When Corbet was seven, he and his mother moved to Glenwood Springs, Colorado, a city between Aspen and Vail, where his grandparents and uncle lived. “It’s more blue collar, or certainly it was then,” he said. In those pre-Internet days, Glenwood Springs was one of a handful of casting hubs around the country for child actors. (Hanna Hall, the girl who screams “Run, Forrest, run!” in “Forrest Gump,” grew up nearby.) Corbet’s grandfather saw an ad for a movie audition in the newspaper and suggested that he go. The film was Alfonso Cuarón’s “Great Expectations.” He was too young for that project, but ended up with a manager and an agent.

“I was not that outgoing as a kid,” Corbet told me. He booked some commercials and small speaking roles in television, but knew that he wanted to pursue acting only if he could work in film. His mother agreed. “She had worked in advertising, in Chicago, and had seen so many kids coming in to sell Skippy peanut butter,” Corbet said. “I think that part of the reason I never fell victim to that was her level of awareness, of just being, like, ‘Look, you can do it, but try and make sure that you do it your way.’ ”

By the time he was twelve, Corbet was booking more jobs, and he and his mother moved to Los Angeles. Soon afterward, he was cast in “Thirteen,” Catherine Hardwicke’s tale of tween girls gone wild, as Mason, the older brother of the rebellious middle schooler played by Evan Rachel Wood; Corbet himself turned thirteen during the shoot. The film, which became an indie juggernaut after its release, in 2003, was produced by the British studio Working Title, whose executives then approached Corbet about “Thunderbirds,” a sci-fi action-adventure film based on an English television show from the sixties. “It was right after ‘Spy Kids’ had been an enormous success,” Corbet explained. He was cast as Alan Tracy, the

fourteen-year-old protagonist, who, in the course of fighting a criminal mastermind, flies rocket-like contraptions, dangles above gnashing machinery, and says things like “Time to thunderize!” The movie was filmed in London over eight endless months; the script kept being rewritten, necessitating several reshoots. “It was my first experience of dealing with the Hollywood rigmarole of so many cooks in the kitchen,” Corbet told me. He had a similar experience a few years later, while working on a season of the show “24.” “I realized, if this is what being a performer means, I’m not willing to be this,” he said. “I felt totally out of my element.”

Back in Los Angeles, Corbet was sent a script for the director Gregg Araki’s “Mysterious Skin,” adapted from the novel by Scott Heim. The film, which came out in 2004, tells the story of two small-town teen-agers, Brian and Neil, who were molested as kids by their Little League coach. Neil, played by Joseph Gordon-Levitt, responds to the abuse by becoming a promiscuous hustler. Corbet played Brian, who suffers memory loss and comes to believe that he was abducted by aliens. The role required a heartbreakingly innocent; Brian, prone to fainting spells and terrified of sex without knowing why, lives in a kind of suspended childhood. Corbet found that working with Araki, an audacious independent director associated with the new queer-cinema movement, clarified his creative priorities. He told me, “It suddenly made me feel like I could breathe again.”



“I hate brushing my teeth after a formal dinner.”
Cartoon by Justin Sheen

At seventeen, Corbet moved to New York to shoot “Funny Games,” Michael Haneke’s English-language remake of his Austrian film of the same name. Corbet was cast as Peter, one of two psychopathic young men

who torture a family vacationing at a lake house. If he wanted to shed his G-rated “Thunderbirds” image, “Funny Games” obliterated it. Haneke renders Corbet’s all-American charm—the hint of baby fat still in his cheeks, his blue eyes, his cleft chin—as a sinister mask for nihilistic evil; dressed in white polo shirts and golf gloves, Peter and his co-conspirator, Paul, played by Michael Pitt, act like Freddy Krueger but look like models in a J. Crew catalogue. Corbet’s performance is all the more frightening for being so subdued. Pitt’s Paul is the charismatic one; Peter, who speaks in a voice barely louder than a whisper, has the disconcerting fragility of a starstruck follower.

After “Funny Games,” Corbet said, “I felt like I’d gotten everything out of performing that I needed to.” He had already started making his own music videos; “Protect You + Me,” a short that he shot with the “Funny Games” cinematographer, Darius Khondji, got an honorable mention at Sundance. But interesting work kept coming. At one point, Corbet took a draft of “The Childhood of a Leader” to several of Lars von Trier’s producers; instead of offering to back the film, they asked whether he would appear in von Trier’s next project, the operatic science-fiction drama “Melancholia.”

Corbet, who dropped out of high school around the time he came to New York, looks back on this period of his life as one of intensive education. Von Trier and Haneke, he told me, “couldn’t be more different. One is all about control, and the other one is focussed on chaos.” Haneke famously shot his American “Funny Games” as a frame-by-frame re-creation of his earlier work, and Corbet described his direction as a kind of obsessive choreography: “Take two steps forward, two ingressive breaths, and then put your left hand on the counter.” With “Melancholia,” on the other hand, “you barely had a sense of whether the cameras were even rolling.” But Corbet loved both extremes. What he didn’t respond to was the noncommittal middle ground.

Corbet shot “The Childhood of a Leader” when he was twenty-five, leaving acting behind for good. Many directors cast themselves in their first films. Corbet wasn’t tempted. “I was never that comfortable in front of the camera,” he told me. Directing, he went on, “really requires objectivity, and, unfortunately, I just don’t think anyone is beyond vanity.”

Corbet's experience of working with some of the world's great filmmakers undergirds his conviction that films live and die by the degree to which directors are able to execute their vision. It's rare to be "like, 'Oh, I can't wait to see the studio cut,'" he said, dryly. But, at the same time, "I don't believe in this feting-the-maestro kind of thing." Growing up on film sets dispelled any lingering auteur mystique: "I just saw how much they all struggled, and how difficult it was for them to bring their projects to life."

It was late in the morning, a few weeks after the party at the Leopard, and we were sitting together at Public Records, a cavernous hi-fi record bar and vegan café near Corbet's home in the Gowanus neighborhood of Brooklyn. Corbet, who has spent years lovingly assembling his own hi-fi system from secondhand equipment, admired the quality of the speakers as he tucked into a bowl of coconut-milk yogurt. He worries about his blood pressure. Corbet is serious in his thinking and frank in his talk; he gives the impression of someone who has never quite known how to relax, although lately he has turned to yoga (the hot kind). At home, he drinks only tea, a self-imposed precaution. On set, he guzzles coffee "like it's gasoline." During another conversation, at a different café, I watched Corbet down three Americanos in the space of an hour, his fingers trembling as he lifted the cup.

"It's been an intense, gruelling period," Corbet told me. He was speaking of the present—Fastvold's shoot in Budapest, which had taken place during the hottest summer on record; the promotional crunch around "The Brutalist," which had him travelling constantly—but also of the past decade. Corbet shoots his films quickly; "The Childhood of a Leader" was filmed in twenty-four days, "Vox Lux" in twenty-two, and "The Brutalist," which is more than an hour and a half longer than either, in only thirty-three. Financing these projects, by contrast, has been a drawn-out battle. "The Brutalist" took seven years to get off the ground. At a press conference in Venice, Corbet, recalling the fight to get the film made, had choked up. "We were always about to start," he told me. It required a large ensemble, which meant coördinating numerous schedules; to secure financing, it needed a star. Finally, after years of assembling a package for financiers, Corbet and his team began to shop it—in March, 2020, the first week of the pandemic shutdown. Momentum stalled. Corbet compared the

situation to a house sitting on the market: “It’s like you’re on Zillow. ‘What’s wrong with it? Is it fucking haunted?’ ”

Corbet is no stranger to precarity. When he was trying to make “The Childhood of a Leader,” he applied for dozens of grants and got none. With “Vox Lux,” a demanding investor defaulted a week before the film was supposed to begin shooting. Meanwhile, the apartment building where Corbet lived with his family in the West Village burned down; he and Fastvold had neglected to obtain renter’s insurance, and they lost everything. “You’re always faced with the possibility that this one might be your last,” Corbet said. “And I think that, if you’ve devoted your entire life to one medium, there’s nothing more devastating. Every dancer worries about getting kneecapped.”

“The Brutalist” dramatizes this agonizing situation in its central relationship, that of László Tóth and his American patron, the self-made Pennsylvania industrialist Harrison Lee Van Buren. Their first meeting is inauspicious. Tóth arrives in New York in 1947 and soon goes to live with his assimilated cousin, the owner of a furniture store in Philadelphia. One day, the men are commissioned by Van Buren’s son, Harry (Joe Alwyn), to remodel the study at his father’s grand countryside estate as a birthday surprise. In the space of a week, Tóth transforms the dark, stodgy room into a modernist light-filled marvel lined with cabinets that unfurl, like the sails of a ship, to reveal Van Buren’s book collection. At its center, he places a sinuous chaise in the style of Marcel Breuer or Mies van der Rohe, elegance incarnate.

Ambushed by the changes, Van Buren reacts with fury. But, when he discovers that Tóth trained at the Bauhaus and was celebrated in Budapest before the Nazis declared his work “anti-Germanic,” he changes his tune. He commissions Tóth to design the Institute, which he believes will put Doylestown on the cultural map. The ensuing collaboration between the men gives the film a dark, electric charge. Van Buren initially hails Tóth as a genius; his support offers the architect a chance to reclaim not merely the professional identity the war stripped from him but, in exercising his artistry, the essence of his humanity. At the same time, in holding the purse strings, Van Buren holds the power, and he doesn’t let Tóth forget it. Played

with devilish deviousness by Guy Pearce, he is all square-jawed charm and coiled, glinting menace—a fearsome antagonist in the guise of a benefactor.

One source of support for Tóth is his wife, Erzsébet (Felicity Jones). At the film's start, they have been separated by war; stuck in Europe with the couple's niece, Erzsébet sends her husband loving letters. After she makes it to the United States, their marriage suffers from scars both visible and concealed. Malnutrition has confined Erzsébet to a wheelchair, and the couple struggle to bridge the emotional gulf that has opened between them. Before the war, Erzsébet worked as a journalist; as she tries to restart her own career, she resents the isolation, and dependency, that Van Buren's commission imposes on them. But she stands by her husband's vision. When he tells her of his decision to sacrifice his fee—their livelihood—for the sake of his towers, she doesn't bat an eye.

Corbet and Fastvold were a creative team before they were a couple. When they met, Fastvold, who grew up in Norway, was married to the musician Sondre Lerche; she invited Corbet to work with her on the screenplay for her first feature, “The Sleepwalker” (2014). Corbet characterizes their transition from friendship to romance in less than romantic terms—“Basically, one day we realized, ‘We already have a life together’”—but their coupledom has flourished alongside their collaboration. Jesse Ozeri, an executive producer on “The Brutalist,” described the pair’s ethos to me as “Let’s never take a day off, because our lives are about our art.”

“It’s been something very powerful and binding,” Corbet told me. Fastvold directs second unit on Corbet’s films, and vice versa; they research and write their films together, a process that Fastvold called “symbiotic.” He likes to write at night. She prefers early morning. “I’ll just open up the computer and I’ll see where he left off and I’ll continue on, and he’ll do the same,” she told me. In the middle of the day, they sit side by side and compose different pieces of the story at the same time.

“I had a lot of specific ideas about Erzsébet,” Fastvold said. Both she and Corbet have architects in the family; her grandfather designed housing in Norway following the Second World War. Her grandmother, on the other hand, “was a starved intellectual” who was only able to get an education after having children. When it came to depicting Erzsébet, she went on, “I

wanted to show her character as something different than what we've seen portrayed in so many of these kind of stories about a brilliant man and his frustrated housewife at home waiting with the cold supper, angry that he's prioritizing only his work. I wanted to mirror, more, a relationship between two equals."

From her mother, a novelist, Fastvold has inherited what Corbet calls "an effortless knack for story and structure," which functions as a useful counterbalance to some of his more experimental impulses. Before they met, Corbet, stung by a rejection from a Cannes incubator program, had set aside his screenplay for "The Childhood of a Leader"; Fastvold persuaded him to pick it back up, and helped to make it work. "I think he was so focussed on every scene being perfect immediately that he got in his own way," she said. "The rule that we follow now is that you write five pages every day. You can't criticize them until you're done. Then you go back and revise and revise." A few months before the film was scheduled to begin shooting, Fastvold, pregnant with Ada, went into labor prematurely while the couple were on a train from Cannes to Paris. Doctors put her on bed rest, so that is where she and Corbet prepped the film. Six months later, the family was on set. Corbet's teen-age cousin flew in from Colorado to babysit.

"The Childhood of a Leader" takes place in rural France during the final days of the First World War. The title character's father (Liam Cunningham) is an American diplomat involved in drafting the Treaty of Versailles, and much of the film unfolds in the big empty house where he has installed his family as he participates in the negotiations. The story is broken into three chapters signalled by title cards, each corresponding to a tantrum thrown by the protagonist, Prescott. He pelts churchgoers with rocks; he gropes the breast of his French tutor and refuses to leave his room. His beautiful, distant mother, played by the French-Argentinean actress Bérénice Bejo, treats these outbursts as insurrections to be suppressed. As his father pursues the doomed project of bringing peace to Europe, we watch Prescott sharpen his will against that of his uncomprehending parents, the better to impose it on the world.

A period film starring a child would be a heavy lift for any director, let alone a novice. “I realized that the only way to get the movie made was to do it without a safety net,” Corbet told me. Though he had hoped to shoot in France, he eventually decided on Hungary, where his money would go further, and where child-labor regulations were not as stringent. Prescott is played by the ten-year-old Tom Sweet, a first-time actor who was spotted by casting agents while kicking around a soccer ball with his friends in London. Legally, he could be on set for only six hours a day, which meant that Corbet had to maximize every minute of the shoot.

“He was incredibly assured for a first-time filmmaker,” the cinematographer Lol Crawley, who has shot each of Corbet’s features, told me. Corbet and Fastvold’s screenplays specify what the camera is doing at every moment in relation to the performers; to save time and money, Corbet shoots minimal coverage, which leaves him without extra angles or compositions to draw on in the editing room. One climactic scene involved a violent confrontation between Prescott and his father that takes place at the end of a single, four-minute-long shot. The camera begins by following Cunningham as he enters the house and finds Bejo in suspicious conference with a family friend, played by Robert Pattinson. It then travels with him up the stairs, where Prescott has barricaded himself in his bedroom, and lingers on Cunningham’s back until he breaks down the door. “I was, like, ‘Well, listen, we have a child. It’s a lot to try to achieve. What if we get a leading shot or something in there that gives you a cut point so you actually have a chance of stitching this together without relying on one take?’ ” Crawley recalled. “Brady very elegantly took me to one side and said, ‘I only ever want to cut to another shot if it gives more information to the audience.’ ” Crawley was impressed by Corbet’s light touch: “There’s no ‘I don’t want to do that.’ I went, fine, my job’s done. His job is certainly done. And off we went.”

“The Childhood of a Leader” shares its name, and some narrative details, with a novella by Jean-Paul Sartre that describes the coming of age of an antisemitic fascist. But, whereas Sartre narrates the incident that sets his character on the path to tyranny, Corbet leaves the transformation a mystery. The film ends with a coda, set some twenty years after the main action. Hemmed in by soldiers, a crowd has assembled in the courtyard of a

grand building festooned with evil-looking red banners to cheer the arrival of Prescott, now an adult. The score, composed by Scott Walker, swells as the image comes unfixed and begins to tumble and spin. To get the shot, Corbet put the camera in an aluminum crate and sent it surfing through the crowd, with crew members dressed as extras. The effect is nauseating. It is only an intimation of things to come, but it is enough.

While watching “The Brutalist,” I was struck by a similar shot at the very beginning. As the camera bumps obscurely around a dark, crowded space, we glimpse Tóth for the first time, and hear his anxious voice. Knowing that the movie concerned the Holocaust, I thought that we might be inside a cattle car, and my stomach tightened. In fact, we are in a ship; suddenly, the screen fills with light as Tóth emerges on deck and shouts for joy as the Statue of Liberty comes into view. The moment is at once rich with relief and freighted with ominousness: Lady Liberty is filmed upside down.

Corbet sees each of his films as a reaction to the one before. After the elliptical, claustrophobic “Childhood,” he told me, “I was so tired of early-twentieth-century drapery and textiles. All I wanted to do was exist in the world of pleather.”

“Vox Lux” opens in 1999. The first half of the movie introduces Celeste (Raffey Cassidy), a delicate American fourteen-year-old who survives a school shooting. When she sings at a memorial for her classmates, she makes the national news, and soon gets a record contract and an unscrupulous manager (Jude Law). The second half of the film picks up in 2017. Now in her thirties and played by Natalie Portman, Celeste has become a global sensation. She’s also a monster, petulant and egomaniacal, flagrantly abusive to the people closest to her. How did that pure, unaffected girl turn into this bedazzled, booze-chugging cliché? Corbet refuses to tell.

Reaction to “Vox Lux” was as sharply split as the film itself. In the *Times*, Manohla Dargis described it as “a deeply satisfying, narratively ambitious jolt of a movie” and wrote that Portman “gives the kind of aggressively big performance that teeters precariously, and at times excitingly, on the edge of vulgar indulgence.” In this magazine, Richard Brody criticized the movie’s “banal slightness of content” and Corbet’s “ponderous direction.” Corbet noticed a similar tension at early screenings: “It just completely divided the

room. People were arguing about it, and I thought that was fantastic. I felt, O.K., there's something really transgressive here."

"Vox Lux" came out the same year as Bradley Cooper's "A Star Is Born," but Corbet's presentation of pop stardom is far more jaded than Cooper's Cinderella story. Celeste isn't particularly talented; in fact, her sister is the better singer. Corbet was fascinated by the ways that an average person, trapped by sudden celebrity, might both buckle under pressure from the public and come to depend on it. He intended the two parts of the film to serve as a stylistic provocation: minimalism versus maximalism, good taste versus bad. "I felt that the only way to appreciate how disturbing that transformation, or transfiguration, truly is was to see the brutality of it," he said. The crudity was the point.

Corbet is frank about what he considers to be the "toothlessness" of most contemporary films. "I think you really have to dare to suck to transcend," he told me. "Everyone is so concerned with sanding down the edges to make everything more palatable and create something that doesn't ruffle any feathers." Both "Vox Lux" and "The Brutalist" serve, in part, as an indictment of the profit-hungry capitalist world's neutering impact on art, but Corbet can be just as critical of indie movies as he is of studio-backed ones. "Art-house cinema and big tentpole releases are equally algorithmic," he said. "I've seen '4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days' remade forty-five times. I know why; it's an extraordinary film." Still, he went on, "There's this kind of faux subtlety, and an allegiance to good taste, that I find really frustrating. It's the same recipe, regurgitated over and over."

"American indies have been conditioned to think small," Dennis Lim, the artistic director of the New York Film Festival, told me. With "The Brutalist," Corbet has gone full maximalist. The film, which takes place over a span of thirteen years and ends with a coda set two decades later still, promises, from its first moments, to be a capital-“E” Event. To the sounds of orchestral rumbling, a title card announces the “overture.” (Scott Walker, who scored Corbet's previous movies, died in 2019; the music for “The Brutalist” was composed by Daniel Blumberg.) A few moments later, as Tóth scrambles above deck, the score reaches such a visceral crescendo that

I was surprised to discover that, though the film was less than five minutes old, I had a lump in my throat.



"How come you never get me anything nice?"

Cartoon by Roland High

"The style of this movie is very unapologetic," Corbet told me. At press conferences and in interviews, he has tended to shut down questions about its length by asking whether anyone would criticize a book for being seven hundred pages long rather than one hundred. (Well, yes, a weary literary critic might reply.) But its run time is only one of the ways that "The Brutalist" announces its grand ambitions. To imbue the movie with a mid-century feel, Corbet told me, "there's a certain bluntness that's required, also in the style of performance." This is particularly apparent in Pearce's Harrison Lee Van Buren, who, with his tawny skin and bristly mustache, resembles nothing so much as a lion ready to pounce. Pearce gets the film's best laugh lines, making a meal of the phrase "intellectually stimulating" not once but twice. "He never evolves," Corbet said. "There's a lack of nuance which is very, very intentional"—not least in the character's name, stacked as it is with American Presidents and one notable traitor.

Corbet is adamant that his attempt to channel fifties cinematic style is intended neither as homage nor as pastiche, but as "a jumping-off point." And yet, he confessed, "we were slavish to how you would have to operate a camera at that time." VistaVision cameras are big machines, and so noisy that in their heyday they had to be "blimped": enclosed within custom-made cases to dampen their rattle, the lens just poking through. "It's a cumbersome piece of kit," Lol Crawley explained—not merely for the operators but for the actors, too, who had to get used to performing intimate scenes with the camera humming three feet away. Because the film is

loaded horizontally rather than vertically, the amount of information that can be recorded in a given frame is more than doubled. The magnificence of the technology is on full display in a bravura sequence in which Tóth and Van Buren travel to the marble quarries of Carrara, Italy, to select a piece of stone for the altarpiece that will sit in the Institute's chapel. Accompanied by foreboding drumbeats, the camera revels in the dazzling expanse of jagged white stone, the earth cracked open for centuries in pursuit of capital, or beauty, or both.

Whatever the final consensus on “The Brutalist,” it will serve as an object lesson in the creativity required to turn less—in this case, a budget of ten million dollars—into more. “You have to think very economically, and almost in a minimal way,” Judy Becker, the film’s production designer, told me. Becker’s responsibilities on “The Brutalist” included designing the Institute, which, for all its looming presence onscreen, was filmed, in exterior shots, as a scale model. To imagine László’s aesthetic sensibility, she had consulted the work of Marcel Breuer, another Hungarian modernist immigrant of Jewish extraction, and, more darkly, immersed herself in the architecture of concentration camps, a built environment with which Tóth would have been intimately familiar. At a panel following the New York Film Festival screening, Becker got into a lively back-and-forth with Adrien Brody, each of them declaring, “*I am László Tóth!*”

Corbet looked on, laughing. “People are attracted to characters that are innocent,” he told me later, when I pressed him on what he thought explained the film’s appeal. But Tóth isn’t innocent, really. He is prickly, pigheaded, fallible, frequently exasperating. He is also the first Corbet character you want to root for.

On a Monday afternoon in early November, Corbet went to Three Lives & Company, a bookstore in the West Village, to pick out something to read on a plane. He was leaving the next day for a two-week trip, first taking his mother for some sightseeing in Lisbon, where “The Brutalist” was screening at a festival, and then going on alone to London and Los Angeles. Lately, he had been submerged in “The Decline of the West” (1922), the German reactionary Oswald Spengler’s abstruse two-volume opus predicting civilizational collapse. “It’s fantastic, but some of it is very, very

dry,” he said. “When I’m on an airplane, I just want to, you know, read a story.”

Corbet browsed the display tables, keeping an eye out for the new Anne Carson. “I just finished this,” he murmured, pointing to “Herscht 07769,” a recent novel by the Hungarian writer László Krasznahorkai, which is more than four hundred pages long and consists of a single sentence.

I observed that Corbet’s Hungarian connection remained strong.

“Well, in the ten years that I spent in Hungary, he’s definitely the most significant cultural figure there,” he replied. Krasznahorkai has frequently collaborated on screenplays with the director Béla Tarr, known for using long, lingering takes in his films—“a shot for a sentence,” Corbet said.

Books are important to Corbet’s filmmaking, too. His movies are full of literary allusions and references; their chapter structure and special typefaces—even the dense, angular layout of their production credits—give them a consciously novelistic feel. (The first section of “The Brutalist” is called “The Enigma of Arrival,” after V. S. Naipaul’s account of emigrating from Trinidad to the United Kingdom.) When he was growing up in Colorado, Corbet worked at a bookstore and was paid in merchandise, amassing a hefty collection of first editions. In his teens, he discovered W. G. Sebald, who became his favorite writer. Sebald opened for him the possibilities of “virtual history”—a fiction that feels like a genuine account of the past. If Corbet’s movies can be said to belong to a single category, that is it. Even “Vox Lux,” his most contemporary effort, pointedly ends the year before its release, the better to frame it as a historical consideration of the start of the American twenty-first century.

“I think my bigger life project is exactly that: to really augment our traditional or classical relationship with history and storytelling,” Corbet said. The past feels alive to him. Watching the opening ceremony for the Paris Olympics, Corbet had been horrified to see the macabre display of severed Marie Antoinette heads by the Seine. “I was, like, this woman suffered!”

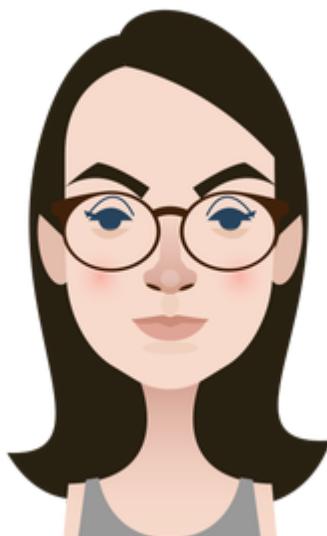
What he hopes to do is bring history to life for other people. When Corbet decided to make a film about an architect, he consulted the architecture historian Jean-Louis Cohen. Could he think of a single European architect who got trapped by the war and was later able to build a new life in America? Cohen couldn't. That answer chilled Corbet. "The Brutalist" hardly shows anything from before the war; nor do we see the Holocaust's horrors. The clearest glimpse that we get of the past is in the form of a still photograph, projected onscreen during the film's intermission, of László and Erzsébet's wedding. The couple is surrounded by smiling family: ghosts. Think of all the people who trained at the Bauhaus and never made it out of Europe—the work they never made, the buildings that never got built. "The Brutalist" is dedicated to them.

Survival alone hardly guarantees success. Until its final moments, "The Brutalist" leaves viewers in suspense as to the fate of the Institute, and of Tóth. "The film is about immigration, full stop," Corbet told me, as we left the bookstore and set off for Union Square, where he had a clandestine appointment with some hi-fi guys. As progress on Tóth's building stalls, and he finds himself on the verge of being pushed to the social and professional periphery, he grows embittered toward the Van Buren family as well as the nation they so comfortably represent. "We tolerate you," Harry Van Buren tells him, in the tone of someone who does not.

The next day was November 5th, the election. Corbet had spent the better part of a decade thinking about the nineteen-fifties, the same era hailed as a beacon by the once and future President. It had not escaped his attention that, in December, 2020, with a month left in office, Trump had signed an executive order to promote "beautiful" federal architecture: in other words, classical buildings that harked back to antiquity and the Renaissance. Among the structures identified as "unpopular" and "unappealing" were the Hubert H. Humphrey Department of Health and Human Services Building and the Robert C. Weaver Department of Housing and Urban Development Building, both designed by Breuer. For Corbet, the immigrant and artistic experiences are intimately linked. "They don't want us here," Tóth seethes to Erzsébet. "They" felt the same way about provocative buildings, paintings, sculptures, films. Some still do.

Corbet's mind was moving toward the future. "I think that my immediate response to the reception of this movie is, like, 'Well, now you have an opportunity to make something that really pisses everyone off,'" he said, laughing. He already had a draft of a new screenplay. "At the end of 'Vox Lux,'" Lol Crawley told me, "we literally wrapped in a parking lot at night, and he swung around with a copy of a book on brutalist architecture and said, 'This is the next one.'"

The new project, which is set in the nineteen-seventies and early eighties, will also deal with immigration, this time of the Chinese to California. Its style will be looser; genre-wise, it will draw on horror and Westerns. On Halloween, Corbet and Fastvold had a group of friends over to watch "The Texas Chainsaw Massacre." Ada was included, until it became clear that a slasher flick about cannibals might not be the best choice for a ten-year-old. The film had been Corbet's choice; Fastvold had never seen it before. "She was, like, 'You're insane that you thought that this was O.K.,'" Corbet said. "But I also was, like, 'The filmmaking is so great!'" He had thought that Ada, having spent her life on movie sets, would be able to distinguish the fake from the real, but the level of craftsmanship was so excellent that it got to even the most jaded viewers among them. This had given him ideas. "It seems like a good time to really shake viewers," he said. "I think they can handle it." ♦



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

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Kate Beaton's “A Murder Mystery”

Take a closer look at the cover of the annual Cartoons & Puzzles Issue.

By [Françoise Mouly](#) Art by [Kate Beaton](#)

December 16, 2024



For the cover of the December 23, 2024, issue, Kate Beaton created an image that doubles as a simple game. (To play, see the word bank below. Print subscribers can peel off the removable label.) “I have always enjoyed poking around the trappings of genre in my cartoons,” Beaton said. “For a puzzle issue, who better to feature than a film-noir detective eyeballing some clues? And better watch out for that shady dame.”

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ALARM	DEDUCE	LOCK	PLOY	STUMP
ANSWER	ENIGMA	LOGIC	PUZZLE	UNRAVEL
BRAINTEASER	EYE	MASTERMIND	RED HERRING	WHAT
CASE	GAME	MOLE	RIDDLE	WHEN
CIPHER	GUESS	MURDER	RUN	WHERE
CLUE	HIDDEN	MYSTERY	SECRET	WHO
CODE	KEY	PERPLEX	SOLVE	WHY

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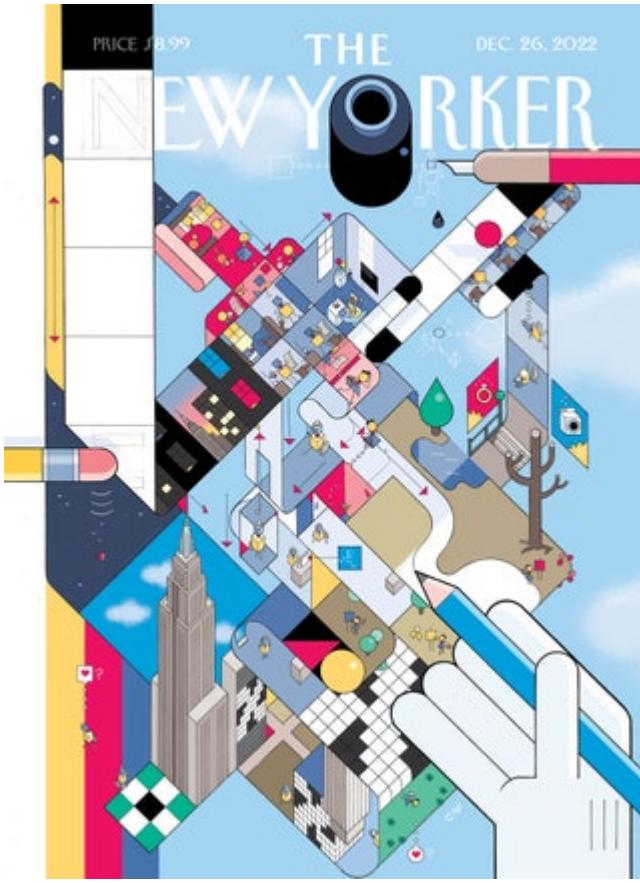
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[Françoise Mouly](#) has been the art editor at *The New Yorker* since 1993.

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Grocery Run

By [The New Yorker](#) Illustration by [Tamara Shopsin](#)

December 16, 2024

’Tis the season for cookie cutting, chestnut roasting, and eggnog guzzling. If you’re feeling a bit overserved, take a break with our annual Cartoons & Puzzles issue, full of zesty games to stimulate the mind and salty jokes to exercise the abdomen. Your first challenge involves that timeless holiday tradition: last-minute grocery shopping. At this particular supermarket, the shelves have been picked over, and only odds and ends—emphasis on the “odd”—remain. Can you spot the items listed below?

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Puzzles & Games Dept.

Yule Log



By [**Patrick Berry**](#)

December 16, 2024



[**Patrick Berry**](#) has been publishing puzzles since 1993 and lives in Athens, Georgia.

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[Puzzles & Games Dept.](#)

Complements of the Chef



By [Kate Chin Park](#)

December 16, 2024

While the chef is busy dealing with an oven that's on the fritz, it's up to you to put together the pairings for tonight's nine-course menu. Every clue below has a one-word answer; as a hint, the answers in each column are in alphabetical order. After solving each clue, match an answer on the left with one on the right to make a well-known phrase, name, or compound word containing a food, then draw a straight line between each pair. When you're done, the crossed-out letters on the table, read from top to bottom, will spell the menu's theme.

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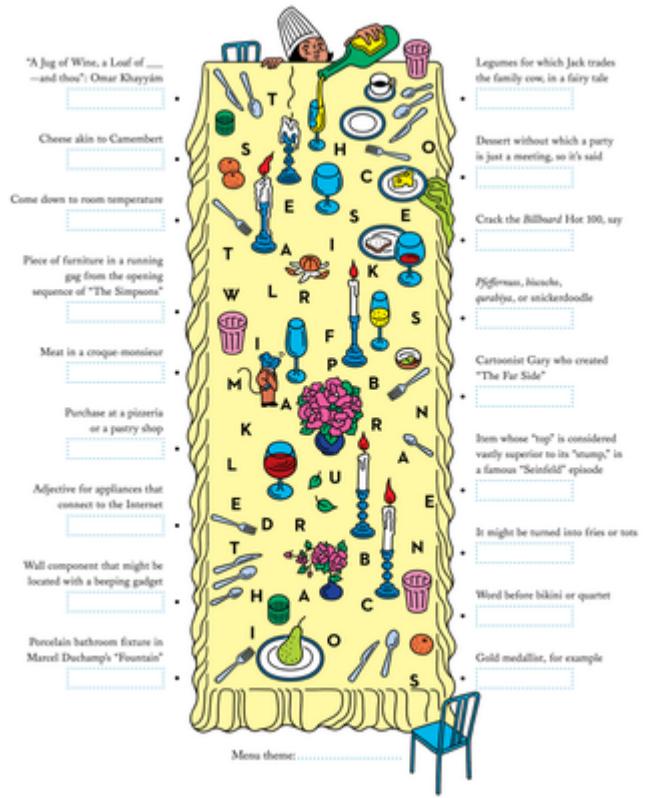


Illustration by Tomi Um



[Kate Chin Park](#) is an associate puzzles-and-games editor at *The New Yorker*.

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[Puzzles & Games Dept.](#)

The Supper Soirée

By [Foggy Brume](#)

December 16, 2024

Every year, six friends—Barbara, Cindy, Julie, Kara, Marina, and Nan—gather for a meal inspired by Judy Chicago’s art installation “The Dinner Party.” Each guest dresses as a different woman from the installation: Elizabeth I, Georgia O’Keeffe, Hrosvitha, Ishtar, Kali, and Sojourner Truth. Owing to dietary restrictions, each friend chooses a different dish to eat. Can you use the clues to determine where each guest sat, whom she dressed as, and what she ate? A solving grid is provided for tracking your inferences and ruling out impossible combinations. If you need help getting started, consult the hint below the grid.

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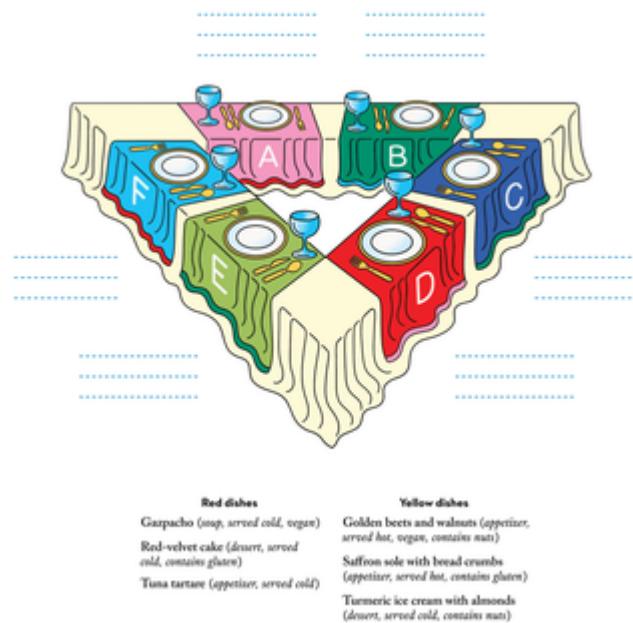


Illustration by Tomi Um

Note: The table has three sides (see illustration). People on the same corner (for example, A and F) or the same side (for example, A and B) are considered to be sitting next to each other. Guests need not be sitting next to each other to talk to each other.

1. On one side of the table, "Hlswitha" and the woman who ate the tuna tartare talked about how one of them ate only red foods and the other ate only desserts.

2. On the second side of the table, Julie and the woman who ate gazpacho talked about why neither of them could have the red-velvet cake. One of them was gluten-intolerant; the other are only foods starting with "G" (on the advice of her psychic).

3. On the third side of the table, Barbara and "Sojourner Truth" discussed the nut allergy that one of them had; the other said she would find that challenging, since she'd recently gone vegan.

4. Kara, in seat B, really enjoyed the saffron sole with bread crumbs—so much so that she raved about it to "Hlswitha."

5. Speaking through a mouthful of red-velvet cake, one of the women in the upper-left corner (either seat A or F) wondered what made it red, anyway.

6. The woman in seat C, whose dish was yellow, asked "Georgia O'Keeffe," who was sitting next to

her, for a sketch of the calla lilies in the kitchen.

7. "Elizabeth I" declared that she had "the stomach of a king" every time she took a bite of her hot dish. Both Marina and Nas were glad they were not sitting next to her.

8. Cindy and "Kali" complimented the presentation of each other's dishes, which were the same color.

9. After spending the entire day together at the Brooklyn Museum, Marina and "Ibtar" had run out of conversation topics, so they were relieved not to be sitting next to each other.

	Elizabeth I	Georgia O'Keeffe	Hlswitha	Nasir	Kali	Sojourner Truth	Gazpacho	Golden beets	Red-velvet cake	Saffron sole	Tuna tartare	Turneric ice cream	
Barbara													
Cindy													
Julie													
Kara													
Marina													
Nas													
A													
B													
C													
D													
E													
F													
Gazpacho													
Golden beets													
Red-velvet cake													
Saffron sole													
Tuna tartare													
Turneric ice cream													

Carte 4. Pour une dîner sieste que je fêtais à temps partagé j'invitai neuf amis et deux de mes amis de dessin au dîner. Chaque invité devait écrire à travers la grille les noms de ses plats et de ses boissons. Lorsque les personnes se trouvaient dans la même case, elles étaient assises à côté l'une de l'autre.

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Puzzles & Games Dept.

Stop Right There!

A crossword that takes things too far.

By [Adam Wagner](#)

December 16, 2024

[Adam Wagner](#) is a creative lead at Patreon, as well as a keeper of about twenty thousand honeybees.

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[**Puzzles & Games Dept.**](#)

Recipe Swap

By [Suerynn Lee](#) and [Liz Maynes-Aminzade](#)

December 16, 2024

You've inherited a box of recipe cards from your grandmother, who went to great lengths to protect her culinary secrets. To decipher her code, translate the picture (or pictures) on each card into two words, then anagram the letters to spell out one of the dishes depicted on the right.

[Printer-friendly version](#) | [Get answers](#)

[Suerynn Lee](#) is a cartoonist and illustrator who has been contributing cartoons to *The New Yorker* since 2018.



[Liz Maynes-Aminzade](#) is the puzzles-and-games editor at *The New Yorker*.

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Comics

- **First (and Maybe Last) Fast**

By Navied Mahdavian | A lapsed Muslim tries to revive a tradition.

- **A Traditional Family Roast**

By Will McPhail | A step-by-step guide to everyone's favorite meal.

- **Bored Game**

By Liana Finck | Traverse the morass of traffic, the sea of awkwardness, and the soup course to win the game.

- **Snacks of New England**

By Ben Passmore | Regional treats sweeten seasonal feuding.

- **On Goops and Slops**

By Roz Chast and Jason Adam Katzenstein | Two cartoonists dig into their food-texture issues.

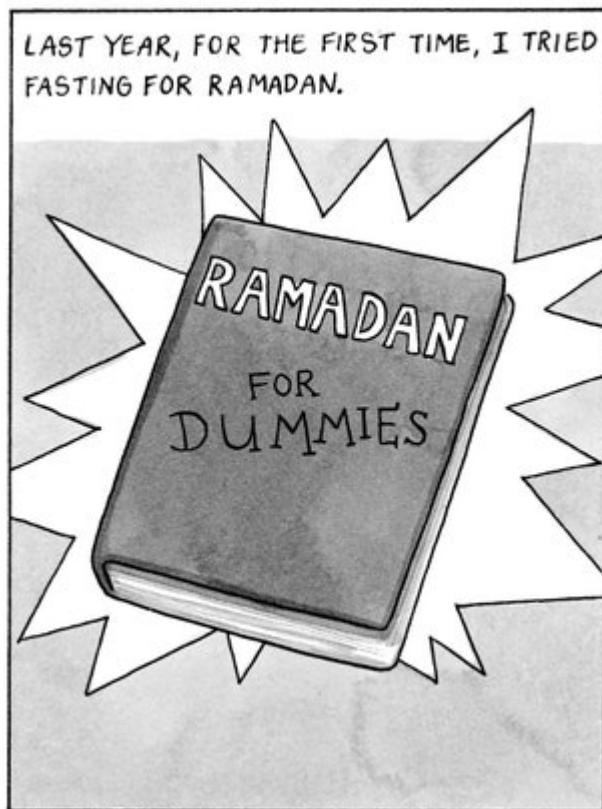
[Comic Strip](#)

First Fast

A lapsed Muslim tries to revive a tradition.

By [Navied Mahdavian](#)

December 16, 2024



WHEN I WAS VERY YOUNG, MY FAMILY WOULD FAST. I DON'T REMEMBER WHEN OR WHY, BUT THEY STOPPED DOING THIS AT SOME POINT, LIKE SO MANY OTHER TRADITIONS FROM BACK HOME IN IRAN.



BECAUSE OF THIS, AND THE FACT THAT THE MEMBERS OF MY FAMILY NOW LIVE THOUSANDS OF MILES APART, I FASTED ON MY OWN.



I HOPED LOOKING BACKWARD WOULD HELP ME LOOK FORWARD.



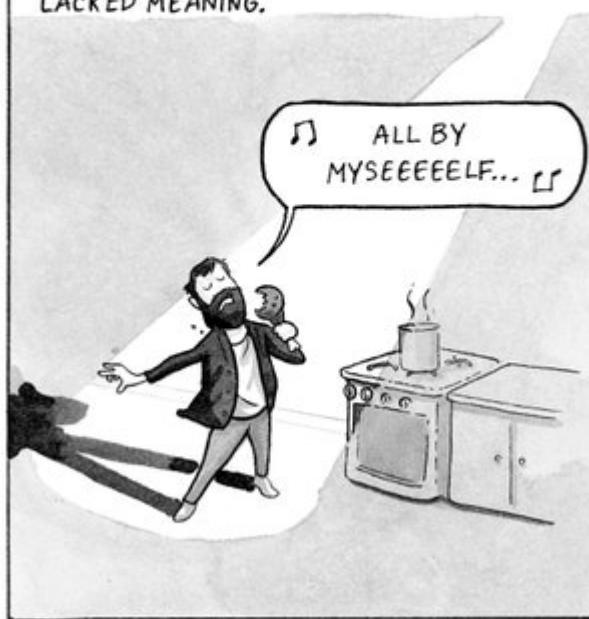
I QUICKLY REALIZED HOW MUCH OF MY AVERAGE DAY WAS SPENT SNACKING, ESPECIALLY WHEN I WAS WORKING FROM HOME.



AND FASTING GAVE ME TIME TO MYSELF IN THE PRE-DAWN MORNING, WHILE EVERYONE ELSE WAS ASLEEP. STOLEN HOURS TO THINK AND REFLECT.



TRADITIONALLY,IFTAR,THE MEAL AFTER DUSK, IS A BIG DEAL, WITH EVERYONE EATING TOGETHER AND CELEBRATING. OUTSIDE OF THIS CONTEXT, FASTING LACKED MEANING.



MUSLIMS TURN TOWARD MECCA TO PRAY.
BUT I AM A LAPSED MUSLIM. I DID NOT
KNOW WHERE TO TURN.



WHEN TRADITIONS STOP HAVING MEANING,
THEY ARE NO LONGER TRADITIONS.

SO I STOPPED AFTER SIX DAYS.



Navied Mahdavian is a cartoonist and a writer. His graphic memoir, “This Country: Searching for Home in (Very) Rural America,” was published in 2023.

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[Comic Strip](#)

A Family Roast

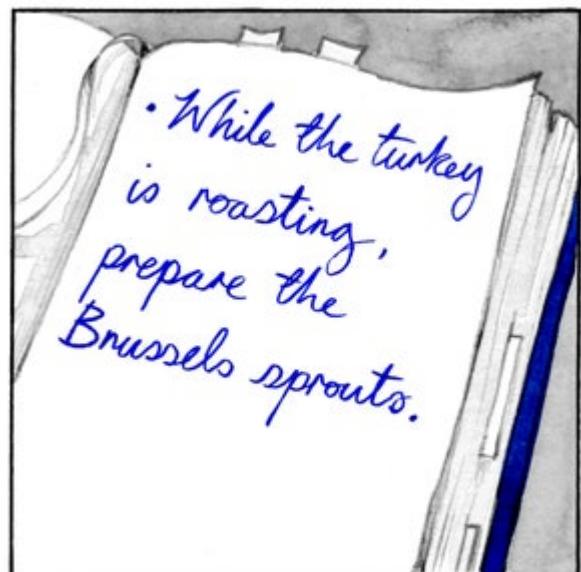
A step-by-step guide to everyone's favorite meal.

By [Will McPhail](#)

December 16, 2024

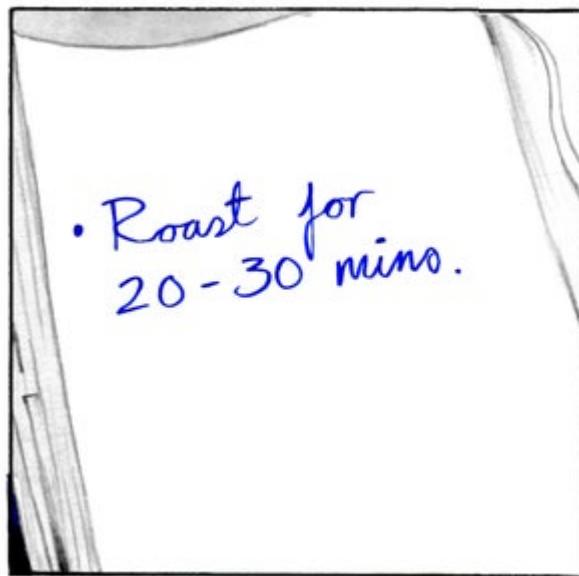


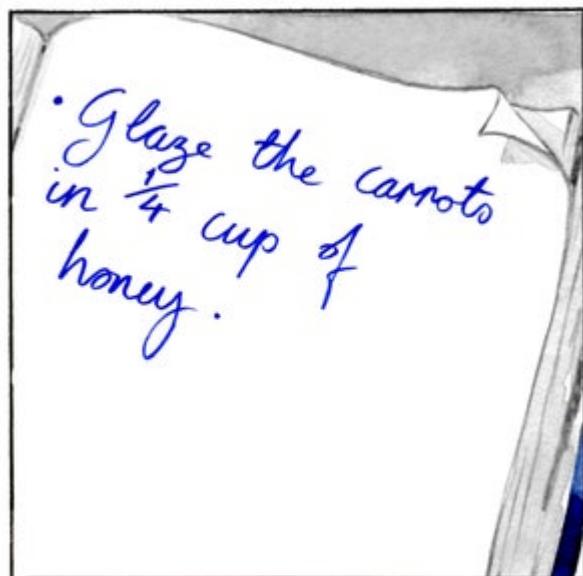






• Once the sprouts are
done simmering and
have softened slightly,
add them to the
bacon.

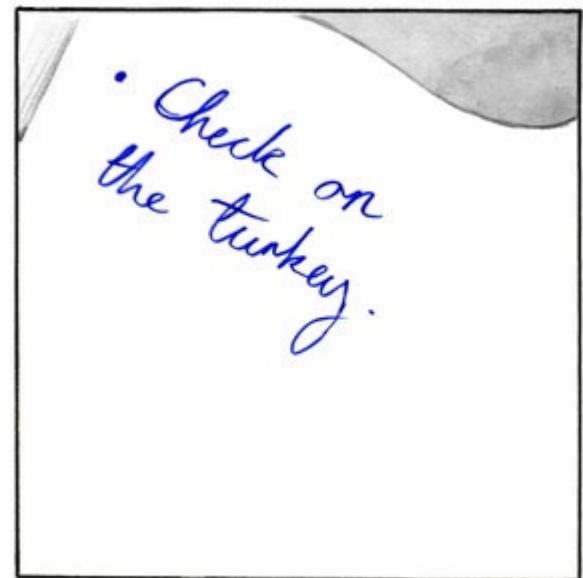






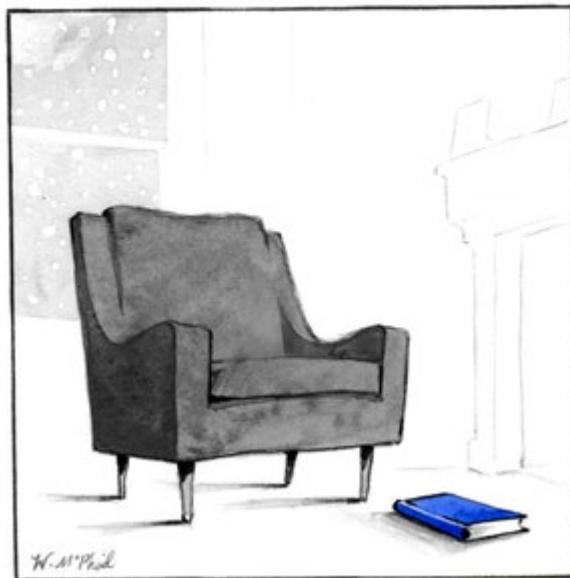
... and add a pinch
of salt to counteract
the sweetness.











[Will McPhail](#) has been contributing Cartoons, Sketchbooks, and humor pieces to *The New Yorker* since 2014.

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[Comic Strip](#)

Bored Game

Traverse the morass of traffic, the sea of awkwardness, and the soup course to win the game.

By [Liana Finck](#)

December 16, 2024

[Printer-friendly version](#)

[Liana Finck](#) is a cartoonist and an illustrator who has contributed to *The New Yorker* since 2015. She was a 2023 Guggenheim Fellow and is the author of “[How to Baby](#)” and “[You Broke It!](#)”

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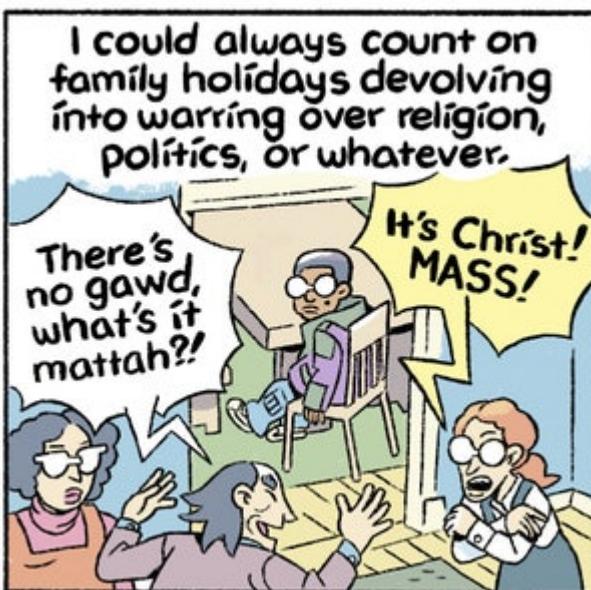
[Comic Strip](#)

Snacks of New England

Regional treats sweeten seasonal feuding.

By [Ben Passmore](#)

December 16, 2024



No matter how loud the family got, my nana would always try and act like things were normal.



We didn't know each other well, so Nana would break our awkward conversation with the most New England of snacks.







...he'd bring us a piece of honeycomb fresh from his beehives by the shed.



The snacks were weird but they made me forget all the fighting and remember how funny my grandmother was.





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Goops and Slops

Two cartoonists dig into their food-texture issues.

By [Roz Chast](#) and [Jason Adam Katzenstein](#)

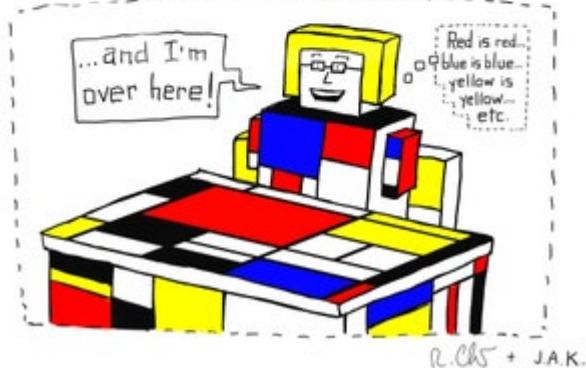
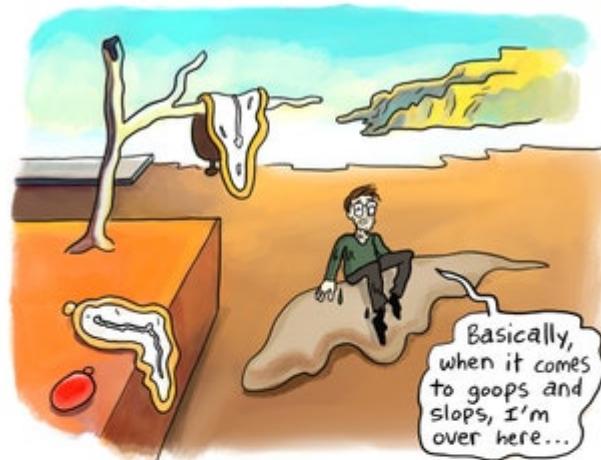
December 16, 2024





I was not allowed to order anything made with ground beef (e.g., a hamburger) at a restaurant on the rare occasions when we didn't eat at home, because "you never know what they put into it." Could be a neighborhood cat, or other diners' leftovers. When my mother made burgers at home, she made sure they were cooked to a dark brownish gray and as dry and hard as concrete. I often came across a small piece of gristle in the meat, which, for some reason, I thought was called a "Kosher."





Roz Chast has been a New Yorker cartoonist since 1978. Her books include the graphic narrative “[I Must Be Dreaming](#),” published in 2023.

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Showcase

- **Some Food-Themed Funnies**

Cartoons about fine, good, and excellent dining to whet your appetite.

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Shouts & Murmurs

- **The Most Dangerous Cruciverbalists**

By Ali Fitzgerald | Meet these diagrammatic daredevils and grid-obsessed cultists of yore.

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Ali Fitzgerald, an artist and a writer, first contributed to *The New Yorker* in 2016. She is the author of “[*Drawn to Berlin: Comic Workshops in Refugee Shelters and Other Stories from a New Europe.*](#)”

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Fiction

- **“Revision”**

By Daisy Hildyard | For the first time, Gabriel accepted that this privilege was in his possession. He had taken his place at the table.

Fiction

Revision

By [**Daisy Hildyard**](#)

December 15, 2024

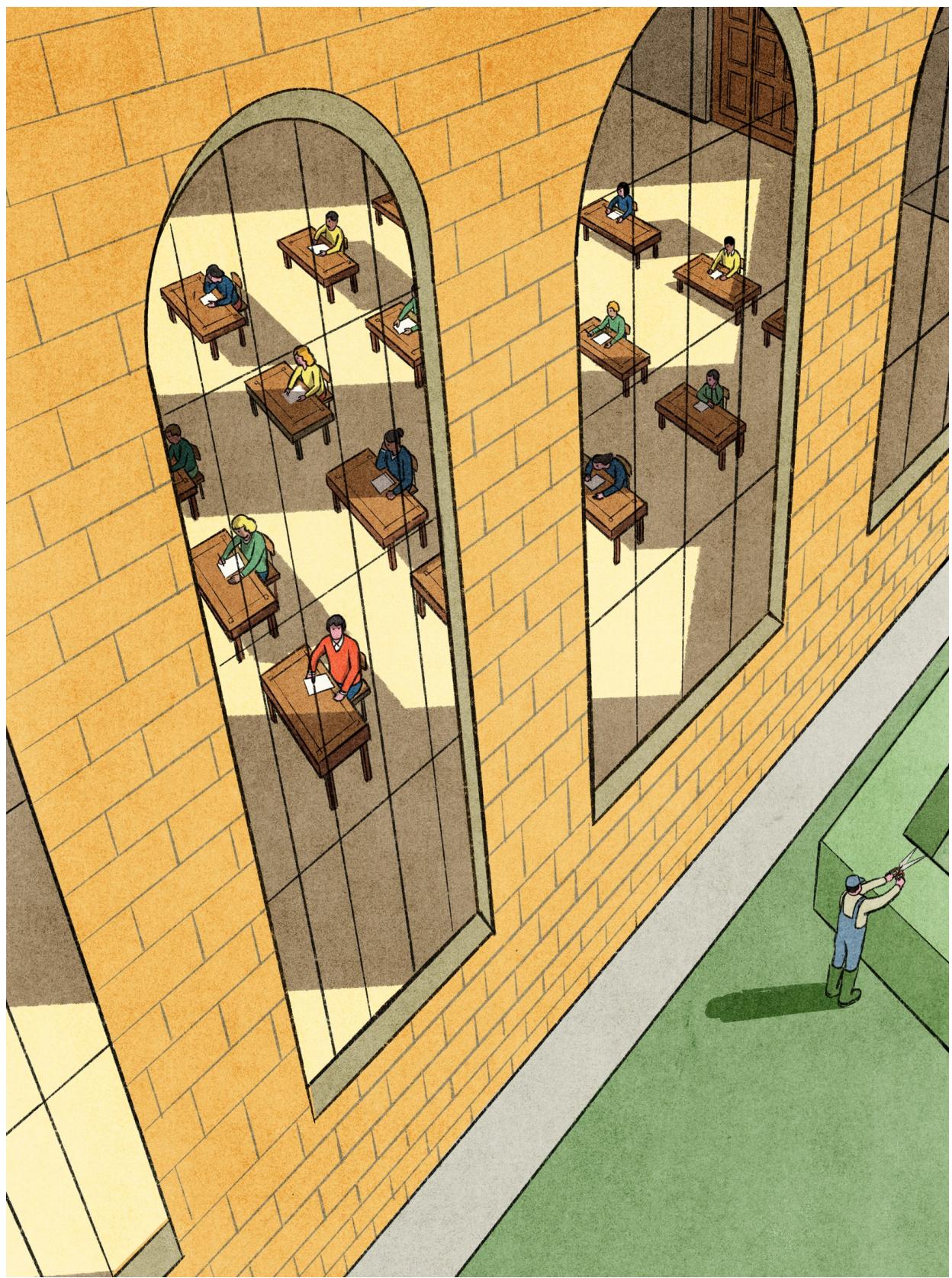


Illustration by Klaus Kremmerz

The awakening began for Gabriel in Oxford, in May, 2009. As final exams approached, everybody was talking about the girl who had walked up to the front desk of the social-sciences library and stabbed herself in the eyes with a pen. She survived, they said, but was permanently blind, and currently lying in the John Radcliffe infirmary, awaiting the arrival of her parents. There were rumors that students at Oriel College were being monitored through the bar codes on their library cards, but the story was spun in different ways. Some saw it as a dystopian conspiracy, with data being harvested for a eugenicist research project run by the head of the college. Others told it as a tale of the élite: the students who were found to be falling short would be quietly expelled so that the college could uphold its excellence in internal rankings.

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

If these were extreme responses to the onset of the examination period, it was normal to do the things that Gabriel was doing: turning off his phone so that his family could not reach him; experimenting with cognitive enhancers acquired from the teen-age supplier who worked in the covered market; hiding in the college library at closing time so that he would be locked in to study overnight. On Sunday evening, two weeks before his first exam, Gabriel had not spoken to another human being for three full days. He was alone in his room, revising, when there was a knock at the door.

Petra stood on the landing outside. She had come straight from the engineering building, and was still in her coat and backpack. It was past ten. She lifted two bottles of wheat beer, one in each hand, and asked, somewhat formally, whether he had time for a conversation.

Gabriel let her in and went back to his desk. He didn't close his laptop but returned to the paragraph he had been writing—half working, half listening—while Petra opened the beers and handed him one, then sat on the edge of his bed and kicked off her shoes.

“Today, I spoke with my mother on the phone,” she said. “She told me how I can assume possession of the bars of gold in the bank vault if anything happens to her and my father.”

Gabriel spun around on his chair. “Actual bars of gold?”

Petra shrugged like a middle schooler. “We’re reducing our investments in them now—Pàpi thinks the value has to fall.”

Gabriel slowly spun around again, and put his toe to the floor to stop when he was facing her. Petra was young— younger than Gabriel, although he was still an undergraduate and she nearly had her doctorate. She’d come to Oxford from Zurich at sixteen. Intellectually gifted. An only child. They were the two students who lived on this stairwell in the college’s central courtyard—neighbors, not friends. She was making herself at home, though, cross-legged on his bed, fingering a small stuffed Totoro toy, once white, now grubby and balding in patches, which she kept on a key ring attached to her belt loop.

“Last weekend,” she said calmly, “a trespasser climbed over the walls and into the grounds at home. It was fortunate that the guards discovered him. He had a bread knife and a bicycle chain in his rucksack.”

Podcast: The Writer’s Voice

[Listen to Daisy Hildyard read “Revision.”](#)

Gabriel made a low noise. He meant it to be sympathetic, but it sounded weirdly impressed. He understood now why Petra had knocked on his door. Her father, a banker, had been involved in an aggressive corporate takeover that had made him a public hate figure in Switzerland. There were death threats and silent phone calls; a panic room had been installed beneath the stables at the family mansion. Petra came to talk to Gabriel late in the evening, when she was possessed by fears for her parents. She never said this in so many words.

She looked around the room, her eyes strained into a slight squint. It was an old space. Sloping ceilings held up by a huge, dark beam. A single bed. A desk and plastic office chair. Gabriel, tall and dirty-haired, a silver hoop in his ear.

“You’re lucky,” Petra said.

Gabriel thought of his own mother, alone in her small flat. He took a swallow of beer. “What were you doing in the lab today?”

“I tested my module, of course.” Her tone suggested that it was ignorant of Gabriel not to know. “It’s going well, but we have hundreds of tests still to run.”

“Sorry,” Gabriel said. “Can you remind me what the module does?”

Petra’s squint intensified to a scowl. “It’s the size of a teakettle, and can be retrofitted to the engines of older cargo ships. Put simply, if it works as expected, then it will make an incremental difference to shipping-industry fuel use.”

“And that has major value, right?”

“Right—but only when we complete the tests, and then only if we can acquire a robust patent.”

“Um. How does selling the patent work? Will the faculty make money from it? Will you?”

“Sure.” She shrugged again, as though she did not really care to know.
“Both.”

It occurred to Gabriel to ask Petra why her father did not quit his post at the bank and allow his daughter to support him. She would be rich in her own right soon. Gabriel knew that this was not how wealth worked for the wealthy, that it was not a quantity but a scale. Still, from his position, he could see how easily the family could slip out of this labyrinth, with its gold bars, panic rooms, and gothic terror. His eyes went to his laptop screen.

Petra followed his gaze. “How is your revision going?”



“Your depression could be seasonal affective disorder, or it could be that you know all the bad deeds that every man, woman, and child on earth has ever committed.”

Cartoon by Adam Sacks

“Fine,” he said. “Great.”

There was a long silence that didn’t seem to bother her. She drank deeply, then sighed comfortably, like a tired pet, and settled her back against the wall.

“Actually, it’s a disaster,” he said. “I know I’m close to doing well, but I have this one paper on medieval literature that I just don’t get. I can’t get a first if I don’t do well in that paper.”

Petra frowned. “So learn the material.”

“Hmm. Yeah. It’s, like, not only the texts I have to learn. There’s a whole history behind them that I don’t know the way the other students know it. It’s already too late for me to learn that. They knew it before they came here.”

Petra looked blankly at him. “Gabriel, history is just facts. You don’t have experiments or computations.”

He gave it up. “Yeah, O.K. Yeah, I guess.”

“You should talk to your tutor about this.”

Her international-school accent, Euro-American, had a parodic quality—it was sometimes hard to take her seriously. When Gabriel's actual friends joked about his off-the-map relationship with his oddball neighbor, he responded by smiling, shaking his head, and firmly saying no, they were not sleeping together. In fact, he did not find Petra attractive. Her cheeks were always damp—a slick moisturizer, or perhaps her acne was weeping. He didn't feel sorry for her, either—solitude and fearfulness did not qualify a person for pity in this place. Keeping her company was, rather, a kind of tolerance that he had discovered in himself. Now he was tired, and the essay he had been working on was basically done. He pushed his beer away and said plainly, “I have a tutorial in the morning. We should get some sleep.” Petra left, neither offended nor apologetic.

In the morning, Gabriel arrived punctually for his tutorial, tapped on his supervisor's door, and waited. It was quiet. The latticed window beside him was open, drawing a breeze down the stone spiral staircase, and Gabriel pushed the pane wide to lean out. He emerged, head and shoulders, into a clearing within the wisteria and roses that grew thickly over the front of the building. Below him, in the courtyard, a gardener wearing a straw hat and a long skirt was spraying and snipping at the climbers. The breeze gusted, each stalk lifted and swaying, and Gabriel was ambushed by a feeling of sufficiency. He decided that he would say something to his tutor after all. Then a male voice called him in.

Thornton was sitting at his desk in his small study, surrounded by bookshelves, with a book open before him. He looked up and greeted Gabriel, and then looked down at his book again.

Gabriel stood awkwardly between the door and the back of a sofa, facing Thornton, and his calm drained away. His tutor was completely absorbed, slight and otherworldly in his raincoat and hiking boots, as though he were about to set off for a mountain peak. Gabriel shifted from foot to foot. He cleared his throat.

“Dr. Thornton, I need you to help me. The Middle English examination will bring down my mark, and the grade is forever. My future is at stake.”

“Well,” Thornton said. He blew gently on the dried glue that had broken off of the cracked spine of his old book; it scattered across the desk. Then he closed the book and turned to look at Gabriel. His gaze shifted from Gabriel’s flushed face to the faded T-shirt, then the clenched fists. “So, Gabriel, the concern is that you’re doing better in the other papers than you are in here, with me?” He spoke lightly, merely trying to elucidate his student’s point.

Gabriel shrugged miserably and turned his face away. “I’ve studied Middle English for two years now, and I still don’t actually know what it is.”

Thornton raised his eyebrows.

Gabriel was conscious that he looked sullen. He fixed his eyes on the spines on the bookshelf. “I don’t have the grounding in English history that everybody else has. Most of them took A-Level History, I get that, but it’s not only that. It’s like they belong to English history, and it belongs to them. For this paper, with you, I just don’t know about the Middle Ages, and so I can’t write the essays.”

Gabriel halted, blushing deeply. He was still standing in the narrow space between the door and the sofa, his body stupidly tensed. Thornton was listening with a serious look on his face. Gabriel resolved to see this through.

“It’s as though everybody else here grew up in a place I’ve never visited,” Gabriel said. “The other students actually laugh when I get the kings and queens confused, even though there are so many queens of England called Elizabeth, not just the ones who were actually Queen Elizabeth, and there are eleven kings called Edward. Eleven. I have to compete here with people like Charlie, who literally went to school with the royals. We’d be on a different footing if we were all assessed on, like, the families of Matt or Khadija from my physics class at Harrop Fell.”

A certain relief passed through Gabriel at having unburdened himself, but it went away when he glanced at Thornton, the only person in the world who could help him now. The chances were remote. Thornton, in his chair, one matchstick leg crossed over another, could not have looked more like a classic Oxford case: thoroughly adapted to his environment and useless

elsewhere. Friendly but evasive, Thornton couldn't make eye contact, he did not have a driver's license, and it was not at all unusual to spend a tutorial engaged in a search for a possession of his—perhaps a coffee cup, perhaps a favored pen—that had peregrinated to the back of a bookshelf, or to a sunny flower bed beside a bench in the front quad. He was not much older than Gabriel—one of the many academics here who had arrived as an undergraduate and simply never left. It was reasonable to assume that Thornton would have been a failure had the institution not existed to render him miraculously élite.

Thornton was waiting now, apparently to establish that Gabriel's speech was over. When he was sure, he spoke. "Harrop Fell?"

"It's the name of my school."

Thornton nodded. "Well. I've never had a student put it quite so. But all your papers require context, Gabriel, even the modern ones. And everybody lives in history, of course."

He made a low-pitched, thoughtful noise, as though something mildly interesting had occurred to him, and caught Gabriel's gaze. There was a charge, a beat—something jumped between them that surprised them both. Gabriel looked down to the floor, and Thornton's gaze skated away. He gave a small, feminine sigh.

"Ah, well. Gabriel. There's a lot here. But I can help you only with this one thing: the class of your degree."

Thornton stood abruptly, and then seemed to lose his train of thought. He leaned over his desk with his back to Gabriel, sifting through books and papers; a miasma of dust and glue scatterings rose from the pages as he unsettled them.

"Do you have your Chaucer with you?" he asked.

He turned and blinked compulsively. There was a pause, and then he closed his eyes and spoke more rapidly, in a raised voice, as if he were trying to make himself heard over background noise. "There is a quote, Patterson on Chaucer's 'Troilus and Criseyde.' I think it goes something like this: 'The

poem's deepest message is about the failure of history, and of historical understanding, per se.' You can work on this as an essay question. If you write on that, you'll be able to examine these issues which are troubling you." Another brief, broken pause. The conversation snapped open.

"I am willing to give you extra tutorials during these next two weeks," Thornton said. He did not sound as if he was conferring a favor—more like he was making a plea. "You could do timed essays on the sofa . . . while I am at my desk at work?"

Gabriel nodded and agreed. He asked for the Patterson reference, and Thornton hunted for the book and then for the page, which took some time; the room's charged energy relaxed. At the end of the tutorial, as Gabriel was leaving, Thornton asked him to wait. "Close the door."

Gabriel did as he was told.

"Don't—whatever you do," Thornton said, "don't try to cheat."

"Oh," Gabriel responded, smiling and shaking his head. "No, I hadn't thought about that, no."

"It won't work."

Gabriel shook his head again and left.

After closing the door behind him, he stood still on the stairwell landing. It was a crazy idea that hadn't come across his mind at all. He looked down: his feet in scuffed Adidas on the flagstone, where centuries of students, ascending and descending, had become a force of erosion. Light and air filtered through the window, through the rose and wisteria leaves, and Gabriel's seamless sequence of thoughts culminated with the beautiful clarity of a solution, which was that he could cheat.

Gabriel had attended a normal school, wore sportswear, and had male friends from home who got into physical fights when they went out on a Saturday night. His peers at Oxford therefore believed him to be "street," a word that was spoken ironically but found useful as a marker of class and relative cachet. The undergraduate students here were more likely to have spent time

in Brooklyn, Roppongi, or Kreuzberg than to know what happened in the windowless corridors of an English provincial state school, and Gabriel did not awaken his peers to the leafy, left-leaning serenity in which he had grown up—an area of Manchester populated by young families, old hippies, and recent immigrants, whose citizens distributed their time among allotments, community arts centers, madrassa, and piano lessons—a gentle, open, roughly friendly place where people joked that the only common language was lentil dal.

Gabriel felt that his reticence was fair. He had never been coached or shown the way; his high school was failing while he was there; his mother was chronically unwell, living on disability benefits. At school, Gabriel had been exceptional because he looked like the kind of kid who might get into Oxbridge. When he arrived in Oxford, he became exceptional because he did not at all look like the other young people who had made it here.

This new experience of difference was, initially, rewarding. Gabriel had more sex than ever before. Boarding-school girls were drawn to him, and he was impressed by the harsh power that they exercised over themselves: their pretty, managed forms, their silky locks of hair, their bodies, which had been tailored by regular participation in team sports, in short and tight dresses. Even their personalities had been worked over, to the extent that the nights eerily repeated themselves. Perched on a barstool, playing with her hair, whichever girl he was with would be brutally disparaging about herself, and so quick to laugh at the things Gabriel said that he doubted she had actually heard his words. Then the morning after, disarranged, she would be grumpy and unexpectedly cutting, impatient for him to leave.

Eventually, his fascination with these girls diminished. The seasonal-affective-disorder lamps, the requests to be slapped during sex, the amaranth salads in brown cardboard boxes, like gifts—all these things assimilated themselves until they became ordinary elements of Gabriel's world. He acquired a subtle pity for the students, male or female, who had attended these segregated, expensive, isolated schools. They bore no resemblance to the debauched caricature of the Oxford student that was depicted in novels and newspapers. Instead, they brought to mind the neurotic zoo animal who has been driven to dementia by its reduced, serviced universe. There was a nervous, pacing energy to the way in which they relentlessly monitored and

evaluated others while remaining on their guard, permanently hyperconscious of their own subjection to reciprocal surveillance.

Then Gabriel reached the revision period, right at the end of his degree, and his sympathy abruptly flipped. These people, who came here not through merit but as birthright, were lazier than he was and, objectively speaking, more stupid. Yet they were poised to crush him, in the final examinations and then in real life. Decades from now, they would be making the money, ruling the country, running the news, and writing the history. Gabriel did not wish to become an overworked, underpaid secondary-school teacher. He needed a first-class degree.

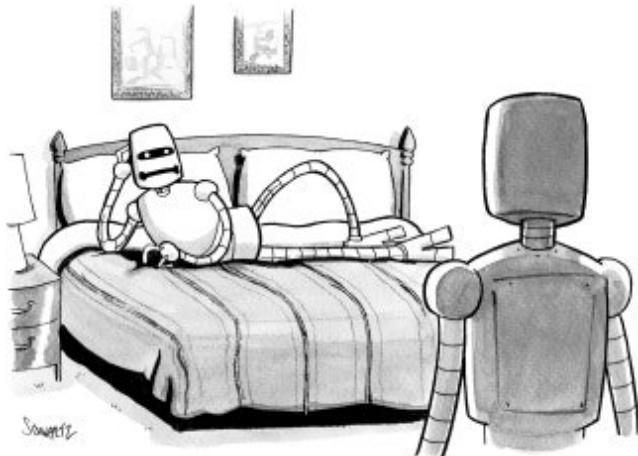
When he came out of his session with Thornton, he went to look for June. June would help. June, Gabriel's tutorial partner, teased him for hate-fucking posh girls who believed he was rough. She had a tiny spike in the top of her ear and spent her days in the library reading, and she was in her element now, as exams approached. She knew what she was doing. The first time they had met, in a bar at the start of the first term, Gabriel had begun to talk to June about his latest date, and June had informed him, earnestly and with a genuine sense of apology, that, sorry, the conversation was not very interesting, from her side. She made Gabriel feel unsure of himself, but he did not feel watched by her. He didn't feel that she was looking at him, that much, at all.

Gabriel walked around the college, searching for June in the library, and then the common room, and then the canteen, and she was there, sitting alone at a long-top table with a paper cup of coffee, a library book, and an unopened packet of chocolate biscuits. Gabriel sat wordlessly beside her. June closed the book, opened the biscuits, and offered them to him; he took one and placed it on the table in front of him. She tapped the book cover, on which there was an image of James Joyce leaning on his cane. "Why do all the male critics lose their minds about the fact that Molly's speech gives voice to the common woman, when in fact she is an avatar of Joyce's barely literate wife, scripted by Joyce?"

This was not exactly a question. June spoke quietly and thoughtfully, staring out into the vacant dining hall before them, then looked sideways—

seemingly registering Gabriel's presence for the first time—and shook her head. "Never mind. You won't get it."

Gabriel picked up the biscuit and ate it slowly so that he did not need to reply. June often acted as if he had no sense of politics or identity or the bitter reality beyond the college walls, to which the undergraduates occasionally, with vague reverence, referred. In tutorials, she spoke over and around him, addressing their supervisor directly whenever matters of race, class, or gender, politics or justice, arose—which they did, when June was speaking. The punch line was that June herself had gone to private school. This joke was one that Gabriel had heard on repeat through the past three years, and it didn't make him laugh anymore.



"You really know how to turn me on, then off, then back on again."
Cartoon by Benjamin Schwartz

Gabriel had lost track of the conversation, which was more of a monologue now. June's voice seemed louder than usual. "You have to answer the question that is written on the exam paper," she was saying. "That sounds obvious, but it's harder than you'd think to pay attention to the question and really see it, respond to what it actually says and not what you want it to say. Most people just write out what they have revised and squeeze the question to fit." She made a quick, startling motion with her hands. "You won't get a first if you say what everyone else is saying. It's like you have to say the wrong thing in the right way. Not the right thing in the right way—that's just box-ticking—and not the wrong-way right, what even is that? And the wrong-way wrong is too far. The examiner won't understand what you are talking about." She giggled. "It has to be the right-way wrong." She nodded

to herself and turned to look at Gabriel almost pleadingly, inspired and daunted by her own vision.

“Do you know,” he asked in a deliberate and casual tone, “whether they search us when we go in? Our bodies, I mean.”

“Pat us down?” June giggled again. “They could try. It might make the *Times*.” She shook her head. “No, Gabriel. I don’t think they’re very interested—you can go to the toilet during the exam, and they don’t even walk you down the corridor. It’s a *gentlemanly* understanding. Why, are you planning to cheat?”

Gabriel put his arm over the back of his chair and smiled. “Yeah, I thought I’d write all the dates for the Middle English paper on my legs.”

“Nice.” June narrowed her eyes. “I guess there would be a fairness to that, like a handicap or a head start.” She pressed her lips together. She was either suppressing irritation or on the brink of laughter. “You’re cleverer than the rest of us, but you don’t know fuck all about the past.”

“Your voice is loud,” Gabriel said, screwing up his eyes. “Are you taking caffeine pills?”

June placed her palms down on her closed book, a devotional gesture. She didn’t seem to be conscious of it. “Gabriel, we’re worried about you,” she said, lowering her voice. “Ruby and Charlie and me. Just don’t do something fucking stupid like the social-science girl.”

“Oh,” Gabriel said. He smiled and shook his head. “No, I wasn’t planning to. No.”

The next day, in the afternoon, Gabriel returned to Thornton’s office. Thornton gave him paper, a board to rest on his knees, and a question to answer. Gabriel sat on the sofa while Thornton, his back to Gabriel, worked at his desk. He put on a Mahler CD at a low volume, and this softened the space between them so that they did not feel quite so alone together.

At the end of the hour, Gabriel read aloud what he had written, and Thornton listened intently, then briskly explained what could be interesting about

Gabriel's thinking; the mistakes and omissions he had made; and what he needed to read. After the session, Gabriel went to the library to find the recommended books, leaving his essay with Thornton.

He did the same thing the next day, and the next. Thornton did not annotate and return his scripts, which prompted Gabriel to realize that he would have to pay closer attention to the conversation as it happened.

This changed something. Gabriel felt present in that room in a way he hadn't felt for months. The window was usually propped open, and, when the music was off, the buzz of distant traffic and a fitful breeze entered. Gabriel almost enjoyed listening to the thorny, vowel-dense sounds of the Middle English texts when Thornton read from them in his prosaic manner, and he came to appreciate the casual knowledge of old things that Thornton let fall into the conversation, as when he told Gabriel that Chaucer's favorite flower was the ordinary daisy, or that it took eight calves to make a slim book on vellum.

On the seventh day, the essay title was taken from Chaucer's translation of Boethius: " 'Where wonen now be bones of trewe fabricius? What is now brutus or stiern Caton?' Consider relationships of influence or difference between Old English literature and Middle English writing."

The quotation was enigmatic to Gabriel, but the question felt aggressive, as though it had been designed with the intention to silence any student who had never been tutored on the respective circumstances of Old and Middle English—and it had. Gabriel was muted.

He sat still with the board and blank paper on his knees, struggling with a sense of proportion. Terrible things were happening in the world.

Sweatshops and roadside bombs. People were living in deep poverty right there in Oxford, on the ring road and in the outer suburbs, beyond the university. This test in front of him was just an old exam paper with a question about the long-gone past. Yet this precise knowledge, these exact facts, had receded into its own meaning, which had acquired a weight that Gabriel could neither bear nor relinquish, because knowing this material was critical to his future and he did not get it. The meaning he could not quite grasp, just out of his reach, beyond the tip of his tongue, could not stand in

contrast with the terror of the world because it was, in some way Gabriel could not get straight in his head, intrinsic to it.

Thornton cleared his throat, and politely interpolated his thoughts. “I can see that you are not making progress. Shall we break this down?”

He turned off the music and ran through a sequence of modest and manageable ideas—ideas that Gabriel could cope with. Thornton wrote down dates, names, a battle. He reminded Gabriel of the passages in Old English poetry in which heroes of the past list their immense losses and reflect on how inane and hopeless worldly achievement is.

“You will remember the Seafarer’s loneliness,” he told Gabriel with perfect confidence, “and the passages in which the Wanderer asks where his universe has gone. His horse. Parties. Money and friends.” Thornton opened his empty mouth like a goldfish, articulating an almost silent *pouf*.

Quiet again. Through the open window, Gabriel could hear a distant sound of drilling. He felt the bubble of emptiness that Thornton had emitted inflating, filling the room, and swelling into the surrounding area. His eyes began to sting, betraying him. He knew that Thornton would correctly identify self-pity.

But Thornton showed no sign of scorn or even embarrassment. Instead, he said something that did not make sense to Gabriel at first: “I don’t think I have told you that we went to the same school.”

Gabriel’s mind went to the physics laboratory at his secondary school, as though he would immediately, miraculously retrieve a memory of a teen-age Thornton sitting at one of the long counters in his hiking boots. But the room was vacant, and only then did it make sense—Thornton was saying that he had been a pupil there some years before Gabriel arrived. Gabriel did not know how to respond.

“You don’t sound like you’re from Manchester,” he said at last.

“Quite.” Thornton looked at Gabriel levelly and held his gaze.
“Nevertheless. I do understand what it is like to be a working-class

undergraduate here. I can tell you, the situation has improved since my time. Back then, we had to cover our tracks.”

Gabriel had not thought of himself as working class before. It was too exposing and direct a term, too confrontational for his peers to apply. It made him uncomfortable, though he did not know why: whether the idea of the lower class or the possibility that he was not, in truth, lower class at all was the authentic shame. He was aware that he wasn’t alone in that. Many of his peers felt that they were outsiders in this place. Perhaps there were more people outside than in.

He played five-a-side football with a second-year named Adam, who’d confided to Gabriel the pain he felt “as a state-school kid” when tutors, administrators, and even his closest friends repeatedly mispronounced or Anglicized the spelling of his Polish surname.

In the English department, Gabriel took seminars with Chantal, who had told him that she avoided social events because of trauma she had inherited from her mother, who had grown up in rural Vietnam in the nineteen-sixties.

Once, in his first year, Gabriel had been at the college bar with Robert, who lived next door to him. A group of male students from another college came into the bar, and greeted Robert as an old friend. When they left, Robert told Gabriel that these boys had bullied him for a decade at boarding school, where he was the scholarship boy. Now, here, they were still tormenting him with feigned friendliness—“Roberto, *mate*”—as though their past were a shared joke.

But Gabriel had alternative intelligence on Robert and Chantal and Adam. A knowledge of everybody’s background was part of the infrastructure of undergraduate social life. Adam’s mother was an author and psychoanalyst whose practice was based in Hollywood. His state school was in a London neighborhood where the average house price topped a million, and it sent more students to Oxford and Cambridge than entire cities in the North.

Gabriel had heard Chantal speak of her mother’s trauma several times, but he had never heard her mention that her father was a diplomat and had a private jet.

Robert was somebody whom Gabriel knew better, and one night in the pub Gabriel pressed him on the question of money. Robert, evidently uneasy, told him that he believed his scholarship was honorific, worth two hundred pounds, and that the annual school fees . . . he was not sure . . . were perhaps forty thousand.

Gabriel understood that the pain his friends had described was true for them, and that the suffering they experienced—intergenerational trauma, or bullying, or the simple, significant disrespect of having their name repeatedly mispronounced—was real. This did not prevent him from thinking of his friends as liars, and articulating that word to himself offered an ugly but undeniable relief. Liars. And there he was, too, a straight white man and a raw hypocrite. Surely somebody was on the inside, holding power, and yet everybody here felt iced out, their privilege and their victimhood irreducible against one another; each personal combination private, hurtful, and too tender to touch.

Gabriel looked at the man sitting opposite him, who presented as a boarding-school boy, oddly aged, but was actually working class. Thornton was eying his student carefully, with concern or interest.

“Well,” he said, finally. “What matters for you now is to be sensible. Eat good food, sleep wholesome sleeps. Don’t do anything drastic, and you shall do well.” He was in teaching mode again. “Gabriel,” he said gently, “our tutorial has finished.”

The night before the first exam, Gabriel was already in bed, watching an old episode of “Seven Up!” on his laptop, when there was a knock at the door. It was Petra, in pajamas and a fleecy dressing gown, her wet hair hanging in long strings and an expression of extreme distress on her face. The assailant must have found his way in, at last. Perhaps her parents were injured, or worse. Gabriel allowed the door to swing open and stepped aside. Petra floated past him and sat on the chair at his desk.

“My father’s bank’s gone bust,” she said baldly.

Gabriel closed the door and leaned his back against it.

“He’s lost everything he’s made,” Petra said in the same abrupt, almost belligerent tone. “We have to sell the house, and the gold, and it still won’t be sufficient to pay.”

There was a moment’s silence. Petra sniffed, and Gabriel looked around for a tissue, then wondered whether he should leave the room to retrieve one from the bathroom across the landing. He decided against it. She wiped her face with her sleeve. “What happened?” he asked.

“It’s the same as Lehman. The same as all the others. That world is over.” She drew an empty circle in the air. “The money was borrowed from funds that weren’t there.”

“He’s safe, though?” Gabriel asked.

“Sure.” Petra made a dismissive gesture. “But, Gabriel,” she said reprovingly, “my mother says there’s nothing. My father will be fortunate if the shareholders don’t pursue him through the courts. . . . His world is over,” she repeated. She sounded distantly awed by what she was saying: not yet quite awake in this revised reality. “He could go to prison—”

Gabriel did not realize he was about to yawn until it happened. It cut a hole in the conversation. Petra stopped talking.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

Petra stared at him. “You are a friend to me,” she asserted in a harsh voice.

They were quiet.

EMOTIONAL-OUTBURST ANIMAL



"Leave me and my weird mom alone!"

Cartoon by Sarah Kempa

Eventually, Gabriel spoke. "Do you want to stay here for now? I was watching a show. We could watch the rest together."

Petra nodded.

"Petra, I think your family will be fine."

They sat on the floor and watched to the end of the episode. When it was over, Petra asked to stay in Gabriel's room.

Gabriel looked at the clock: past midnight. His examination would be later that morning. "O.K.," he said slowly, thinking it over. "You can have the bed."

Gabriel changed into his pajamas in the bathroom, then took one pillow and lay down on the floor under the window. The floor was hard, and he felt chaste and purified by his offer to sleep there. Hours passed. He could hear Petra breathing through her mouth. He stared up at the ceiling, watching the light change on each of its slopes, and avoided looking at the clock's face.

When Gabriel arrived outside the examination school in the morning, he felt weird. He stood on the pavement, swallowing scalding coffee from a wilting paper cup. Thornton appeared, crossing the road from the college, his

approach slowed by a very small, dark-haired child who was holding his hand. Gabriel shook his head and blinked.

“Dr. Thornton!” June cried. “I didn’t know you had a kid!”

Thornton fixed his eyes to the wall behind June’s head with a comical, quizzical look. “Let’s hope you were paying more attention when we discussed the texts.” He sounded jocular. “This is my daughter, Raine.”

Gabriel greeted them, then turned his back, swallowing the last of his coffee. He faced the imposing building. Tall windows, a columned portico, and sculpted reliefs depicting university patriarchs. Façades and colleges extended up the road, all the way to the statue of a notorious colonialist that stood in a stone recess, surrounded by a twisted and petrified decorative frame.

A friend of Gabriel’s had complained about this statue, suggesting that the college should take it down. A warden had responded that it was held in place to commemorate the iniquities of history. That morning, on the day of his exam, looking up at the stone façades, Gabriel suddenly realized that this was a place that existed not despite but because of the iniquitous history exhibited here. Oxford, no longer relevant to the contemporary world in so many ways, was advertising its special connection with the cruelty and suffering that had been rolled out across the entire planet, over centuries, and still rolling away. Gabriel’s eyes rested on the mosses and lichens that had grown over the old stone building, and he had a short-lived, beating impression that their huddled forms, augmented by morning shadows, had mobilized and were edging toward him. Then he turned around, and Thornton was wishing everybody good luck. The doors opened.

Inside the exam hall, a big room with long windows, full of quiet, Gabriel felt unfettered. Elated by exhaustion, he became expansive. He felt lucky. It occurred to him that an ordinary seminar room—low-ceilinged, with carpet squares and a whiteboard at the front—would not have had the same physical capacity to hold and refresh ideas as this high-ceilinged, pillared, airy space. He found his chair and sat down, conscious that it was an extremity of privilege to be examined here. For the first time, he accepted that this privilege was in his possession. He had taken his place at the table.

He held still and closed his eyes. His mind jumped around. Dates and quotations were unreachable, every fact revised. His mind zoomed out, and he had a vision of a great complex. It was a bit much, like being shown a hidden camera that had been tracking beside him all along. The ingredients of his luck: The stone slavers who stood outdoors, and the sugar and cocoa that were baked into June's packaged biscuits. The gardener's insecticide that killed the aphids on the roses, releasing the old, rich, scented breeze that had infected him with self-confidence. Petra's father's collapsed bank. The bones of knackered cattle in the glue that held his antique books together. His clever mother's missed opportunities. The scarred hands of the miners who extracted the coltan and cobalt that now resided in his silenced phone. The web of shipping channels that bound it all. The well-stocked libraries; many long hours of Thornton's time; and years, rooms, and space in which to learn, all produced on the backs of the past. Eight calves.

He felt relieved of something, actually—he'd dropped the thread running through the labyrinth, and that was fine, nobody gets out. The line wasn't working anymore. It was good that he hadn't tried to cheat. What mattered now was to submit his experience to the clean sheet of paper on the table. The monitor called out the instructions, and the exam papers, swishing open at the same time, created a pulse of air. Gabriel relaxed, allowing himself a few moments to read the questions, choose one, and consider it.

Something strange twanged in him on the first question. It was a quote from a secondary source: "For the poem's deepest message is not about the failure of any particular historical moment but about the failure of history, and of historical understanding, per se." The second question had a passage from Chaucer's Boethius, which Gabriel already knew by heart: "Where wonen now be bones of trewe fabricius . . ." He had seen the next question, too.

He scanned the page in a panic. He had answered all of these questions. Thornton had placed each one before him last week and the week before. The questions on this sheet were identical to those of last year's exam paper. He started to put up his hand, hoping that there had been a simple mistake. The correct paper could be brought to him, and he would be compensated for the lost time. And then, before his arm had reached its height, the understanding came that this was not last year's exam.

His hand was still in the air, and the monitor was walking toward him. Gabriel put it down and shook his head, and she retreated. He felt an obscure sense of shame, a deep disgust with himself that he could not force into sense—as though he had turned up to a blind date and found his mother waiting.

He looked down at his paper. He looked up, around the room. The other students had a faint, anxious appearance, their differing characters had receded deep inside their bodies for the duration of the examination. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary to them. They were required to respond to three questions, selected from eleven. Gabriel could tolerate this. He already knew that he would not tell anybody what Thornton had given him. His tutor's intention had been to rebalance his chances, and, anyway, there was no evidence.

Now, there were two options that had integrity. The first: he had an advantage, and so he must excel by the same distance. Rather than responding to three questions, as was required, he would respond to every single one. He could absolutely do that. The second possibility was that he could stab his pen into his eyes. His hand began writing without planning or thinking, and the material arrived from somewhere behind conscious thought. He wrote desperately. When he requested more paper, the woman brought it to him, and he received it without thanking her. The hours streamed past until he had written eight essays, all continuous with one another, and he knew that he had achieved something exceptional when the monitor called time.

One week later, the English-literature students left their last examination, exiting through the back of the building into a cobbled lane. June blinked in the light and felt the tense awareness that had been with her throughout the examination period diffuse into the environment. It was a cool, gray morning in late May. Branches of mock orange extended over the walls of the college gardens, dropping loose white blossoms, their released scent weakened by the chill of the air. Somebody handed her a water balloon. She held it cautiously and walked on, not yet in the mood to deploy it.

Gabriel appeared in the crowd and fell into step beside her.

“There you are,” he said.

He lowered his voice and said that he’d wanted to talk to her, and then went on to say, in his sudden, awkward, halting way, that he had made a serious mistake in one of his papers. His case had already gone to review. He hadn’t followed the most basic instructions, and the university board had judged the paper to have been disqualified. He could still hope for a second-class degree, he explained, if he achieved high marks in his other papers. He shrugged and smiled lopsidedly. He’d never wanted to be a banker or politician, anyway—he’d be more useful as a history teacher and had downloaded an application to train.

June let the water balloon fall into the gutter and put her arm around Gabriel. “I’m sorry,” she said.

She did feel sorry for him, and somehow bewildered: she could not understand why he had done this the wrong-way wrong. If he were a woman, she told herself, he wouldn’t assume the world would be so friendly to his experiments.

James Thornton was standing in his office, looking out the window, when the students emerged from the lane onto High Street. He felt a current of strong irritation when he caught sight of them, crowding around one another in the middle of the road, covered in flour and food dye. They were all still so immature, and yet they were also real and indisputably adults, just as much as he had been at their age, though he had had more responsibilities then than these kids could imagine. Their rounded faces, their piercings and makeup, their lateness and absences and profuse, careless apologies—their vulnerability was almost intolerable. Tears would spring to their eyes if he made a sharp comment about their use of quotations in a weekly essay. Each time they came to his office, they would confide to him whatever terror, longing, humiliation, or desperate desire they possessed, then walk out of the tutorial and forget that he existed, until next time. He was perpetually amazed and a little impressed by this entitlement. Even the most considerate of them were innocent of the fact that anything they took from him had been, and had to be, extracted from another part of his life: Raine or his girlfriend, Mae, his delayed monograph, his untidy home, his tired body. He had given to them freely—Mae believed excessively—because he cared for them. And

now he was ashamed of himself, too, because he was distraught that they were leaving, though he wanted them to go. He could not talk about this, even or especially to Mae. They were not leaving him—they were just leaving.

In the college courtyard, after the people had all gone home for the day, the roses remained, still growing at their own stately pace. They were dependent on the earth in the flower beds and the wiring on the warmed stone walls, and absolutely indifferent to the fates of individual students. The gardener's recent spray had liberated them from the aphids that had been bothering them for weeks, and now they were free to open. The stems moved so slowly that the people around them could not discern the movement. Nevertheless, every single one was animate, and aspiring upward, where it was slightly warmer and there was a little more light. ♦

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Up from Urkel, World-Famous Nerd

In his book “Growing Up Urkel,” Jaleel White details how “Family Matters,” for good or ill, brought a new Black male archetype to the culture’s doorstep.

By [Vinson Cunningham](#)

December 16, 2024



Urkel’s constant good cheer, powered by White’s admirable comic timing and shameless mugging, made him a favorite of audiences. Illustration by Harrison Freeman

Toward the end of Jaleel White’s new memoir, “Growing Up Urkel,” the actor runs through a list of regrettable life experiences. There’s an agent he wishes he’d never worked with, and another he wishes he’d followed to the ends of the earth. He wishes he’d pursued a small part in a Jim Carrey vehicle. He didn’t really need to finish college, but he did so at the urging of his parents. If he could do it again, he’d consider getting into U.C.L.A. “the win,” quickly move on, and stop splitting the attention that rightly belonged on his career. As soon as he felt the “creeping sense of dislocation” that estranged him from his fellow-students, try as he might to act “normal,” he should have packed his bags and gone back to his admittedly unconventional life.

The name of that chapter is “There Are No Do-Overs,” but the book vibrates with palpable regret. “I’m not bitter,” White says. Then, reversing himself: “Okay . . . maybe a little.” White, who grew up acting, was already on a career path before he’d developed a mechanism to make his own choices. The term “child star,” with its intimations of troubled glamour, doesn’t always convey how much of a grind such kids endure. Starting at the age of four—he learned to read early, which helped him get gigs—White starred in commercials for Pepsi, Oreos, and Jell-O Pudding Pops. His job on the sitcom “Family Matters” was supposed to be a quick guest role. But, as the earnest, klutzy, tenderhearted nerd Steve Urkel, White hit it off with audiences and found himself suddenly at the center of the star-making machine.

“Family Matters” premiered in 1989. It was a spinoff of the show “Perfect Strangers,” whose workplace setting was a Chicago newspaper. Harriet Winslow, played by the versatile Jo Marie Payton, works as an elevator operator there. “Family Matters” began as a formulaic sitcom following the doings of the Winslow family. Harriet’s husband, Carl (Reginald VelJohnson), is a Chicago police officer who watches the family’s budget like a hawk and occasionally, under stress, blows his top. Their children Eddie (Darius McCrary) and Laura (Kellie Shanygne Williams) are regular, warm-blooded products of sitcom America: he pines for girls, and she frets over her grades. In early episodes—before Urkel, the next-door neighbor, takes over the focus and the direction of the show—the Winslows talk a surprising amount about bills.

“Family Matters” started out as a working-class answer to “The Cosby Show” (whose now disgraced creator, Bill Cosby, became a kind of distant mentor to White). It wasn’t the first time a not so tony Black family had appeared in a sitcom: the popular Norman Lear show “Good Times,” which premiered in 1974, took place in a housing project, also in Chicago. Nor would it be the last: the undersung early-nineties show “Roc” featured the brilliant Charles S. Dutton as a sanitation worker in Baltimore. Had Jaleel White never shown up, it’s possible that “Family Matters”—which at first struggled to find a voice and a tone—would have flopped. Or perhaps it would have deepened its connection to the socioeconomic moorings of its characters. A show about a hotheaded Black urban cop—a reflection of

Lear's interest in adapting social and political themes to the necessities of TV situation comedy—might have had plenty to say, in the fullness of time, to the America of Rodney King and O. J. Simpson, in Los Angeles, and the Crown Heights riots, in Brooklyn.

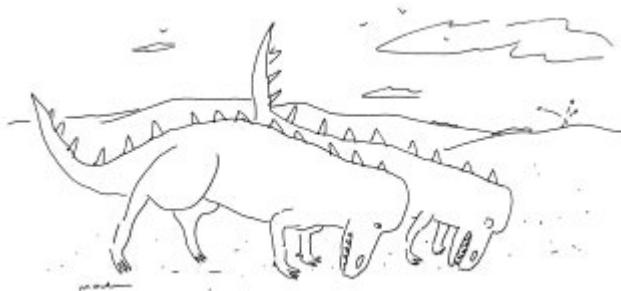
In an uncanny turn, though, “Family Matters” echoed, if only cosmetically, a different quirk of Lear’s televisual career. The unsparing social realism of “Good Times” was increasingly undercut by the exuberance of J. J. Evans, played by the comedian Jimmie Walker. J.J.—the son of Florida and James Evans, played with pathos and cold humor by Esther Rolle and John Amos—is a jive talker, a peacocking dispenser of bombast whose catchphrase, “Dyn-o-mite!,” became a constant refrain on the show. It could sometimes feel as if J.J. were in a different show than Florida and James, and soon Rolle and Amos expressed their discontent with the arc of Walker’s character. J.J., they thought, was a buffoon, a big joke, a cooning distraction from the show’s urgent originary idea.

Much like Jimmie Walker, Jaleel White delivered a performance that would, for good or ill, turn the meaning of an entire sitcom on its axis, and bring a new Black male archetype to the culture’s doorstep. Don’t ask me how I know, but it was just about impossible for a bookish, bespectacled Black kid in the nineties to show up to school and avoid being called Urkel. Steve was sweet and smart and brave, especially in his constant, seasons-long, vaguely Pepé Le Pew-ish romantic pursuit of Laura Winslow. He snorted when he laughed and was always knocking shit over. He wore suspenders and saddle shoes and improbably tight jeans. He was a whiz at math and always seeking friends, but almost nobody—especially tempestuous Carl—seemed too jazzed to have him underfoot.

Urkel was a walking social death. And yet his constant good cheer, powered by White’s admirable comic timing and shameless mugging, made him a favorite of audiences and, quickly, a permanent member of the cast. White, who was twelve when the show began, was a middle-class kid from Southern California whose biggest concerns were basketball and Sega Genesis. He had large feet for his age and had recently got braces—the better to portray the world’s most famous nerd. He hadn’t been thinking about Jimmie Walker when figuring out how to play Urkel: he’d have been

too young to notice any similarity between the two figures. (White doesn't mention J. J. Evans or "Good Times" in his book.) Instead, he used as models other dorky eccentrics of the moment—Rick Moranis, Pee-wee Herman, and Martin Short's "Saturday Night Live" character Ed Grimley. He perfected an unwieldy, bowlegged walk and hiked his pants past his navel; he made his face stretch in all kinds of inscrutable ways. He had his own catchphrase, songlike and nasal: "Did I do that?"

Soon, White was famous, and had no idea how to handle it. Now, in "Growing Up Urkel," he mostly remembers the downsides. He noticed how adults would offer him perks like courtside seats at N.B.A. games, only to use their proximity to him to achieve their own social-climbing ends. He recalls how the parents of the other young stars on the show became jealous of his increasingly large role. He devotes several pages to his co-star Jaimee Foxworth, who played Judy, the younger Winslow daughter. According to White, her mom didn't value the important things in life—the stuff beyond show biz—as much as his did. "Gwyn Foxworth and Gail White could not have been more diametrically opposed as mothers," he writes. "Education didn't seem to be of high importance to Gwyn Foxworth." Jaimee took cues from her mom and tried to ostracize White, making fun of him on the set. According to White, Foxworth left "Family Matters" after expressing in no uncertain terms her lack of interest in the show's mandatory schooling for minors. "If Jaimee were as funny in the role of Judy Winslow as she was in our studio classroom, she would have never left," White says.



"Are you sure doing pushups will stave off extinction?"
Cartoon by Michael Maslin

White's got barbs for other castmates, too, several of whom have, in later years, labelled him "difficult" to work with. He makes a meal, for instance,

of Jo Marie Payton’s increasingly improbable excuses for being late to table reads. He doesn’t seem to have much enjoyed his co-workers.

Those digs notwithstanding, White trains most of his attention on Hollywood’s backstage—those purgatorial offices where decisions get made. He was—and evidently remains—besotted with powerful executive types like Les Moonves, of CBS, and the Disney honcho Bob Iger. He contrasts their tough, frank speech, decisive action, and relative fairness with a far more common show-business condition—weak leadership and dishonest talk. When he describes a high-school basketball coach who didn’t, in White’s opinion, give him a fair shake (he sat on the bench), he compares the man with Iger, and asserts that “the dichotomy of those two leadership experiences is precisely what makes me uniquely who I am.”

White catalogues, at length, how agents left loose language in his contract, costing him hundreds of thousands of dollars, and how the naïveté of his parents sometimes set him back. “My deal on ‘Family Matters’ was a home run deal for a kid whose parents couldn’t see past college,” he writes. By the end of the show, in 1998, at the point of peak Urkel-mania—dolls, billboards, cereal boxes—he focussed on being a “trooper,” doing promotional events that would never yield him a profit. He wanted to write and produce, but nothing ever seemed to work. And, because of Urkel’s popularity, he’d lost control over the one thing that felt like it might be truly his: the world-famous performance that had made his name.

In one harrowingly awkward scene, White writes, with the wincing pacing of a horror movie, about a U.C.L.A. course he took called History of Broadcast Journalism in America:

It was a huge class, with close to two hundred students packed into the lecture hall, and it was taught by a woman of color. I was diligently taking notes, head bent over my spiral-bound notebook.

The TA was going through the history of television, and she got to the shows of TGIF: *Full House*; *Step by Step*; *Hangin’ with Mr. Cooper*; *Sister, Sister*; *Boy Meets World*, and yes, *Family Matters*. . . .

She started describing Steve Urkel as a “sambo” that was designed to cater to white audiences in a non-offensive and entertaining way. She said that the character was created to make white viewers more comfortable watching a show about a Black family . . . In my opinion, that lady had the thinnest of grasps on what she was talking about.

The moment is easily the most revealing of the book. White can’t see himself clearly, he can’t see Urkel, and nobody on the outside can see them, either. It’s an echoing reiteration of an earlier scene, when the grownup White watches a home video of himself, as a kid, being obnoxious to his parents as they settle into a penthouse suite at the Plaza Hotel. “You used to get beside yourself sometimes,” his mother said. He hadn’t remembered. Fame, here, is a way to lose your sight. In a moment of despair, White tells a reporter, “If you ever see me do that character again, take me out and put a bullet in my head and put me out of my misery.”

It’s possible to read “Growing Up Urkel” as a litany of complaints—about child stardom, about typecasting, about the fickleness of show business. White didn’t drink or do drugs until he was an adult, so the usual compensations of a celebrity memoir—parties, wild gossip, rampant sleeping around—are nowhere to be found. The book is, instead, a sober Inferno, a hellish manual of cautionary tales, with the increasingly frustrated White as a Dantean guide into the hot depths. White seems to be waving a red flag for aspirants who might follow in his wake.

He’s had a downright weird life: He once played basketball against an erratic R. Kelly, whom he was trying to recruit to star in a rom-com White wrote, called “R. Kelly Stole My Girlfriend.” (Between Kelly and Cosby, he had too many brushes, at far too young an age, with sexual abusers of the worst kind. He doesn’t claim that anything bad ever happened to him, but the names of these awful men constitute a warning all their own.) He took a date by limo to the Mall of America, for a late-night showing of “Schindler’s List.” Everybody’s always calling him Urkel. Now he’s selling cannabis.

A book more historically angled might have dwelled longer on Steve Urkel’s lasting TV legacy: a mathematically inclined eccentric like Sheldon, Jim Parsons’s character on “The Big Bang Theory,” carries some of his

DNA. And it's possible that multivalent newcomers such as Quinta Brunson, the creator, writer, and star of "Abbott Elementary," have learned from him—if only by photonegative contrast—to maintain tighter control of their art, closer contact with their dignity.

The book isn't just a lament. White tells the story of a meeting with a TV executive who wants to make a reboot of "Family Matters." Steve would be a grownup, finally married to Laura, and they'd be raising a conspicuously Urkel-ish kid. White's not interested. Instead, he'd like to cast some kid to play himself, to finally tell the world how hard it was to go to public school while making "Family Matters," how strange his life on TV was. The executive isn't interested. The book, it's clear, is not so much literature as a work of proto-TV, a barely disguised treatment for the show to come. I'm sure we'll hear, one of these days, how he got the deal done. ♦



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Books

What Professional Organizers Know About Our Lives

Overwhelmed by too much stuff, we hire experts to help us sort things out. But what's really behind all the clutter?

By [Jennifer Wilson](#)

December 16, 2024



Decluttering—with the advent of how-to books, Netflix series, and even Hallmark movies based on the subject—has become central to American culture. Illustration by Max Guther

In 2012, when the anthropologist Carrie M. Lane would tell people that she was researching professional organizers, most pictured Sally Field as Norma Rae holding up a “*Union*” sign on a factory floor. In fact, Lane’s subjects were more likely to be sitting on a *basement* floor alongside empty nesters, helping them discard their children’s old toys. One organizer Lane interviewed recalled asking a client, “What does this toy want? Where would it be happiest, most fulfilled? Is it happy at the bottom of a pile, not being used, collecting dust?” More than a decade later, Lane—the author of

[“More Than Pretty Boxes: How the Rise of Professional Organizing Shows Us the Way We Work Isn’t Working”](#) (Chicago)—need not clarify. The job title “professional organizer” is now firmly part of our lexicon, owing to an overstuffed market of how-to books on getting rid of clutter.

At the top of the pile would be [“The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up,”](#) by the Japanese author [Marie Kondo](#), published in English in 2014. Her method evoked the Shinto principle that objects can be inhabited by a *kami*, a spirit. Socks, for instance, should not be folded into balls. “Do you really think they can get any rest like that?” she asked. She famously instructed readers to pose the question, when deciding whether to hold on to an object, “Does this spark joy?” Kondo herself sparked many things—fourteen million copies sold, the Netflix series “Tidying Up with Marie Kondo,” intense annoyance (why not ask “Does this spark revolution?” one Facebook post I saw read), and a decluttering craze.

Another international best-seller, [“The Gentle Art of Swedish Death Cleaning,”](#) by Margareta Magnusson, arrived in 2018. Her method drew on the Swedish concept of *döstärdning*, organizing one’s things to lessen the load on family members who will have to sort through them after you die. “Let me help make your loved ones’ memories of you nice—instead of awful” is how Magnusson put it, not so gently. During the pandemic, home organization became America’s favorite lockdown hobby. (The Washington Post hailed the era as “the great decluttering.”) Americans who hated math suddenly could not stop talking about the four-box method (four boxes per room, labelled “Keep,” “Give Away,” “Throw Away,” and “Storage”), the 20/20 rule (toss anything you could replace in twenty minutes and for twenty dollars), the one-in-one-out rule (throw out one item for every new one you acquire).

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When Netflix released “Get Organized with The Home Edit,” four years ago, one critic declared it “the most 2020 show of 2020”; it featured a smiley crew who swore by the *ROYGBIV* method: organizing objects by the colors of the rainbow. Theirs was a distinctly American entry in an otherwise minimalist genre; the show’s principals assured us, “It’s O.K. to own things.” Just as long as you bought their branded storage bins from Walmart to keep them in.

Decluttering, an activity that once played a supporting role to cleaning and to moving, became a star in American popular culture. The mystery writer Mary Jane Maffini created a series about an organizer who solves “fatally untidy cases,” in novels like [“The Cluttered Corpse”](#) and [“Death Loves a Messy Desk.”](#) ’Tis the season to make room for love—in the Hallmark movie “Christmas in the Air” (2017), a busy single dad hires a pretty but anal-retentive organizer. “While she’s organizing his life, he’s showing her you can’t schedule true love,” the trailer’s voice-over teases. You’ll find episodes devoted to home organization in sitcoms like “The Big Bang Theory” (Sheldon’s compulsive organizing is a recurrent plot point) and “Modern Family” (Claire, a type-A personality, rebrands herself “Mrs. Clutterworth” as she tries to corral her husband and children into clearing out the house). Watching people declutter should be the equivalent of watching paint dry, and yet here we are.

Not everyone tuning in is a fan. Somehow, professional organizers—with their cheery dispositions and stickers that say “Donate”—became deeply polarizing figures in contemporary life. A writer in *The Atlantic* accused Kondo of being insensitive to refugees, who might hold on to things as a trauma response. Others charged that organizers were dulling our creativity, encouraging a house emptied of the objects that make us unique. A quote dubiously ascribed to Einstein was suddenly all over social media: “If a cluttered desk is a sign of a cluttered mind, of what, then, is an empty desk

a sign?” When Kondo recommended that people dispose of books that did not spark joy, it became clear she had touched the third rail of American civic society, or at least of everyone who loved the movie “You’ve Got Mail.” The backlash was so intense that Kondo was compelled to affirm publicly that she didn’t hate books.

The debates over detritus eventually spilled into academia. The scholar Scott Herring tied so-called “clutter panics” to eugenics, citing early twentieth-century racist and classist theories of urban disorganization. In his book “The Hoarders,” he asked, “Why is one material life commended while another is reviled? Who calls these shots? Under what historical circumstances?” Why single out keepers of clutter in a society in which greed and overaccumulation run rampant in tidier places like investment portfolios?

Lane, too, went into her study critical of what she dubs the “containo-industrial complex,” the multibillion-dollar business of home organization. “When I began researching professional organizers, I saw them as the human equivalent of *Real Simple* magazine and the Container Store, part of a growing industry built around persuading Americans that organizing things in pretty boxes is the key to a happy life,” she wrote. That all changed after she conducted her field work.

Lane went native, signing up for a decluttering boot camp where she learned to shred papers with the ruthlessness required for the job. In addition to interviewing more than fifty organizers, she worked with a number of them as a volunteer assistant. (In one session she observed, a client proceeded pen by pen, telling the story of how she acquired each.) Lane walked the red carpet at the Los Angeles Organizing Awards alongside an environmentally focussed organizer wearing a dress made entirely out of repurposed plastic bags. She attended civic task-force meetings, where organizers joined social workers and firefighters to brainstorm best practices for dealing with hoarders. Lane also organized her own belongings, to get a client’s perspective. Sorting her son’s baby clothing for a garage sale was “physically painful at moments.” Conversely, recycling an old stack of unread *New Yorker* magazines, she felt “both transgressive

(Am I really allowed to do this?) and elated (Farewell, scolding pile of ‘shoulds’!).”

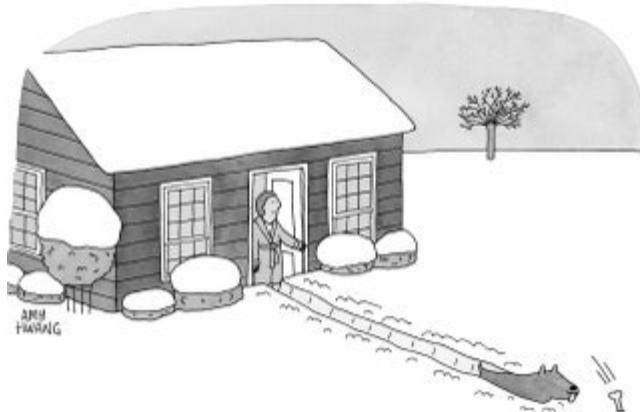
Amid her research, Lane, like many who have enlisted the services of organizers, found things she hadn’t realized were there. She discovered a profession made up mostly of women who had been looking for work that offered better pay or more flexibility when they stumbled into home organization. For them, the challenges of self-employment beat the constant threat of layoffs. Their clients were familiar to them—women with full-time jobs to whom the task of tidying somehow still falls, managing the same feeling of being inundated and unsupported that the organizers themselves were attempting to flee. The two meet in a sea of disposable consumer goods that was supposed to make all that hard work and personal sacrifice worth it in the first place. These women may not be Norma Raes, but Lane comes to see professional organizers as containers for our attitudes about work, what we fill ourselves with when we are unfulfilled, and what keeps us buying things that we don’t even have time to take out of their pretty boxes.

Before there was clutter, there was bric-a-brac, and, as with most instances in which too much is kept inside, we can blame the Victorians for that. A home full of needless curios was once considered refined, expressive of the luxuries that industrialization had made possible. Magazines such as *Harper’s Bazaar* catered to so-called “parlor people,” those who had the time and the means to laze about in sitting rooms, taking in the décor. A woman mindful of appearances might install doorstops that looked like dogs, all manner of feathers, seashells, dried flowers, and hairwork (art created out of the human variety, preferably braided).

Critics of parlor culture tended to be reformers inspired by William Morris, the English socialist and textile designer who helped launch the Arts and Crafts movement. Morris believed that art had been chased out of the home by mass-produced knickknacks that were useless and, above all, ugly. His ideas found a warm reception in the United States at the onset of the Progressive Era, as Americans preached simplicity and the control of passions (temperance was by then a mass movement) with an almost religious zeal. The novelist and social reformer Charlotte Perkins Gilman,

in “[Women and Economics](#)” (1898), argued that women were suffering under the weight of their own possessions: The female housekeeper “has crowded her limited habitat with unlimited things,” she wrote, “and the labor of her life is to wait upon these things, and to keep them clean.” As a new era began, women were told to dispose of all their Victorian wares and embrace the pared-down aesthetic of the modern age. “Pictures on sofa pillows and all other objects are out of place,” Charlotte Wait Calkins, an anti-ornamentalist, wrote in “A Course in House Planning and Furnishing” (1916). “No one should want to rest his head on anything that resembles real rose thorns, tennis rackets, pipes, flags, Indian heads and the like.”

Properly modern women were primed to tidy. When more of them began taking on office work as secretaries—or “office wives,” as they were often called—the dawn of a new, less messy era was heralded. “Feminine Hands Have Taken Dirt and Clutter Out of Offices,” a Los Angeles *Times* headline read. But the postwar manufacturing boom presented American homemakers with a dilemma. They were urged to keep their homes free of knickknacks, and yet knickknacks of a sort—transistor radios, sewing machines, electric mixers—were everywhere they looked. The parlor, now the living room, was once again invaded by wares, thanks to the commercials that aired on yet another new device, the television. Bric-a-brac had made its triumphant return, but women were too busy being office wives to keep it in order. It’s no wonder that, in the nineteen-sixties, Americans had to invent the yard sale.



Cartoon by Amy Hwang

For most of the twentieth century, it never occurred to anyone that decluttering could be outsourced. Outsourced to whom? Lane writes,

“There have always been people who organized other people’s things for pay—butlers, maids, housekeepers, secretaries, personal assistants, efficiency experts, architects, and interior designers, among others, not to mention the unpaid work of homemakers. In each of these cases, however, decluttering and reorganizing were *components* of a job, not the job itself.” Only in 1974 did the job of home organizer enter the public record, through the paper of record. That September, the *Times* ran a story about a woman named Stephanie Winston, who could be hired to sort out everything from kitchen cabinets to filing cabinets. “It’s Her Business to Take the Distressing Disarray Out of People’s Lives,” the headline read. Winston was a Barnard College graduate who had worked as a freelance book editor. “She finds it far more profitable to organize people than words,” noted the *Washington Post*, which profiled her when she published her first book, “Getting Organized,” in 1978. (At the time, she was charging two hundred dollars a day.) The only difficulty, she said, was that “it’s a hard concept to grasp.” One of her clients was quoted commanding Winston for making a business out of what seemed “like a non-idea.”

Another organizer Lane spoke to, Standolyn Robertson, similarly had trouble at the start of her career formulating precisely what kind of work she had in mind. After Robertson graduated from high school, in Florida, in the nineteen-seventies, she was asked what she was interested in doing next. “I was explaining this *thing*,” she recalled. When she offered, as an example, that she wanted to reorganize kitchens, someone said it sounded like she wanted to be a wife. Robertson corrected him, sort of: “ ‘No, no, no! I want to do it and then *go home*.’ That was the best way that I could explain it. That I was going to play house in someone else’s house and then go home.”

Although the *Post* identified Winston as the first professional organizer, there were other women beginning to eke out a living this way. One was Barbara Hemphill, a D.C. housewife whose husband’s job, at a nonprofit, scarcely covered the costs of raising three children. She had heard about people who “hadn’t eaten off the dining room table in months because it was piled full of papers, or they couldn’t file their income taxes ‘cause they couldn’t find their receipts,” she told Lane, and she thought she could help. Like many other organizers, Hemphill had always been good at putting

things in order. When she took out a seven-dollar ad in the newspaper, her first callers were men trying to pick her up. After all, who had ever heard of hiring someone to organize your files? It sounded like a euphemism for something. In 1975, Maxine Ordesky placed an ad in *Los Angeles* magazine in which she described herself as a “Creative Organizer.” When she told one gentleman caller her rate, he went silent, eventually saying, “If that’s all you’re charging, you don’t do what I think you do.”

Historically, organizing was work performed in the home, primarily by women, as a service to others, and, Lane writes, “this trifecta of characteristics is not an auspicious one for a budding profession.” In an effort to garner recognition that their work was work—and deserving of fair remuneration—the pioneers of the field did what they did best: they got organized. In 1984, a dozen women in California created the Association of Professional Organizers, later the National Association of Professional Organizers. “The most tenacious waged a three-year, eventually successful battle with the California Yellow Pages to include an entry for ‘professional organizers’ in the telephone directory,” Lane recounts.

The press that Winston and others generated started to coalesce into something like a career, and just in time. The early eighties saw the rise of the simplicity movement, an extension of aesthetic minimalism into the rhythms of everyday life, with the publication of Duane Elgin’s landmark book, [“Voluntary Simplicity”](#) (1981). Yet, amid the greed-is-good eighties, the neat and tidy life took a while to take off. Wanda Urbanska, a simple-living advocate, told the magazine *O*, “When I first started talking about this, in 1992, I was seen as a wacko zealot.” Then the sleek and shiny surfaces of Y2K appeared on the horizon. People wanted to make space for the future, just as they had at the dawn of the last century. In 2000, a new magazine appeared, *Real Simple*, whose mission was to provide readers with “beautiful, actionable solutions for simplifying every aspect of your life.” Before it even launched, the magazine had attracted a hundred and fifty thousand subscribers.

By one estimate, the average American spends a total of two and a half days every year looking for misplaced household items. More than a third of homeowners say their garage is too cluttered to use for parking. Eleven per

cent of us rent storage units. “There are now more self-storage facilities in the United States than [Starbucks](#), [McDonald’s](#), Dunkin’ Donuts, and Pizza Hut locations *combined*,” Lane writes. This has all happened as the size of the typical American home increased from fifteen hundred square feet in 1973 to twenty-two hundred in 2023: we somehow have more room and less space. One often quoted statistic is that the standard American household contains three hundred thousand items. It is hard to verify (the number comes from the organizer Regina Lark, who was interviewed in 2014 by the *Los Angeles Times*), but the fact that so many don’t question it speaks volumes—unalphabetized, poorly shelved volumes.

Both proponents and skeptics of the home-organization industry agree that consumerism is to blame for this morass. Fast fashion and technology designed to be out of date within a few years are putting unsustainable demands on our natural resources. At the same time, the demand for cheap goods at breakneck pace is fostering working conditions that are inhumane. Some of the vitriol directed at professional organizers no doubt arises from a misplaced disgust that anyone would profit from this mess. Some see organizers as an extension of what they consider the real problem: affluenza —excessive money in pursuit of excessive stuff. Those who can afford to hire decluttering experts are how we got into this mess in the first place, they say. I understand the temptation to put this problem in a neat box, but I’m not sure it fits. You can find “unboxing” videos across TikTok filled with aspiring influencers showing off their “hauls” from low-cost retailers like Shein to get views. These women—it’s mostly women—are not life-style shopping; they’re shopping for their lives.

People hire organizers for all sorts of reasons, Lane notes. One organizer told Lane about a woman who summoned her to deal with the “paperwork chaos” from her family business. “But the minute I picked up one Post-it and moved it to this side,” the organizer recalled, “she lost it and she went into the kitchen and closed the door.” In such cases, the organizer said, she recommends that clients seek out a mental-health professional.

Lane is more interested in those clients for whom the hiring of an organizer feels symptomatic of larger social ills. She has found people across the class strata who are overworked, and underwhelmed with what they have to show

for it. They are not just too busy to organize their things; they are too busy to live their lives. Instead of writing a novel, they buy a Moleskine. Instead of travelling, they accrue travel points. They acquire books on decluttering that collect dust—somewhere. (They’ll hire a professional organizer to find them.) In the early years of the profession, some organizers called themselves clutter therapists. Lane argues that professional organizers could be better described as “therapists of capitalism.” They provide, she writes, “a particular kind of therapeutic relationship suited to people trying to manage their copious belongings while also working through their feelings around their stuff *and* the labor it demands of them.”

Some of the most affecting material in “More Than Pretty Boxes” involves what Lane refers to as “wishful shopping”—in which people purchase “items that stand in for the activities they would like to do or the people they would like to be.” One organizer recalls a client who had an extensive collection of cassette tapes for learning Dutch. The organizer recommended he donate them, since he wasn’t using them, but he protested, “If I got hired by a multinational company based in Holland and I get transferred there, and I learn Dutch before I go, I’ll be way ahead of everyone.” This man had already retired.

In another story, an organizer Lane was working with was hired by a woman named Lauren who had recently quit a corporate job. When Lane entered Lauren’s home, she noticed shopping bags near the door filled with picture frames, most with their price tags still attached. As she made her way to Lauren’s bedroom, she struggled to squeeze past still more frames, some in more shopping bags, others leaning against the wall. In total, there were more than forty frames, some gilded, others with hand-painted flowers, and one with the words “Girlfriends Forever.” Lauren said that she was planning to get back into painting now that she had left her job, and these frames would hold the art work she’d eventually make. When the organizer told her she would not have space for forty frames on the walls of her apartment, Lauren protested that she would give some of the art away to friends. The organizer suggested that she write the names of those friends on sticky notes and attach them to the frames. Lauren then explained that these were friends who had “yet to come into her life” but would do so now that she had more free time.

At the start of “More Than Pretty Boxes,” Lane lets readers know that hers is “not a book about how to get organized.” I did pick up a tip or two, though. Lay everything out and decide from afar what to discard; the idea is that, once you touch something, you’re more likely to keep it. This is what has been described as “tactile sympathy.” Lane’s book will make the people who confront capitalist waste—the heaps of products never used because their owners are too busy working so they can buy more—feel close enough to touch. They are not the cloying perfectionists we see on reality TV or in Hallmark Christmas movies, and their solutions are not the cause of our problems. *We’re in this mess together!* they want us to know.

Still, reading through Lane’s slim but intellectually capacious book (she clearly learned a thing or two about maximizing small spaces), I found myself wondering whether there might be some value in being surrounded by the detritus of dashed hopes. Maybe you need those untouched paintbrushes staring you in the face to remind you how much you hate your nine-to-five for being seven-to-seven. That’s a math problem for a different kind of organizer. ♦



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

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[Books](#)

Sure, “Paradise Lost” Is Radical, but Did You Know It Was Sexy?

A new study charts John Milton’s influence on revolutionary thinkers but misses the sheer seductiveness of his masterwork.

By [Merve Emre](#)

December 16, 2024



“*Paradise Lost*” has long proved popular with revolutionary thinkers. Illustration by Laurie Avon

On winter nights in the early sixteen-sixties, a blind poet lay awake in his bed and dreamed of the universe. Before his eyes swam suns and stars. A celestial light, visible to him alone, revealed a procession of images: first, a great battle in Heaven, between Satan’s rebel angels and the armies of God, who chased the rebels into a new realm, Hell; next, God’s creation of Earth

and the inhabitants of Paradise, chief among them Adam and Eve; then a glimpse of Satan, who flew from Hell to tempt Eve to eat the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge; and, finally, man's exile from Paradise. Into the poet's mind flowed twenty or thirty unbroken verses. Alas, his blindness meant that he had to wait until morning for an amanuensis to arrive and preserve them in writing. The poet would sit impatiently, one leg flung over the arm of his chair, and cry, "I want to be milked!"

Such is the legend of John Milton's "Paradise Lost." It may be an apocryphal story but feels true to the poem; it was as if God had filled the poet to the brim, until he had to be drained by the hands of mere mortals. Onto the page spilled more than ten thousand lines of the richest and most resourceful blank verse in the English language, arranged into ten books in 1667, then rearranged into twelve in 1674. The subject was nothing less than the whole of human history, as proposed by the thunderous invocation of Book I:

Of man's first disobedience, and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world, and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat
Sing heavenly Muse. . . .

To read these lines aloud is to feel the gravity and the intensity of their ambition. It is to hear their strange music: the first line held a beat too long and punctuated by the sharp explosions of breath in "first" and "fruit"; the hissing of "taste," "loss," "us," and "bliss," which snake down to the command "Sing heavenly Muse." Milton founded his style on the impersonality of ancient epic, and the resulting poem can feel more like the anonymous product of history than the effort of a single mind. No wonder the legend of divine inspiration persists. God, in the poem's account of Genesis, had infused "vital virtue" and "vital warmth" through profound darkness. The poet, too, filled his darkness with a divine stream of words, and through these words a whole cosmos spun into view.

Milton claimed that his purpose was to "justify the ways of God to men"—to explain how an all-knowing, all-powerful God could have made man

“sufficient to have stood, though free to fall.” The answer demanded poetry, not doctrine, and a practice of prosody liberated from what Milton denounced as “the modern bondage of rhyming.” His Muse dictated to him in an “answerable style,” an “unpremeditated verse” that featured few jangling couplets but a wealth and variety of rhetorical flourishes. They include Milton’s Latinate tendency to invert the usual English order of subject, verb, and object; his Homeric catalogues of the angels in Hell and the creatures on Earth; his elaborate tropes, which layered references to Greek and Roman epics, medieval romance, Renaissance cosmology, imperial conquest, and the English Commonwealth onto the Biblical story of creation. Floating above it all was an air of learned majesty, a cool radiance that compelled admiration but, in the centuries since, has not always spurred delight.

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Part of the aloofness of “Paradise Lost” comes from Milton’s world view, forged during the English Civil War, which abolished the monarchy in favor of Parliamentary rule. His passionate commitment to freedom landed him in the employ of the new regime, Oliver Cromwell’s Protectorate, as one of its most successful polemicists. Milton’s 1649 pamphlet “The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates,” printed two weeks after the beheading of Charles I, mounted a strident defense of regicide: “It is not, neither ought to be the glory of a Protestant State, never to have put their King to death; It is the glory of a Protestant King never to have deserv’d death.” Yet his republicanism had a Puritan cast: his aversion to one ruler, the King, was intensified by his devotion to another, God, who he believed ought to be worshipped without the intercession of bishops and other church hierarchy. His strain of Protestantism, Arminianism, was unusual in its belief that God

offered salvation to all (rather than just the “elect”), but that each man must prove himself deserving of it through the exercise of his free will. In “Paradise Lost,” the shifting relations between Satan and God, God and the Son, and God and man trace a philosophy of liberty and necessity, hierarchy and equality, that was eccentric even in Milton’s time. To appreciate it requires understanding how, in his writings, freedom can be fortified by, and through, obedience to what is virtuous.

“*Paradise Lost* is a scandal, a monument to dead ideas, a petrification of the English tongue,” the great critic Geoffrey Hartman declared in 1982, marvelling at the survival of visionary poetry in a secular world. Many, however, have worked to assimilate it to modern orthodoxies, including, most recently, the British academic Orlando Reade, in his study “What in Me Is Dark: The Revolutionary Afterlife of *Paradise Lost*” (Astra). Broadly, each of its twelve chapters narrates a book of “*Paradise Lost*” alongside the history of various readers to whom the poem was important, to show how its insistence on political freedom “influenced readers embedded in revolutionary struggles in America, France, Haiti, and elsewhere.”

Reade begins in 1948, in Norfolk Prison Colony, in Massachusetts, where a young Malcolm X reads “*Paradise Lost*” in the prison library and delivers “an astonishing interpretation” of it: Milton confirmed the views of Elijah Muhammad, the former leader of the Nation of Islam, on the origins of white supremacy. “In either volume 43 or 44 of The Harvard Classics, I read Milton’s *Paradise Lost*,” Malcolm X writes in his autobiography. “The devil, kicked out of Paradise, was trying to regain possession. He was using the forces of Europe, personified by the Popes, Charlemagne, Richard the Lionhearted, and other knights. I interpreted this to show that the Europeans were motivated and led by the devil.” Yet the devil is in the details, as it were. Milton’s work does not in fact appear in Volume 43 or 44 of the Harvard Classics. His Satan is kicked out of Heaven, not Paradise; it is Adam and Eve who are expelled from the latter. Apart from a glancing reference to Charlemagne, the forces of Europe are not personified in the poem.

Reade is not the first to use this passage from Malcolm X to claim that “Paradise Lost” speaks “to the radical needs of the present.” But what is the difference between a radical reading and a misreading? How far can one go in making Milton speak to contemporary concerns—scanning his work for nascent arguments about religious terrorism, or police abolition, or anti-capitalist models of work—before the poem itself becomes irrelevant? Perhaps a more authentically radical way to read “Paradise Lost” is to insist on the scandal of its strangeness, to yield to its alien vision. By honoring its balance between freedom and obedience, we may resist the temptation to rewrite our present political disgraces as original sin.

The scandal begins with Satan. He is nowhere in Genesis, but everywhere in “Paradise Lost”—the only character to cross from Heaven to Hell, and Hell to Earth, the first to speak into the darkness. The Muse is asked to sing of Satan before she sings of God’s creation: “Who first seduced” Adam and Eve “to that foul revolt?” The answer is one of the great accusations of the epic tradition:

The infernal serpent; he it was, whose guile
Stirred up with envy and revenge, deceived
The mother of mankind, what time his pride
Had cast him out from heaven, with all his host
Of rebel angels, by whose aid aspiring
To set himself in glory above his peers,
He trusted to have equalled the most high.

We plunge into Hell, where Satan lies on a burning lake until God lifts his chains. Here is the poem’s first radical choice: Satan is its most attractive character, not despite his envy or his desire for revenge but because of it. We learn that the object of his envy was the Son, whom God anointed Messiah, elevating him over the angels. The real reason for Satan’s rebellion is his “injured merit”—what C. S. Lewis, in his study of the poem, called “a well known state of mind which we can all study in domestic animals, children, film-stars, politicians, or minor poets.” Lewis knew that Satan’s charisma owed much to his sense of ressentiment, and that such ressentiment, whether in poets or in angels, could be cultivated to appear more principled and sympathetic than it really was. In the first two books of

“Paradise Lost,” Satan politicizes his wounded pride, using all his powers of persuasiveness to build support in Hell for the righteousness of his rebellion against God.

No doubt Milton risked building support for Satan among his readers. Satan is harsh and hypnotic, romantic and self-pitying in his despair. He is outfitted in the poem’s most illusory similes: his massive shield hangs on his shoulder “like the moon, whose orb / Through optic glass the Tuscan artist views”; his spear makes “the tallest pine / Hewn on Norwegian hills” look like a wand. He emits the sickly light of a solar eclipse. Place his polluted aura next to the bright skirts of God, and you will see how low this superior angel has sunk. Yet how his ruined grandeur moves him to speak! Book I roils with Satan’s exhortations to his defeated army to test God’s omnipotence again:

All is not lost; the unconquerable will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:
And what else is not to be overcome?

Often, his arguments for freedom resemble Milton’s own. “Here at least / We shall be free,” Satan proclaims of Hell, a line that would fit right into Milton’s 1660 treatise “The Ready and Easy Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth.” Reade, who is mostly sympathetic to Satan, casts the rebel angels as revolutionary subjects. He notes the poem’s influence on Thomas Jefferson, who copied Satan’s speeches into his commonplace book, and the pioneering abolitionist Olaudah Equiano, an African Briton who likened the torture of enslaved people to the torture inflicted by God on Satan’s army. But the sound of a speech is as important as its sense. After the rebel angels rise, their first order of business is to build a glorious hall called Pandemonium and shrink themselves to fit into it, becoming “less than smallest dwarfs.” Their voices dwindle, into the tinny, “jocund music” of “faerie elves.” They may strike maddening notes, but they are easy to ignore.

Putting Satan in perspective requires constant vigilance. One must avert one’s eyes from Pandemonium’s false glitter to perceive the corruption of Hell:

Satan exalted sat, by merit raised
To that bad eminence; and from despair
Thus high uplifted beyond hope. . . .

Satan makes his rule seem more equitable than God's, by claiming that his intentions are logically unimpeachable: no one could want to be king of the damned, and so "Devil with devil damned / Firm concord holds." When the devils discuss how to avenge themselves, their plan—one of them will fly to Earth to corrupt God's latest creation, man—seems arrived at through open debate. But it is secretly Satan's idea, planted by his second-in-command, Beelzebub. Immediately, Satan volunteers to play the self-sacrificing hero. "The monarch," Milton writes, "prevented all reply." What looks like consensus is, in fact, decision by fiat. By his smooth tongue, Satan inaugurates in Hell the injustice that he accused God of perpetrating in Heaven.

Hell is dark, obscuring distinctions between good and evil. When Satan lands on Earth at the end of Book III, the phenomenon of light, which God created just days before, is new to him. Only now can he apprehend how changed he is, how miserable. He recoils from himself at the beginning of Book IV: "Now conscience wakes despair / That slumbered, wakes the bitter memory / Of what he was." But misery loves company, and Satan's plan to recruit man to his cause turns on arousing a desire for freedom: "Hence I will excite their minds / With more desire to know, and to reject / Envious commands, invented with design / To keep them low."

In his 1654 treatise "The Second Defence of the People of England," Milton wrote, "Know that to be free is the same thing as to be pious, to be wise, to be temperate and just, to be frugal and abstinent, and lastly, to be magnanimous and brave." By the sun's blinding rays, we can perceive how depraved Satan's freedom is. By one hand, he is bound to himself, to his impiety, his recklessness, his envy and pride, his guilt and spite. "Which way I fly is hell; myself am hell," he laments. By the other hand, he is bound to the Almighty, whom, as the critic John Guillory has observed, Satan imitates. But God's authority tends toward reason and grace; Satan's is a poor, perverse copy. His every thought is shaped in reaction to God's glory. It is as if God had never lifted Satan's chains.

Compare Satan with God, about whom Reade has little to say except (in a chapter on Toussaint Louverture and Baron Vastey) that he is “intemperate” and probably a cat person. This seems inadequate, but understandably so—it is hard to know what to say about God. In Book III, he is an awesome presence but a curiously insubstantial one. Whenever we meet him, he is surrounded by angels raising hallelujahs, dazzled by his gorgeous armories. He praises and condemns with a stiffness that verges on dispassion. Milton could hardly have made God a creature of variety and contradiction. The more we see of God, as the critic Samuel Fallon has observed, the stronger our sense of his limits: “He cannot die; he cannot suffer; ultimately he cannot change.”

To God’s right sits his radiant Son, who hears from his Father all that is to happen to man: he will fall, but he will be saved “not of will in him, but grace in me.” Their conversation points to the poem’s second radical choice: God and the Son are neither identical nor coexistent. The Son was made by God and, like all God’s creatures, is subject to the trial of his free will. God anoints him Messiah, but, by offering meekly to die for man’s sins, the Son proves himself deserving of it—“By merit more than birthright Son of God, / Found worthiest to be so by being good.” His humble martyrdom opposes Satan’s preening self-sacrifice, just as his “being good” inverts Satan’s source of “merit,” “his bad eminence.”

Yet the mirrored acts of Satan and the Son show how they are necessary to each other, as sin is necessary to virtue. The unfolding of God’s plan reminds us of what Hartman called the counterplot of “Paradise Lost.” God’s “imperturbable providence” opposes all of Satan’s agitated activity. It lends the Almighty his cold formality and the poem its feeling of supreme prescience. The reader not only knows what is to come—the fall of man, the salvation of mankind, the triumph of obedience and free will—but believes that it is good.

Satan is Reade’s antihero, but “Paradise Lost” is really Adam and Eve’s poem. The reader first spies them through Satan’s eyes when he enters Eden in Book IV. Much has been made of his first impression:

His fair large front and eye sublime declared
Absolute rule. . . .

She as a veil down to the slender waist
Her unadornèd golden tresses wore
Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved
As the vine curls her tendrils, which implied
Subjection, but required with gentle sway,
And by her yielded, by him best received,
Yielded with coy submission, modest pride,
And sweet reluctant amorous delay.

Satan's envious gaze seeks hierarchy everywhere. But sexual difference in Eden is not as rigid as it seems. Adam's large front "declared / Absolute rule," and Eve's hair "implied / Subjection," but those verbs describe only their outward aspects. Adam's rule cannot be imposed; it requires "gentle sway." Eve's subjection cannot be ordered; she yields "with coy submission, modest pride," as if marriage, in its pure state, were a game, designed to flatter a man's superiority while letting a woman maintain control. Rule and subjection are calibrated by appearances that the first couple interprets guided by their faculty of reason.

It is this reason that Satan attempts to impair. He waits until they are asleep and, in a mockery of divine inspiration, whispers into Eve's ear, stirring her imagination as any malcontented poet might—by raising "vain hopes, vain aims, inordinate desires" to overrun her virtue. When, on waking all hot and bothered, she tells Adam that she dreamed of eating the forbidden fruit, his murmurs of assurance calm her. "Evil into the mind of god or man," he says, "may come and go." Part of the genius of "Paradise Lost" lies in how it seeds small moments of error and doubt in Paradise, without marring the perfection of God's creation.

Much as Satan arouses Eve's imagination, so the "affable archangel" Raphael proceeds to arouse Adam's. Coming down to Earth in Book V to warn Adam of Satan's plan, Raphael stays through Book VIII and recounts the war in Heaven, replete with Satan's invention of cannon fire and the mountaintops that the armies of God flip upside down and hurl at the rebel angels. "This must be unusually stupid Science Fiction," William Empson wrote. But stupid stories have the effect of prompting questions, and Raphael starts to wonder if he should have told Adam anything in the first

place. “The secrets of another world, perhaps / Not lawful to reveal?” he asks. Too late: Adam and Eve now know “of things so high and strange”—things “so unimaginable as hate in heaven.” They know that someone has refused to obey and, in doing so, has forced an irrevocable change.

Milton is not praised enough for how artfully he represented the first seduction. There is nothing impersonal or cool about it; it is heated and urgent. (Alastair Fowler, in his meticulous edition of the poem, noted that it contains what is likely the first use in English literature of the word “sex” to mean doing the deed.) Satan’s seduction of Eve had to define the very idea of what seduction was: an act of irresistible trickery on the part of the seducer; a moral and an intellectual failing on the part of the seduced. As Eve says to Adam:

His fraud is then thy fear, which plain infers
Thy equal fear that my firm faith and love
Can by his fraud be shaken or seduced.

The incantatory, reversed repetition (“his fraud . . . thy fear”) catches the interlocked logic of seduction. On the one hand, Satan’s success seems inevitable, as if eating the fruit was the only choice Eve could have made, and thus no choice at all. On the other, her disobedience results from her gullibility and erroneous reason. Seduction brings the poem’s central predicament—how to reconcile free will and divine decree—down from Heaven to Earth. The poem’s psychologically acute, domestic framing of this is Milton’s third radical choice.

Book IX begins with an argument between the first husband and wife about —what else?—work. More than Adam, Eve is sensitive to the passage of time and she insists on good time management. “With thee conversing I forget all time,” she told Adam in Book IV, and now her praise of their chatter turns into a complaint about how it “intermits / Our day’s work brought to little.” The garden outgrows her efforts to tame it. The plants that she lops and prunes return, in a night, to their wild luxuriance, leaving no trace of her efforts. Without Adam, Eve proposes, she could work intently enough to make a lasting impression on Eden. She would be able to distinguish between one day and the next, past and present, by means of her own hands.

Adam disagrees, claiming that God intended for them to have fun together; he does not grasp the real issue at hand. Eve wants something different from what he wants, and, whatever it may be, her inscrutable desire asserts her separateness from him. “So absolute she seems / And in herself complete,” he told Raphael in Book VIII. Again, a compliment flips into a complaint, that the woman who was created from his side now insists on straying from it. “Leave not the faithful side / That gave thee being, still shades thee and protects,” Adam warns her. How can the balance of their marriage hold when Eve resists Adam’s “gentle sway”? It is an unanswerable question, and so Adam deflects. He trusts her, he swears. It’s Satan he doesn’t trust.

Autonomy—the fantasy of being absolute and complete, of making choices in her own right, on her own time—is, for Eve, the ideal condition to test her virtue. “And what is faith, love, virtue unassayed / Alone, without exterior help sustained?” she asks Adam. Reade, like many, connects this line to Milton’s argument in “Areopagitica,” his 1644 defense of the freedom to print: “I cannot praise a fugitive and cloistered virtue, unexercised & unbreathed.” But the pamphlet argued only that virtue should be tested, not, as Eve contends, that it must be tested in solitude, away from those who might help one to exercise one’s reason well. Throughout “Paradise Lost,” a freedom that fails to acknowledge its provisional nature, or the particular communities in which it must be exercised, is a lure to evil. It is a satanic freedom to possess “a mind not to be changed by others,” no matter the circumstances.

We see this in the poem’s most breathtaking scene, when Satan finds Eve alone, and Milton dangles the possibility of a reverse seduction before us:

Her graceful innocence, her every air
Of gesture or least action overawed
His malice. . . .
That space the evil one abstracted stood
From his own evil, and for the time remained
Stupidly good, of enmity disarmed.

What if Eve had overawed Satan into good? But no: by now, Satan has spent the whole poem talking himself into the necessity of his position. Ressentiment is the snake that eats its own tail, and it is as a snake, a

gorgeous tower of green-and-gold coils, with flashing eyes and a high, crested head, that Satan steals into Eve's solitude. He rises and steers himself through the roses and the myrrh, shakes the leaves to get her attention, bows before her, and licks the ground. His tongue is out; his flattery will follow, a medley of praise for her ravishing beauty and disdain for her surroundings, "this enclosure wild," where there is only one person to admire her. "Who sees thee?" he asks. The woman whose husband's talk distracted her from her work—the husband who assured her, moments before, that "sweet intercourse" was "to brute denied"—will marvel at the "language of man pronounced / By tongue of brute." Did her husband lie? Or is he a rube?

In the 1643 treatise "The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce," Milton had described a good spouse as "a fit conversing soul." Adam—great in the bower, but a bit of a bore—speaks in paeans, but the snake speaks boldly, sensuously. He whispers to Eve about "the sharp desire" he had "of tasting those fair apples," and how doing so gave him speech and reason. He recalls the longing and the envy of all who watched him wrap his whole body around the trunk of the Tree of Knowledge and drain its fruit. What his ability to speak promises her, implicitly, is change. This sparks her ardent imagination more than any husband tidying the garden could. If the apple "gave elocution to the mute," what might it do for Eve, who is already perfect?

Eve plucks. She eats. As the serpent promised, everything changes. Disobedience begets secrecy and selfishness. Should she tell Adam, or should she keep her knowledge to herself, "the more to draw his love, / And render me more equal?" she wonders. When she tells Adam that she has eaten the fruit, he eats, too, out of firm faith and fear; he cannot imagine life without her. Yet they will never be as they were.

There was inequality in Eden before the fall, but there was no misogyny. This is the first horror (along with nakedness and great guilt sex) to bloom in Paradise, before Sin and Death pave their path from Hell to Earth in Book X. Adam upbraids shamefaced Eve, placing the blame for their fall squarely on her: "Thus it shall befall / Him who to worth in women overtrusting / Lets her will rule." By the time the angel Michael arrives to

show Adam the future, in Books XI and XII, Adam and Eve have fought and reconciled. But the fresh sting of “mutual accusation” still pricks at them as they leave the garden.

The world was all before them, where to choose
Their place of rest, and providence their guide:
They hand in hand with wandering steps and slow,
Through Eden took their solitary way.

Where do they go? In a brilliant and approachable study, “*Inside Paradise Lost*,” David Quint traces Adam and Eve’s “wandering steps” out of the epic poem and into the godless world of the novel. The collapse of the paradisiacal balance between freedom and obedience would seed the novel’s grand themes: marriage, seduction, betrayal, regret, and all the stuff of “the home epic,” in the words of George Eliot, the subtlest of the Milton readers whom Reade discusses. The novel grasped the fallen “conditions of marriage itself,” Eliot wrote in “*Middlemarch*”—that there was “something even awful in the nearness it brings”; that it demanded “self-suppression and tolerance.” Adam’s eye no longer declared “Absolute rule.” Eve no longer appeared “absolute.” Hand in hand, man and woman would be bound in an uncertain, unfixed fellowship. They would have to make their solitary way into the future. ♦



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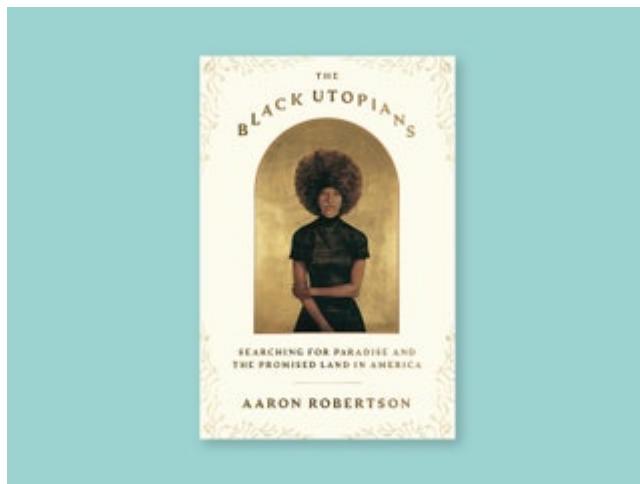
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Books

Briefly Noted

“*The Black Utopians*,” “*Blue*,” “*Rental House*,” and “*The Prisoner of Ankara*.”

December 16, 2024



The Black Utopians, by Aaron Robertson (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In the nineteen-sixties and seventies, liberation theology—which holds that “holiness starts from below, in the experiences and aspirations of the disinherited”—inspired Black Christian nationalists to find “new frameworks” for living. This history focusses on one such experiment: Detroit’s Shrine of the Black Madonna church, led by Albert Cleage, Jr., a visionary preacher. Cleage believed that Black churches had to be “actively engaged in social struggle”; to that end, the Shrine attempted to empower Black communities with innovations including a communal-child-rearing movement and a national food-distribution network. As the congregation sought to “re-create” God “in their own image,” its members strove to create a world that was meant for them.



Blue, by *Rachel Louise Moran* (Chicago). Moran's concise history of postpartum illness charts the decades-long effort by activists, doctors, and psychiatrists to define and legitimize the struggles many women face after giving birth. Long dismissed as the “baby blues,” postpartum illness (an informal umbrella term encompassing mild sadness, depression, and psychosis with a postpartum onset) began coming into public awareness in the United States in the nineteen-fifties. Yet it remained, as Moran shows, severely underpublicized and underdiagnosed well into the twenty-first century, its existence contested and its meaning politicized.

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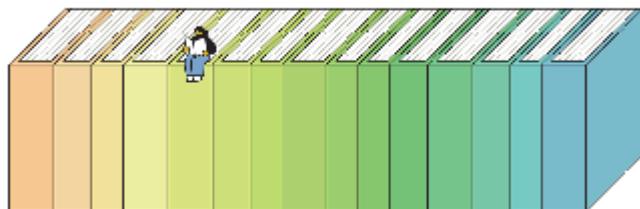
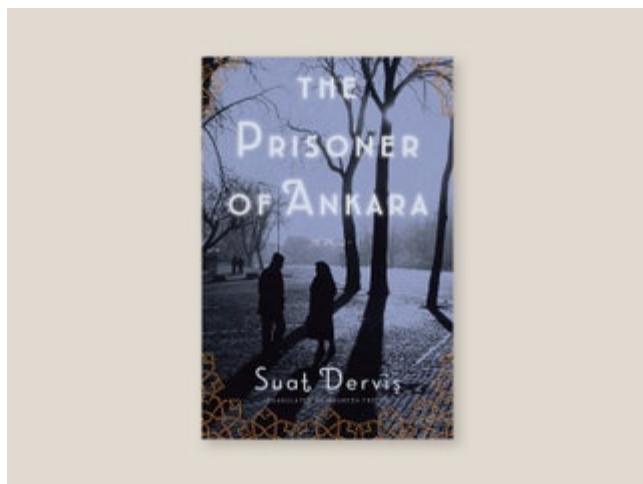


Illustration by Rose Wong

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Rental House, by *Weike Wang* (Riverhead). Filled with both the comedy and the bitterness of miscommunication, this pointed, deadpan novel examines an intercultural couple's marriage. Keru is a first-generation Chinese American; Nate is the product of working-class Appalachia. After meeting at Yale, the two moved to Manhattan and pursued jobs in management consulting and academia, respectively. Though the couple are now ostensibly upwardly mobile urbanites, the differences between them come into high relief during two vacations, when their in-laws make separate visits. Wang wryly examines the nuances of class and culture, while also showing that, in the messy terrain of a family with wildly varied values and assumptions, surprising—and profound—moments of unity can still be found.



The Prisoner of Ankara, by *Suat Derviş*, translated from the Turkish by *Maureen Freely* (Other Press). This slim, stark novel, first published in

1957 and only now translated into English, follows Vasfi, a Turkish man newly released from prison after serving a twelve-year murder sentence. Vasfi wanders the streets, unable to find either work or peace, as Derviş unfolds the circumstances behind his arrest. As a young man, he falls in love with Zeynep, a local beauty, who goes on to marry his rich great-uncle. As Vasfi's love grows into an obsession, Derviş lightly hints at the character's more juvenile qualities—he claims to love Zeynep but knows little of her, and is surprised to learn that she has been divorced. Derviş delivers a bleak story with an inkling of hope at its end—though her protagonist does not entirely earn his redemption.

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[A Critic at Large](#)

The Hidden Story of J. P. Morgan's Librarian

Belle da Costa Greene, a brilliant archivist, buried her own history.

By [Hilton Als](#)

December 16, 2024



The tale of J. P. Morgan's librarian is part of the legacy of passing in this country, and it's alternately heartbreaking, infuriating, and astonishing to walk through a show devoted to a life that was built on repression and erasures. Photograph from Bettmann / Getty

The American industrialist and financier John Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913) was a serious collector of objects, books, and ephemera for most of his life, and his avidity and the diversity of the materials he acquired—from pages of a fourteenth-century Iraqi Quran to the original manuscript of

Charles Dickens's "[A Christmas Carol](#)"—are a testament to both his American determinism and his wide-ranging tastes. One of the founders of U.S. Steel, and a key figure in the creation of General Electric, Morgan, who helped President Grover Cleveland avert a national financial disaster, in 1895, by defending the gold standard, didn't have much patience for those who felt there were things that *couldn't* get done. Jean Strouse, in her extraordinary, definitive biography "[Morgan: American Financier](#)" (1999), describes a man whose physical attributes (broad shoulders, penetrating gaze), febrile mind, and seemingly inexhaustible energy became synonymous with the outsized, overstuffed Gilded Age.

Although he left no comprehensive statement about his passion for collecting, I think that, like most students of art, Morgan collected as a way of dreaming through the dreams of others—the artists and artisans who produced the powerful works he bought, including Byzantine enamels, Italian Renaissance paintings, three Gutenberg Bibles, and an autographed manuscript of Mark Twain's "[Pudd'nhead Wilson](#)," purchased directly from the author. Like the legendary collectors William Randolph Hearst and Andy Warhol, Morgan was self-conscious about some of his physical qualities: he suffered from rosacea, which got worse as he aged. The beauty of art was something to hide behind. And it could be nourishing to his countrymen, too. Morgan was the president of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1904 until his death, and he knew that the works he acquired on his trips to Europe and North Africa could expand America's understanding of art and history, and thus enrich its aesthetic future.

In his acquisition of manuscripts and books, Morgan initially relied on the advice of his nephew Junius Spencer Morgan II, a bibliophile who had studied classics at Princeton University and served in an advisory capacity at the university's library. Junius recommended a colleague there, Belle da Costa Greene, to help Morgan organize his collection. Morgan had stored his purchases in multiple locations, including at his home at 219 Madison Avenue, but eventually this became impractical and he built his own library. Designed by the architect Charles Follen McKim, of McKim, Mead & White, the building, which was adjacent to Morgan's home, was completed in 1906, by which time Greene had been working for Morgan for about a year. Greene, who is the subject of the remarkable exhibition "Belle da

Costa Greene: A Librarian’s Legacy,” co-curated by Erica Ciallela and Philip S. Palmer (on view at the Morgan Library through May), was twenty-five years old when she met her future employer. Greene’s organizational skills were exemplary, and it wasn’t long before she began helping with Morgan’s personal affairs as well: going over his guest lists, choosing gifts on his behalf, and, one year, smuggling objects she’d bought in Europe back to the library—an act of subterfuge that both she and Morgan found hilarious. Morgan, whom she sometimes referred to as “the Big Chief,” didn’t seem to mind when Greene, one of few women with clout in the rare-book world, was featured in newspaper articles heralding her talents as a librarian and an antiquarian. Indeed, in one, Morgan was quoted calling Greene “the cleverest girl I know.”

Slim and petite, witty and stylish—“Just because I *am* a librarian doesn’t mean I have to *dress* like one!” she once said—Greene posed for the photographers Clarence H. White and Ernest Walter Histed, among others, and one can see, in the numerous photographs included in this beautifully lit show, the confidence and quickness that propelled her beyond the bloated conventions of the Gilded Age, which were quickly becoming outmoded. Greene could also be bitchy; she reportedly sniped at the rival collector Isabella Stewart Gardner, saying that her holdings were full of forgeries. The legendary art historian and critic Bernard Berenson was her lover for a time. They met through Morgan when Berenson was forty-three and Greene was twenty-nine, and most of their relationship was conducted long-distance; he was based in Florence. Berenson was an admirer of her keen intelligence, her looks, and her industriousness, and those are the qualities that Ciallela and Palmer want us to see, too, as their expertly arranged, more or less chronological display makes clear. They had some help: Greene herself was always curating her own image.

Although her parents were Black, the light-skinned Greene passed as white, attributing her olive coloring to a Portuguese grandmother or to a father with “Spanish Cuban” blood. Greene’s tale is part of the legacy of passing in this country, and it’s alternately heartbreakingly, infuriatingly, and astonishingly to walk through a show devoted to a life that was built on repression and erasures. I think this is the first major exhibition I’ve seen

that follows a kind of Jamesian trajectory, in which the vagaries of life and art coexist and are subsumed by fiction and its greater resonance.

It's appropriate that the show, which occupies two of the Morgan's intimate galleries, features a desk that Greene used in 1906 and 1907, since the most palpable elements of Greene in the exhibition relate to her work. There are also some more personal items—books she owned (a thin volume of Yeats; a biography of Shelley) and jewelry from her collection. A clothes horse, she was always turned out, and style is one way, certainly, of telling folks who you are, sometimes without even realizing it. (Zora Neale Hurston, in her fierce 1934 essay "Characteristics of Negro Expression," wrote, "The will to adorn is the second most notable characteristic in Negro expression.") But her heavy, carved dark-wood desk and its accompanying swivel chair, covered in a blue-and-white floral fabric, underline, more than anything else, Greene's vivid but ghostly presence: the artifacts exist, but where is the person? That may be a ridiculous question. Any librarian worth her salt should be as invisible as an editor, registered solely through her work. Still, given the circumstances of Greene's life, we want to see *her*, if only because of how much her physical existence has to say about America's treatment of bodies.

Greene's nearly decade-long collaboration with Morgan was arguably the most important relationship of her life outside her family, and I think the curators have done a terrific job of showing the peculiar intimacy that collectors and curators share. The ledgers, letters, cards, and other ephemera on display document not only what Morgan bought but also what Greene turned him on to. Though collectors and curators or librarians usually maintain a professional distance, it is inevitably disrupted when they disagree about a purchase and whether it works in the collection; it's a team sport for two.

Morgan had the money and the dream—and a great eye—but Greene had the vision and creativity to see that the library could tell a story, not so much about the accumulation of *stuff* but about man's deep desire for knowledge, and thus truth. Ciallela and Palmer suggest that if Greene had told the truth about herself she would not have had her extraordinary career. But lies demand constant feeding, and the work of maintaining her fiction

must have been draining. If you’re going to be white, someone else has to be Black—and preferably stereotypically so, the better to emphasize your God-decreed superiority. When her maid died, in 1910, Greene wrote to Berenson about the “poor little black thing who had been *more* than a mother to me” and “my faithful and adoring slave.” In 1921, after seeing Eugene O’Neill’s “[The Emperor Jones](#),” starring the Black actor Charles Sidney Gilpin, she wrote to Berenson, “A real (New York) darky—and amazingly well done.”

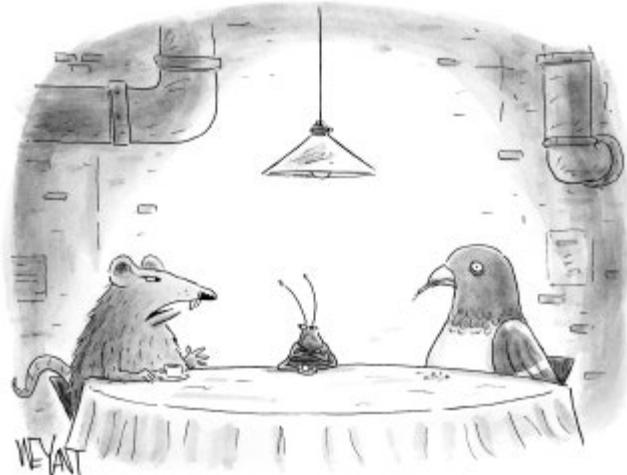
The language Greene used with white people was perhaps not so far from that of the light-skinned, class-conscious Black society in which she spent her early years—which considered dark-skinned Blacks to be less “distinguished.” Born in 1879 in Washington, D.C., which, as the historian Willard B. Gatewood noted, was then “the center of the black aristocracy in the United States,” Belle Marion Greener was the third child of Genevieve Ida Fleet Greener, a musician and a teacher, and Richard Theodore Greener, a lover of books and art who, in 1870, had been the first Black graduate of Harvard College. In 1872, he became the principal of the Preparatory High School for Colored Youth, the country’s first public high school for Black students (and one of the schools where Genevieve had taught music). After they married, in 1874, Genevieve followed her husband to South Carolina, where he had become the first Black professor at the University of South Carolina. They returned to D.C. after Reconstruction fell apart, and Greener supported his growing family by working as a lawyer and as the dean of the Howard University Law School.

The Greeners had five children, including Belle (two others died in infancy), and, in 1888, settled in New York, where Greener served for several years as an examiner at the Municipal Civil Service Commission and led the effort to raise money to build what is now known as Grant’s Tomb. In 1898, when Greener was struggling to find work, he sought out the help of Booker T. Washington. Soon, he was serving in President William McKinley’s diplomatic corps. (According to Strouse, Republicans gave foreign jobs to a few distinguished Black men to attract the Black vote.) Greener was sent to Vladivostok, a remote Russian outpost. Before becoming a diplomat, he had separated from Genevieve, possibly owing to their differing views on race. Genevieve was already passing as white in

some contexts; presumably, the children were, too. Greener died in Chicago in 1922, likely without seeing the children he had with Genevieve again.

By choosing whiteness, Genevieve set a damaging example for her offspring. The lesson it taught them was that whiteness was “better,” its power the only kind worth claiming. In this way, she condemned herself and her children to a void of history. They were racial mushrooms, sprouting out of nowhere, with no permanent ground to stand on. They could trust no one, because they had no one, and I can only imagine the corrosive effect this would have on the spirit.

Once Genevieve and her children began passing in New York, they had to assume new or, rather, reimagined identities. The family abbreviated Greener to Greene. Genevieve changed her maiden name from Fleet to Van Vliet, to align it with the old Dutch names that were then prominent in New York society. Greene and her brother, Russell, added da Costa as a middle name, to connect themselves, the curators write, “to a fictional Portuguese heritage that would help explain their darker complexions.” (The other siblings had lighter skin tones and did not bother to make this change.)



“The time has come for us to put our old ways behind us, unite the three families, and finally take this city by force!”

Cartoon by Christopher Weyant

In order to help support her family, the industrious Greene dropped out of high school, at Horace Mann, after a year and, in 1894, began working as a messenger and a clerk for Lucetta Daniell, the registrar at Teachers College. By 1896, she was Daniell’s assistant, and Daniell was her protector and

mentor; Greene eventually found another advocate in Grace Hoadley Dodge, one of the founders of Teachers College. Both women encouraged her to go back to school—the only way she could achieve her longtime dream of becoming a librarian. (Greene once told a journalist, “I knew definitely by the time I was twelve years old that I wanted to work with rare books. I loved them even then, the sight of them, the wonderful feel of them, the romance and thrill of them.”) Daniell and Dodge’s support led Greene to enroll at the Northfield Seminary for Young Ladies, in western Massachusetts, a school for intelligent students of modest means. In a letter of support, Dodge wrote to the wife of the school’s founder:

The family has a sad history[.] The Mother was a Mt Holyoke Graduate, a teacher—She married a man, with Spanish Cuban & Negro blood a lawyer who graduated the head of his class at Harvard! He turned out clever but bad and after terrible experiences she left him & has been supporting her five children with terrible struggle. . . . While the trace of Negro blood is noticeable, Belle has always associated intimately with the best class of white girls & at the College was a great favorite with many being entertained by them & going out with them— The Mother wants to make the girl a true noble woman & she has qualities for such if under such influence as Northfield. . . . The Mother, of course, is white with good ancestry and Belle inherits brains & ability.

There is no evidence of Genevieve’s having attended Mount Holyoke, or of Richard having “Spanish Cuban” blood (a term chosen to distinguish it, no doubt, from “ordinary” Cuban blood). But to see the racial fear and justification in Dodge’s letter is to see how much Genevieve had already done to perpetuate certain myths, including that of the “shiftless” Black man. To describe a skin color is to say nothing about the person. But, if you create a story around it, you can trigger all sorts of things, including puritanism and the nasty, uncomfortable thrill of the exotic. Greene had to explain her light-brown complexion somehow, so why not make her a victim of it, and Richard the dark marauder sullying Genevieve’s and his daughter’s whiteness—because isn’t that what Black men do?

We live in a world where miscegenation is still often reviled. And artists ranging from D. W. Griffith to Adrienne Kennedy have made art out of racial—read sexual—hysteria. Kennedy’s play “Funnyhouse of a Negro” tells the story of a young light-skinned Black woman who lives in thrall to her dark-skinned father and white-skinned mother. Near the end of the play, her interior voices all speak together:

He never tires of the journey, he who is the darkest one, the darkest one of them all. My mother looked like a white woman, hair as straight as any white woman’s. I am yellow but he is black. . . . How I hoped he was dead, but he never tires of the journey. It was because of him that my mother died because she let a black man put his hands on her. Why does he keep returning?

I wonder if Greener “returned” to his daughter throughout her life, not as a man but as a dark shadow her heart could not let go. Before her death, Greene destroyed her diaries and the letters in her possession, so we’ll never know. It’s up to us to imagine how she, a fatherless, culturally deracinated girl, might have felt as she made her way through Northfield and, in 1900, through Amherst College’s Summer School of Library Economy. Classes on topics such as cataloguing, the Dewey decimal system, and handwriting helped the future librarian hone her skills, which she further sharpened at Princeton University’s library, where she went on to work, for an annual salary of four hundred and eighty dollars—a bit less than eighteen thousand in today’s dollars. (Librarians, like schoolteachers, remain at the bottom of the financial ladder. To economize, Greene roomed with her boss, Charlotte Martins, and Martins’s family.) It’s unclear how Greene got the job, but it is almost certain that she wouldn’t have got it if the administrators had realized that she was Black. Known then as the “Southern Ivy,” Princeton had a number of students from the former Confederacy.



An image from the Anhalt-Morgan Gospels, from the late tenth century, purchased by the Morgan Library & Museum in 1948. Photograph by Janny Chiu / Courtesy Morgan Library & Museum

“The range of material Greene encountered while undertaking this work is staggering,” Daria Rose Foner, who worked as a research associate at the Morgan Library, writes of Greene’s time at Princeton. “On February 28, 1905, for instance, she encountered 146 books.” Greene also performed clerical tasks for Martins. The library was expanding its collection of Civil War manuscripts and materials. Like her future boss, Greene admired the British Museum’s library, but she believed that the American library system, with its card catalogues, was the best in the world. By the time Junius Morgan introduced her to his uncle, she was ready for the monumental job at hand.

Given her remarkable collaboration with the man Greene called “my Mr. Morgan,” it was probably no surprise to many that she was named the first director of the Morgan Library & Museum, in 1924. That year, Morgan’s son, J. Pierpont Morgan, Jr., or Jack, made his father’s library a public institution, easily accessible to scholars. It was a move that Greene

complained about privately, but, because of her love of the work, she stayed on until she retired, in 1948, instituting a number of public programs—lectures, exhibitions—that made the museum more welcoming to outsiders.

Visiting the current exhibition and following Greene's story from achievement to achievement, I thought about her white minstrelsy and how Blackness always shows beneath the makeup. I thought of all that her passing had cost her: family ties, love in a community she actually belonged to. I wondered how her gifts might have flourished in a different setting—working with the great Black bibliophile Arthur Schomburg, say, whose personal collection became the foundation of the New York Public Library's Schomburg Center. But Schomburg's collection wasn't synonymous with world power for Greene, and she was a girl who loved power. What she missed out on, though, was the experience of her race as a cultural power. Because she couldn't acknowledge her Blackness, she couldn't even be properly “siddity,” which Hurston and other race folk of Greene's generation would have called a damn shame. Forsaking that, she became a member of another race—not Black or white but alternately grandiose and self-despising.

Part of what keeps the visitor to “A Librarian's Legacy” from continuously judging Greene is the awareness of how her lies and shape-shifting diminished her. She could not live under her true name, as her true self; America had robbed her of that and so much more. And then there were those who suspected the truth—and saw her only through that lens. The French art dealer René Gimpel, who perished in a German concentration camp in 1945, wrote in his journal (published posthumously, as “Diary of an Art Dealer”):

I don't remember if I've spoken of Miss Greene, with her tanned complexion. I believe she was born in Cuba, she is even said to be a mulatto; her hair is frizzy, her cheeks are thick, her lips big. She's a figure sculpted by a savage of genius. And she's a “savage” herself: she is savage in her furies, in her preconceived notions, even in her marvelous intelligence.

Intelligent but savage . . . Marvellous but maybe Black . . . It was the “but’s” that Greene had to contend with, a conjunction that would never give her

her full due.

I thought, too, of all the brilliant women and men who couldn't pass, who didn't have the opportunities that Greene had because her mother taught her how to get a seat at the table. That's one part of this show that hurts, and the curators make a point of including stories about the damage that passing does not only to the passers but to the Blacks they leave behind. As I read a wall text about Greene's ascent in her field, I was aware of footage flickering nearby. It was a scene from the 1934 film version of "Imitation of Life," and it showed Peola, played by Fredi Washington, a light-skinned actress, telling her dark-skinned mother (Louise Beavers) that she can't be around her anymore, because she wants to live as a white woman. The scene is melodramatic because the situation is melodramatic, and, in the exhibition, we are never free of its questions.

The design of the show emphasizes this racial claustrophobia. In vitrines and on pedestals we see copies of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, "[Passing](#)," Jessie Redmon Fauset's "[Plum Bun](#)" (1928), and other primary texts that only deepen the portrait of the deception that Greene lived in and could never escape. Although Morgan left her fifty thousand dollars at the time of his death, in 1913—a generous gift—it would not have allowed Greene to stop working. For most of her adult life, she supported Genevieve in Murray Hill, where they had adjoining apartments. Then, in 1921, she assumed responsibility for Robert (Bobbie) Mackenzie Leveridge, the two-year-old son of her sister Teddy. Teddy's husband had been killed during the First World War, while she was pregnant with Bobbie. Teddy remarried, but Bobbie stayed with his aunt. Handsome and bright, he was the apple of Greene's eye, and, following her wish, he enrolled at Harvard in 1936. But he dropped out before his senior year, and eventually drifted into the military. In 1943, Greene was told that Bobbie had died in service, in Europe, but it wasn't true. In June of that year, a couple of months before his death, Bobbie gave the art conservator and historian Daniel Varney Thompson, a close friend of Greene's, an envelope. In it was a letter from Bobbie's fiancée, a white girl, in which she confronted him about his family's ancestry. (Her father may have conducted an investigation.) Bobbie died by suicide later that summer. It's unlikely that Thompson ever showed Greene the letter. ♦



Hilton Als, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, won the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for criticism. He is the editor of “[*God Made My Face: A Collective Portrait of James Baldwin*](#).”

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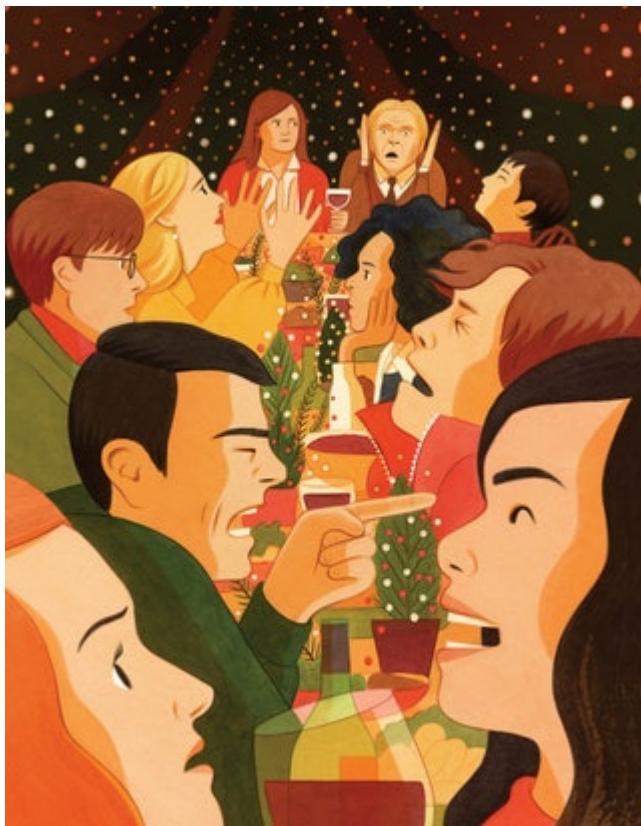
[The Theatre](#)

Family Discord and Holiday Music in “Cult of Love” and “No President”

Two scathing new productions satisfy our hunger for dysfunction-driven entertainment.

By [Helen Shaw](#)

December 13, 2024



In Leslye Headland's drama, a family's attempts at harmony fall flat. Illustration by Eleni Kalorkoti

The first image of Leslye Headland's family drama, "Cult of Love," on Broadway at the Hayes, looks like a Christmas card. Behind a gauzy scrim, most members of the ten-person cast pose in festive symmetry, carefully

arranged around a living room glowing with a thousand holiday lights. We consider this tableau for a moment, before the scrim rises and the action begins. The prefatory pause gives the audience a chance to applaud a starry ensemble. It also signals that what we're about to see is glossy—and a little false.

We're in the seemingly blissful home of an intensely Christian family, the Dahls, and the elders—Ginny (Mare Winningham, Tony-nominated in 2022 for “Girl from the North Country”) and her mentally deteriorating husband, Bill (David Rasche, who played a consigliere on “*Succession*”)—have summoned their adult children home for the holiday. The family members regularly break into impressively harmonized, Osmond-family-level carol arrangements that they've clearly been singing together forever. Some of the siblings' spouses might roll their eyes, but they often join in, shaking a maraca here, playing a washboard there.

At first, everyone's feeling a bit Grinchy because Ginny won't serve Christmas Eve dinner until the sweetheart of the family, the recovering heroin addict Johnny (Christopher Sears), arrives with his friend and fellow N.A. member Loren (Barbie Ferreira). These two have learned to be frank about their issues, unlike the rest of the family, who remain in undeclared crisis. The onetime theologian Mark (Zachary Quinto) and his wife, Rachel (Molly Bernard), are hiding a separation. The pregnant Diana (Shailene Woodley), a zealot, and her Episcopal-priest husband, James (Christopher Lowell), can't stop making homophobic comments as Evie (Rebecca Henderson) and her new wife, Pippa (Roberta Colindrez), grit their teeth. (Henderson and Headland, the playwright, are married in real life.) Dad, meanwhile, is losing his memory, though Mom won't admit it. The play's most chilling line is delivered wryly by Pippa. “Like it or not, *you* are the parents now,” she tells the quarrelling siblings, before splitting for her Airbnb.

“Cult of Love,” which Headland has said is based on her own family, is this season's domestic slugfest, a Broadway staple with a history stretching back at least to Clifford Odets's lyrical “Awake and Sing!” (1935). But “Cult,” first performed in 2018, moves faster and throws wilder punches than other works in its category. Headland has been making films and TV shows for a

decade now—she co-created the Netflix series “Russian Doll”—and in the play’s hundred-minute running time you sense conflicting methods at work. She and her director, Trip Cullman, expertly ratchet up tension with overlapping dialogue, using it to demonstrate the rhythms of addiction and relapse. (Our own hunger for dysfunction-driven entertainment is, sadly, its own kind of dependence.)

Headland does sometimes overload the table with narrative. When she takes a breath, though, she creates moments of genuine connection, as when Bill, exuding amnesiac fondness, pleads for peace among his children. Woodley nails Diana’s mean-waif combustibility, and both Colindrez and Ferreira, playing outsiders unimpressed with their welcome to the Dahl house, do lovely work. Elsewhere, however, Headland’s TV training undermines her. She seems to have needed a few more episodes for all the character arcs and pontificating speeches to land.

“Cult of Love” has a subtitle, “Pride,” which refers both to the hubris of faith and to one of the seven deadly sins; Headland has written a series of plays based on each one. In 2010, she made a splash with the gluttonous girls-gone-bad comedy “Bachelorette.” Two years later, she wrote the greed-themed office farce “Assistance,” informed by her own stint working for Harvey Weinstein. In Headland’s “dirty dioramas,” as she calls those works, there’s usually an alpha—a leader whose behavior infects everyone below them in the pack. In “Cult of Love,” the alpha is Ginny, the family’s Denier-in-Chief, played by Winningham with frightening precision. Usefully, Winningham has a beautiful but nasal folk-song twang, which—whether she’s singing or speaking—cuts through the other, merely pretty voices.

“Cult of Love,” unlike the other “sin” plays, was written when Headland was in her thirties, after she married Henderson, whose character, Evie, can be seen as Headland’s stand-in. Evie’s addiction—one that she battles as much as Johnny does narcotics and Mark does God—is to the toxic family itself. Should she give them up? Performing an intense psychodrama about your wife’s family, night after night, must be gruelling. Henderson approaches the task with crisp gravity, ceding the right of tragedy, as almost everyone does, to Rasche’s Bill. His memory issues, papered over by his

unlistening wife, fade from the play’s attention—they aren’t climax material—but you’ll remember them, or at least I did, in the days afterward.

The same weekend that I saw “Cult of Love,” I also saw “No President,” the avant-garde group Nature Theatre of Oklahoma’s latest show. The production, at the Skirball, is a two-and-a-half-hour dance-theatre marathon, featuring a full corps de ballet, performed without a break. The company, which has won multiple Obie Awards and international acclaim, has endured its own family psychodrama, related to the multiyear project “Life and Times.” (There was a rupture between the company’s leaders, Pavol Liska and Kelly Copper, and its members.)

Like the Dahl household, the nightmarish “No President”—subtitled a “A Story Ballet of Enlightenment in Two Immoral Acts”—relies on holiday music to distract us from interpersonal grotesquerie. An extended recording of Tchaikovsky’s “The Nutcracker” plays while a narrator, Robert M. Johanson, magniloquently intones the show’s plot, which the dancers perform and mime. There are no mice, no soldiers; instead, Johanson relates a grisly, bizarro fable about an actor turned security guard (Ilan Bachrach) whose *Père Ubu*-like ascent to tyrannical power involves frequent sexual abuse (often of him, by a dancing group of “personal demons”) and a cannibalistic approach to a war that he’s waging against another security firm.

Liska and Copper’s balletic staging begins as a delight and then deliberately overstays its welcome. In story-ballet mode, the corps brings the main characters’ props onstage—such as scarves that represent the blood of the security guard’s many victims—and then exits with glad little jetés. Ha ha, off they go! But the nine thousandth little jeté might make you want to scream. You will find it provocative, or punishing, in the same measure that you enjoy other surreal horror projects. I was reminded of the French artist Christian Boltanski’s video-loop work “L’Homme Qui Tousse,” from 1969, in which a man vomits fake blood onto his chest, seemingly forever, and of Casper Kelly’s short film “Too Many Cooks,” from 2014, which obsessively repeats a faux-sitcom theme song. (What is funny becomes boring becomes funny becomes frightening.)

As is common practice these days, this major downtown performance was staged for only three days. The show lampoons the prim, tutu-clad aesthetic of high European culture, but it also depends on that culture's remains: there is not enough support in the U.S. for such audacious, resource-intensive work, so the show was jointly commissioned by the Ruhrtriennale, Düsseldorfer Schauspielhaus, and Bard College. I was grateful to have the Nature Theatre of Oklahoma back, battering my consciousness, but I felt a little disheartened at the echoes of "Cult of Love" 's acidic score-settling. Johanson's narrator refers frequently to the narcissism of actors and their hunger for approval. Liska and Copper's text also, uncomfortably, makes constant, slighting reference to Bachrach's body. (The security guard did not merely take a bath; he "stuffed" himself into the bathtub, Johanson says.) "You want the spotlight?" I imagine the Nature Theatre's alphas asking. "This is how it burns." But that's what we expect from our holiday entertainment these days. All our theatre-makers are angry kids, and *you* are the parents now. ♦



Helen Shaw, The New Yorker's theatre critic, joined the magazine in 2022.

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Poems

- **“On Keats’s Seeking a Rhyme for ‘Breast’ in Each of His Three Last Sonnets”**

By Michael Chabon | “‘Unrest’ suggests the sleeplessness that turns / A burning saint upon a brazier bed.”

- **Greetings, Friends!**

By Ian Frazier | Re ’24: Let’s not forget / We’re all in brave Navalny’s debt. / He showed a soul can still be free / Whatever its surroundings be.

[Poems](#)

On Keats's Seeking a Rhyme for “Breast” in Each of His Three Last Sonnets

By [Michael Chabon](#)

December 16, 2024

I love that in the final fevered surge,
Hectic and heartsick and hemorrhaging time,
He had the art, the nerve, the need, the urge
To cup one last fair couplet with a rhyme.
Not “zest,” so much. It hints of *spice* and *tart*.
The dash of z does nothing to conceal
A young man’s penchant to neglect the heart—
The convoluted kernel—for the peel.

“Unrest” suggests the sleeplessness that turns
A burning saint upon a brazier bed—
Where bright with brazen martyrdom he yearns
For hotter fires, not pillow to his head.
But “waist,” now—that’s a handhold when she tips
An overbrimming cupful to my lips.

[Michael Chabon](#) is the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of fifteen books, including “[The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay](#),” “[Moonglow](#),” and “[The Yiddish Policemen’s Union](#).”

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[Poems](#)

Greetings, Friends!

By [Ian Frazier](#)

December 16, 2024



Illustration by Edward Steed

Peal, Christmas bells! Ring loud and long!
May choral groups rejoice in song!
Though not a few of us are bummed out
Let gloom and doom be hereby drummed out.
As days grow short, and hot, and dry,
And smoke from somewhere dims the sky,
Dear friends, we're primed to wish you bliss

In even such a time as this,
With greetings fond, and full of cheer,
And hopes for better luck next year,
And years to come—we're gonna need it!
Major mojo, may God speed it!
To Kamala and Doug and Gwen
And Tim, you gave your ten times ten
Per cent, i.e., you gave your all,
Then did it right and made the call,
Conceded that you hadn't won—
Please note, opponents, how it's done.
So—what about those Yankees, yo?
Well, yes, the Dodgers beat 'em, though
The Yanks hung tough and looked askance
At the Dodgers' silly dance.
Now, where's our list? It was right here—
Of greet-ees far away and near—
Ah, good. We found it. Let's proceed
To fête, with this December's screed,
Swift Noah Lyles, world's fastest man,
Selena Gomez, Aykroyd (Dan),
Bill Skarsgård, Nascar's Ryan Blaney,
Sen. Andy Kim, Dana Delany,
Smooth Isata Kanneh-Mason,
Whose keyboard riffs set hearts a-racin',
Jose Iglesias, of the Mets,
Who is amazing! (Wait, um, let's
Take just a sec to mist our tree
With flame retardant, 'cause, you see,
That pesky brush fire's coming close. . . .)
May joy in an enormous dose
Descend on marathoner Ruth
Chepng'etich! In perfect truth
We wish the same sublime upon
Danielle Deadwyler, Stewart (Jon),
Eve Best, Ed Yong, Michelle Obama,
Willie Nelson, Zac Oyama,

Coco Gauff, the tennis player,
Andre Dickens, Atlanta's mayor,
Ballet's Chloe Misseldine
(A phenom like we've never seen),
Ludacris, and good Jon Stout.
In point of fact, we're stoked about
The bash that we'll be throwing soon
For all of them and Paul Muldoon,
Laura Gillen, Josh Shapiro,
Angela Merkel (still our hero),
The New York *Times*' Melissa Kirsch,
Steve Aoki, Seymour Hersh,
Yorgos Lanthimos (of course),
Jean Smart and Quannah Chasinghorse,
Stevie Wonder, Trilby Schreiber,
Each and every paid subscriber,
Anunoby, of the Knicks,
Our Jersey Giants, just for kicks,
Zendaya and Dev Patel
(On whose outstandingness we'll dwell),
All snow-globe skaters on their rinks,
And every Minnesota Lynx.
Now glory be, it's started raining!
With reservoirs no longer draining,
Let's pray for snow—we'll order sleds
For Dr. Fauci and his meds,
T-Pain, James Snyder, Tina Davis,
Emma Stone, Ms. Staples (Mavis),
Ha Jin, Samara Joy, Brad Lander,
Janelle Bynum (the Oregander,
First Black Cong. rep. from that state!),
Breanna Stewart, Winslet (Kate),
Chappell Roan, Josh Stein, Matt Damon,
Stacy Schiff, and Christian Gehman.
Haul out the good ol' Flexible Flyer,
On which we'll swoop from places higher,
Downhill posthaste with Walton Goggins

(May we not break both our noggins),
While H. L. Gates, well known as Skip,
Comes with us on our madcap trip;
The snow plumes speeding out behind
Depict our festive frame of mind.

Re '24: Let's not forget
We're all in brave Navalny's debt.
He showed a soul can still be free
Whatever its surroundings be.
Our lives are not much like his was;
We're grateful for him most because
He lived, it seemed, so unafraid—
Uncaught, unbroken, undismayed,
Uncrushed by rat-life knavery,
Serene in plain old bravery.
So now, dear friends, last year departs;
Let some relief refresh our hearts.
The season speaks of love's persistence
'Cross the darkness of existence;
Blest may we walk in love, and thrive—
Sweet hope for all in '25.

Ian Frazier, a staff writer at *The New Yorker*, is the author of “[Paradise Bronx: The Life and Times of New York’s Greatest Borough](#).”

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