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Goings On

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  By Hilton Als, Dan Stahl, Jane Bua, Sheldon Pearce, Marina Harss, Richard Brody, Michael Schulman, and Rachel Syme | Also: the nostalgia of Vacation sunscreen, Tiler Peck's Jerome Robbins festival, and more.

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The Ambitious Film Deconstructions of Stan Douglas

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By Hilton Als, Dan Stahl, Jane Bua, Sheldon Pearce, Marina Harss, Richard Brody, Michael Schulman, and Rachel Syme

August 1, 2025

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

Stan Douglas is a powerful, one-of-a-kind artist who doesn't declare his importance through flash or by making press-ready declarations about how to look at his various films and photographs through the lens of autobiography. Instead, he digs deeply through and around images that speak volumes about the poignancy of being, especially as history disappears us. Born in Vancouver, where he still lives and works, the now sixty-four-year-old master has dedicated his working life to making art about the experience of storytelling—all those stories, as Joan Didion once said, we tell ourselves in order to live.

Installation view of "Birth of a Nation."Art work © Stan Douglas / Courtesy the artist / Victoria Miro / David Zwirner; Photograph by Olympia Shannon

In his outstanding and ambitious show **“Ghostlight”** (on view at the Hessel Museum of Art, at Bard College, in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y., through Nov. 30), curated with insight by Lauren Cornell, Douglas crafts a world that describes and embraces the will of human beings of all stripes, creating a narrative that lives inside and outside the realm of understanding. We do not know why we need stories to live, but we do, and Douglas underscores this in several phenomenal pieces, such as his film adaptation, from 1995, of E. T. A. Hoffmann’s classic tale “Der Sandmann.” The installation alludes not only to Hoffmann’s gothic sense of fear, love, and the intricacies of memory—Douglas shot it in post-Wall Berlin—but to another of the artist’s great themes: how we show what is remembered. Shot on 16-mm. black-and-white film, the ghostly looking “Der Sandmann” was recorded at the old Ufa Studios, near Potsdam—a company that distributed Leni Riefenstahl’s films—and shows a landscape that evokes death and regrowth. Part of what Douglas means to discuss in the intersecting videos is Schrebergärten, a nineteenth-century urban plan in which the poor could grow their own gardens on small rented plots of land. One can see echoes of Syberberg’s “Hitler: A Film from Germany” (1977), certainly in terms of the director’s use of a gray that hovers somewhere between black and white, but Douglas’s work is not operatic—it combines the mythical and the everyday in a frame.

We live history from moment to moment, and one of the extraordinary things that film can do is re-create it. Still, Douglas doesn’t treat film as a documentary but as a document about storytelling and about how film can be used to elicit historical *bigness*. His “Birth of a Nation” (2025) is the show’s pièce de résistance. It’s a deconstruction of D. W. Griffith’s amazing film “The Birth of a Nation,” from 1915, which a number of critics and filmmakers consider the birth of modern cinema—and which introduced racist tropes that infect “entertainment” to this day. Douglas takes the pain and confusion of some of those images out of your heart by showing both the real feeling and the artificiality that go into telling any kind of story at all.—*Hilton Als*

About Town

Off Broadway

“Lord Nil: 7 Deadly Sins” consists of harrowing escape acts executed by the titular creator and star, an Italian who, after earning a degree in political science, naturally turned to illusionism. The stunts here are purportedly real, though, and each is tied, sometimes tenuously, to a cardinal sin. Between dodging axe blades and wriggling free of chains, the limber lord explains his intent: to inspire people to face their own terrors. A nice message, but for most of us that doesn’t involve dangling straitjacketed above flaming spikes, so practical applications are limited. More stirring, perhaps, is Lord Nil’s generously bared torso, a glistening invitation to test our prowess at escaping the snares of lust or envy.—*Dan Stahl (Stage 42; through Aug. 31.)*

Classical

As part of Summer for the City, **Brooklyn Rider** takes the stage at Lincoln Center’s Damrosch Park to kick off the celebration of the ensemble’s twentieth season. Special guests include the Syrian-born, Brooklyn-based clarinettist and composer Kinan Azmeh and the percussionist Mathias Kunzli, who may be the only common collaborator between Lauryn Hill and Yo-Yo Ma. Brooklyn Rider’s fête continues with five additional concerts at various Lincoln Center venues, including a performance of Kayhan Kalhor’s “Silent City,” written in remembrance of the massacre of Halabja; a meditation on Schoenberg’s pivotal Second String Quartet; and an ode to the four elements.—*Jane Bua (Lincoln Center; Aug. 7-9.)*

Off Broadway

The 1988 movie “Heathers” came out when teens killing their classmates could still play as dark comedy, without darker echoes of reality. The current production of **“Heathers: The Musical,”** which premièred in 2013, offsets its disturbing subject with Crayola-bright costumes and performances to match, a fast-paced, funny score, and an even funnier

book. At an archetypal American high school, the resourceful Veronica (Lorna Courtney) ingratiates herself with the popular girls—the Heathers—complicating her relationship with her unpopular best friend (an endearing Erin Morton) and with a Baudelaire-quoting bad boy (Casey Likes), who wants to uncomplicate things through murder. The first casualty is the Heather-in-chief (a majestically merciless McKenzie Kurtz); then, anything—or anyone—goes.—*Dan Stahl (New World Stages; open run.)*

Dance

The enterprising Tiler Peck has been a leading dancer at New York City Ballet for more than fifteen years, played a neurotic ballerina on Amy Sherman-Palladino's "Étoile," and created a number of ballets of her own. Now she curates **"Ballet Festival: Jerome Robbins,"** an array of miniatures, distributed over three programs. These include the charming pas de deux "Four Bagatelles," to Beethoven; the seldom performed duo for two women "Rondo," to Mozart; and "Suite of Dances," a solo meditation on Bach that Robbins whipped up for Baryshnikov in 1994. The last will be performed on alternate nights by Roman Mejía (Peck's husband) and Peck herself—the first time this solo has been taken on by a woman.—*Marina Harss (Joyce; Aug. 12-17.)*

Art

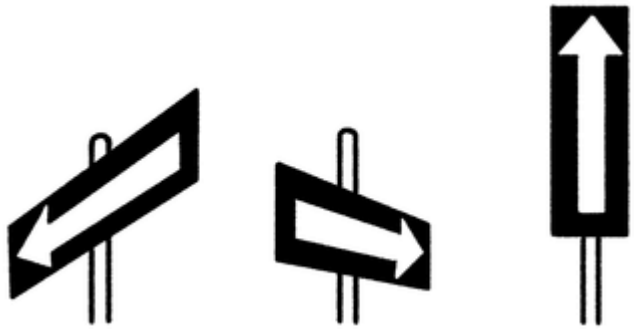
“The Rosebud Garden of Girls,” 1868.Photograph by Julia Margaret Cameron / Courtesy © The Royal Photographic Society Collection at the V&A

One of the great takeaways from the small, elegant, and wonder-filled show **“Arresting Beauty: Julia Margaret Cameron”** is how much fun Cameron must have been. Born in Calcutta to a trader father, she married Charles Hay Cameron, an investor in plantations in modern-day Sri Lanka, and raised eleven children; after moving to England in 1848, they became part of an art scene that included Alfred Tennyson. (Cameron was Virginia Woolf’s great-aunt.) One of her kids gave her a camera, and with it Cameron revolutionized photography by manipulating her exposures to soften and blur, for dramatic results. Among the best pictures here are of the botanical painter Marianne North, and of a pensive young boy named Freddy Gould, who looks at the lens with the calm certainty of knowing who he is.—*Hilton Als (Morgan Library & Museum; through Sept. 14.)*

Movies

Fear not: **“The Naked Gun”** hits the target, but barely. This reboot of the beloved franchise, centered on the Los Angeles Police Squad, is funny enough to sustain patience without rivalling the original’s wild charm. Liam

Neeson plays Lt. Frank Drebin, Jr., whose overly violent response to a bank robbery gets him demoted; his investigation of a car accident connects to the robbery, and both lead him to an evil billionaire (Danny Huston) with a diabolical scheme. To thwart it, Frank teams up with a fellow-officer (Paul Walter Hauser) and a victim's sister (Pamela Anderson), and some of the boisterous humor is playfully ribald. But, in Akiva Schaffer's direction, the gleefully exaggerated slapstick doesn't astonish, it only amuses; the film hardly achieves liftoff from its script.—*Richard Brody (In wide release.)*



Pick Three

Michael Schulman on cheeky new works that fetishize the old.

1. Filling the void left by "Titanique," the Off Broadway comedy **"Ginger Twinsies"** (at the Orpheum) lampoons another cultural artifact of the late nineties: the Lindsay Lohan remake of "The Parent Trap." The show, written and directed by Kevin Zak, stars the pointedly un-twinlike Russell Daniels and Aneesa Folds as the redheaded tweens separated at birth, with a scene-stealing Phillip Taratula as their gold-digging would-be stepmom. The wigs and the sex jokes are plentiful.

2. What's campier than the above? Not much, but consider this: Zero Waste Daniel, the Brooklyn-based fashion brand founded by Daniel Silverstein, is marking the fortieth anniversary of the TV show **"The Golden Girls"** with a capsule collection, including cheesecake-print sweatshirts, banana-leaf-patterned bomber jackets, and bags illustrated with the four ladies' faces. Through Aug. 17, the brand's flagship store, in Bushwick, is outfitted as a "Golden Girls" dreamscape, with retro lounge furniture and Miami pastels.

Illustration by Zack Rosebrugh

3. The character actor Jeff Hiller is Emmy-nominated for his daffy yet heartfelt performance as a gay Kansan on HBO's "Somebody Somewhere." He also has a new memoir out, **"Actress of a Certain Age."** Hiller, an avid reader of celebrity memoirs, titles each chapter after one of them, while recounting the indignities of being gay in Hollywood, his evolving relationship with the church, and studying abroad in Namibia. It's funny on the page, but I recommend the audiobook, so you can hear Hiller's Carol Burnett-like goofy deadpan and trademark giggle.

On and Off the Avenue

Rachel Syme on SPF nostalgia.

Sunscreen, as a consumer good, tends to fall into the gloppy gray area between need and want. We are all aware that the sun, as dazzling and mood-bolstering as it may be, is an unmerciful adversary. Sustained

exposure to UV radiation, the science tells us, comes with a roster of terrible potentialities, from skin cancer to cataracts to leathery wrinkles. So the need is clear; but what about the *want*? I have rarely stood in the sunblock aisle of a drugstore and found myself overwhelmed with desire. My concerns are practical: I am pale and quick to crisp. Give me high SPF, at a reasonably low price, and I'm sold.

Illustration by Joanne Joo

But, back in the summer of 2021, when I was newly vaccinated and practically feral for sensuous experiences, I found myself drawn to a brand of sunscreen, called Vacation, that I'd never seen before. Or had I? The bottle of the brand's Classic Lotion, a cream-colored tube with squiggly neon-blue lettering and a lemon-yellow cap, looked like a relic from 1985. I felt an inexplicable pang of deep nostalgia for the stuff, which touted itself as "The World's Best-Smelling Sunscreen," even though it was, technically, new to the market. I bought a small bottle (then $20, now $15), and, upon sniffing it, further tumbled out of time. There was the traditional banana and coconut, but also something alluringly vintage and plastic. (I later learned the note was eau de pool toy.)

The yearning I felt for this faux-vintage sunscreen was, as it turns out, entirely by design. Vacation was launched, four years ago, by three friends —Lach Hall, Marty Bell, and Dakota Green—seemingly as an exercise in kitschy revivalism. The company, which sells what they call "leisure-enhancing" sun protection, aims to summon the carefree aesthetic of the gaudy tanning-oil era (without, perhaps, the carefree attitude toward melanoma). "The whole mission was to make sunscreen *fun*," Hall told me recently. The brand's products lean toward the stunty; there's a whipped

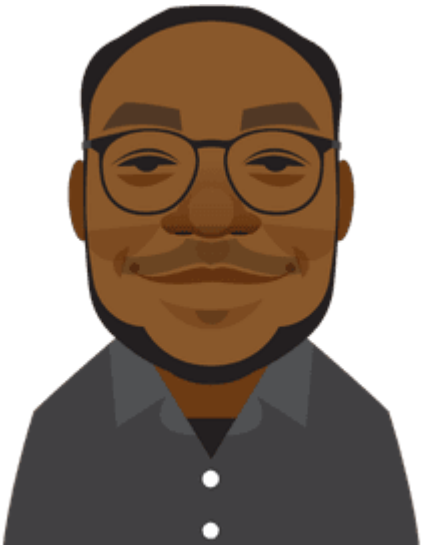
sunscreen that comes in an aerosol can, a crystal-clear face jelly, a UV-deflecting baby oil. In 2022, the brand kicked off the Orange Gelée Revival Project, a mission to resurrect the cultish Bain de Soleil product, a tangerine-hued unguent that launched in 1925 and became coveted, despite its pitiful SPF 4, for its strange texture (somewhere between Vaseline and toothpaste) and signature aroma (neroli, white flowers). When Bayer discontinued Bain de Soleil in 2019, more than eleven thousand people signed a petition in protest. Last year, Vacation's Orange Geleé—freshly pumped up to SPF 30, while channelling the original's scent—finally launched, to a wait list of fifteen thousand. The throwback tactics are clearly paying off; Vacation's wares are now sold in Target, Ulta, and other major retailers, and last month the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Vacation stands to make $80 million this year.

P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- *Diary of a popcorn seller*
- *The rise of heterofatalism*
- *What Gay Talese hates*

This article has been updated to match the version that ran in print.

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."
Dan Stahl is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff.
Jane Bua is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff who covers classical music for Goings On. Previously, she wrote for Pitchfork.



Sheldon Pearce is a music writer for The New Yorker's Goings On newsletter.
Marina Harss has been contributing dance coverage to The New Yorker since 2004. She is the author of "The Boy from Kyiv: Alexei Ratmansky's Life in Ballet."

Richard Brody, a film critic, began writing for The New Yorker in 1999. He is the author of "Everything Is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard."

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

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

The Talk of the Town

- **The Politics of Fear**
  By David Remnick | As a Presidential candidate, Donald Trump made his world view plain: there was “us” and there was “them.” Once he was in the White House, the fear factor would prevail.
- **The Governors Island Ferry Goes Electric**
  By Adam Iscoe | This month, the old diesel-powered Governors Island ferry will be retired, and the Harbor Charger—New York’s first hybrid-electric ferry—will (quietly) hit the water.
- **Sign Here! The World’s Greatest Autograph Collection Is Rediscovered**
  By Ben McGrath | In the early nineteen-hundreds, Josip Mikulec walked the globe, collecting famous signatures (Thomas Edison, Teddy Roosevelt, Admiral Tōgō). Now the mayor of his Croatian home town has purchased the three-thousand-page tome.
- **How to Make a Movie House with John Wilson**
  By Madeleine Wulfahrt | The Ridgewood, Queens, filmmaker, known for his HBO series “How To,” has opened Low Cinema—a neighborhood movie joint, for lovers of odd programming and second-run flicks.
- **New Coins in the Crypto Reserve**
  By Liana Finck | Forget gold. Time to stock up on Eggcoin (very valuable) and Scamcoin (not a scam).

Comment

The Politics of Fear

As a Presidential candidate, Donald Trump made his world view plain: there was “us” and there was “them.” Once he was in the White House, the fear factor would prevail.

By David Remnick

August 3, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photograph by Chip Somodevilla / Getty

The young Donald Trump was the Nelson Muntz of Jamaica Estates. (Or was he its Draco Malfoy? Scholars will debate such questions for generations.)

In any case, Trump was, from his formative years, a spoiled bully. The Trump family, whose fortune was made in outer-borough real estate, had a cook and a chauffeur, and “Little Donny” was a pigtail puller, an unruly loudmouth who tormented his teachers and hurled insults and rocks at other kids. When Trump was thirteen, his father, Fred, shipped him off to a military school, in Cornwall, New York. This was just the sort of place, it

was hoped, where Donald would mature into a young man of rectitude and self-regulation.

That, in fact, did not happen. Trump made it plain that his delight in domination was the immutable core of him. Marc Fisher, who co-authored "Trump Revealed," an astute early biography and character analysis, once told PBS that, as a cadet, Trump "used a broomstick as a weapon against classmates who didn't listen to him when he told them what to do. He was in part enforcing the rules of the academy, but he was equally so enforcing the rules of Donald Trump."

At home, Trump apprenticed with his father, collecting rents and learning the finer points of discriminatory housing. He eventually came under the tutelage of the attorney and sybarite Roy Cohn. What lessons Trump learned from Cohn were entirely malevolent: Never show weakness. Never apologize, never explain. Attack, never defend. Engender loyalty through intimidation. With his curious coif and self-satisfied expression, Trump made himself a presence in Page Six. Indecency and aggression were his brand. Cruel, narcissistic, duplicitous—the list is long and by now so familiar that even some of Trump's supporters concede that his most poisonous attributes are, to use the D.C. lingo, baked into the cake.

In 1989, Trump took out a full-page ad in the New York papers after the arrest of five Black and Latino teen-agers who became known as the Central Park Five. (Their convictions for rape were eventually overturned.) His screed resonates as a credo today:

> Mayor Koch has stated that hate and rancor should be removed from our hearts. I do not think so. I want to hate these muggers and murderers. They should be forced to suffer and, when they kill, they should be executed for their crimes. . . . I recently watched a newscast trying to explain the "anger in these young men." I no longer want to understand their anger. I want them to understand our anger. I want them to be afraid.

The ad led Murray Kempton, New York's greatest columnist, to consider the spectacle of Trump—"the man demeans anything he touches—"as he moved through the big city:

> To boast of hating used to be an embarrassment for the worst of people. I knew the Birmingham police commissioner who jailed [the civil-rights activist] Fred Shuttlesworth, again and again. He was always a mean man and now and then a vicious one, but he went to his grave denying that he had ever hated anyone. Time was when people who sent hate letters had the shame to keep themselves anonymous.

But not Trump. His insistence on a message of contempt was not something that he concealed. To the contrary, his hunger for attention was, then as now, embodied by his preposterous signature. As a businessman, he was often accused of cheating his contractors; as the star of "The Apprentice," he was himself only more so, a puffed-up cartoon C.E.O. who relished making his would-be employees stammer, quake, and cry. As a Presidential candidate, he made his world view clear: there was "us" and there was "them." And, with him in the White House, the fear factor would prevail. (Or, as he once told Bob Woodward, "Real power is—I don't even want to use the word—fear.")

"I'm scared," a twelve-year-old girl in North Carolina told Trump during his first Presidential campaign. "What are you going to do to protect this country?"

"You know what, darling?" Trump said. "You're not going to be scared anymore. They're going to be scared."

Six months into his second term, Trump has made it evident who "they" are; the population of the unnerved is diverse. (If that word is still legal.) It includes immigrants, university presidents, media executives, the heads of cultural institutions, librarians, scholars, scientists, trans people, government contractors, and dedicated federal employees. Some suffer for the President's pique and are deported in handcuffs and leg-irons. Some are forced to pay millions in tribute in order to go on conducting scientific research or broadcasting the news. Others must hire lawyers to fend off phony accusations of treason. In Congress, fear keeps the Republican majority in line and causes all too many Democrats to mind their language. Trump once derided his own Secretary of State and national-security adviser as "Little Marco," and he has been an entirely obedient satrap ever since. The Cabinet is a quivering collection of yea-sayers.

This response brings the President no end of titillation. “They’re all bending and saying, ‘Sir, thank you very much,’ ” he bragged, after certain law firms started making their pitiful arrangements with the White House. “They’re just saying, ‘Where do I sign?’ ”

Fortunately, there are encouraging instances of self-possession in various corners of the country. There are civil-rights groups and judges who have refused Trump’s most blatant challenges to the rule of law. Some artists, too, have set an example. Lately, there is Amy Sherald, who withdrew her solo show scheduled for September at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery, in Washington, D.C., rather than have her painting “Trans Forming Liberty” “contextualized” by an accompanying video. And then came Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s still vital, still scabrous “South Park,” which recently ran an episode about a naked President, his shortcomings pitilessly exposed.

But, even as Trump’s disapproval ratings climb, the Democratic Party continues to languish; its leadership is woefully scattered and deficient. Still, resolve comes in many forms. Cartoon bullies do not inevitably prevail. If individuals and institutions can muster that resolve in far greater numbers, neither will this President. ♦

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

On the Water

The Governors Island Ferry Goes Electric

This month, the old diesel-powered Governors Island ferry will be retired, and the Harbor Charger—New York's first hybrid-electric ferry—will (quietly) hit the water.

By Adam Iscoe

August 4, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

One foggy morning this spring, a ferryboat traversed the choppy waters between lower Manhattan and Governors Island. It was just after 7 *a.m.*—the first run of the day. But, for the boat, it was almost sunset. "She's our tether," a lightly bearded passenger named Sebastian Coss said. Coss, a former Governors Island staffer, was referring to the ferry, whose official name is the Lt. Samuel S. Coursen.

Commissioned by the U.S. Army in 1956, the Coursen has reliably transported equipment, vehicles, and passengers to and from Governors Island ever since. During the island's decades as an Army and Coast Guard base, the ship carried military families (as well as lumber and munitions). In its period of bureaucratic limbo, occasional government caretakers hitched a ride. Lately, food trucks, porta-potties, and luxury-spa-goers are a more common sight.

Two years ago, New York City announced that the Coursen, which runs on diesel, would be replaced by a thirty-three-million-dollar hybrid-electric passenger ferry. Asked if he'll miss it, Coss chuckled. "If you owned a nineteen-fifties Chevy Bel Air and you drove it to work every day, there'd be elements of it you'd really love," he said. "And you'd also be, like, 'It'd be nice to have air-conditioning.' "

The new ferry has enough air-conditioned interior seating for twelve hundred passengers—plus room for thirty vehicles. It runs on two Schottel azimuth thruster propellers powered by twenty-two lithium-ion battery packs, making it the first vessel to offer regularly scheduled low-emissions travel across the harbor. Its name, the Harbor Charger, was suggested by David Kurnov, of Brooklyn, in a public naming contest. Other submissions included Climate Queen, Hybrid McBoatface, and the S.S. Electric Boogie. Coss oversaw the design and construction of the new ferry. It is expected to begin service later this month. A round trip is five dollars for adults and free for kids.

At nine o'clock, Coss and some colleagues boarded yet another ferry, the Staten Island ferry, to pick up the Harbor Charger from a dry dock, where it had gotten a paint job. The boat was at the end of a long pier. It looked like a floating white trapezoid.

Inside one of the ship's battery rooms, an inspector wearing a hi-vis orange U.S. Coast Guard raincoat was examining its hybrid-electric system. Two men wearing blue hard hats, who worked for the ferry operator, were on hand. The inspector asked about setting up the vessel's seven gas-detection systems. "You know how to do it? How to calibrate it?"

"We don't know yet," a hard-hatted man said.

“Make sure you have the manual,” the inspector advised.

Talk turned to cameras and alarms, and then to the vessel’s fire-suppression system. The other hard-hatted man said, “It’s intrinsically safe, but not necessarily explosion-proof!” At that point, a reporter was escorted out of the battery room.

Up on the boat’s bridge, he found Captain Aaron Gracely, who had led the five-person crew that brought the ferry from a shipyard in Morgan City, Louisiana. The voyage took fourteen days. The Harbor Charger travelled thousands of nautical miles through the Mississippi River Delta, around the Florida Keys, and up the East Coast. Gracely, who usually captains larger vessels—oil tankers, container ships—described a stretch when the boat ran on battery power down the Atchafalaya River. “On a typical boat, when the engine goes quiet, everyone wakes up, ’cause it’s, like, ‘What just broke?’ ” But on the Harbor Charger, as in a hybrid car, battery mode is virtually silent. Gracely grinned as he said, “The sun was coming up, and it was quiet. It was a gorgeous river—just cypress trees and birds. It was like you were in a canoe.”

Another memory: the crew’s engineer, Austin Wyant, wired a fishing rod to the ship’s bell. One day, he caught a twenty-pound wahoo, which he cooked on a Blackstone grill that he’d strapped to a railing on the passenger deck. Someone set up a makeshift kitchen, with hot sauce, sea salt, pickles, Clorox spray, and a handmade sign: “Billy’s Bar and Grill.” The crew slept on cots under tarpaulins each night. In all, Wyant caught a hundred and forty-five pounds of fish—Spanish mackerel, tuna, bonito, and mahi-mahi. Otherwise, Gracely said, “nothing exciting happened, which is nice. No weird rattles or vibrations. Nothing serious broke.”

Around eleven o’clock, back on Staten Island, a snafu: a cooling valve had been left open, so the batteries had to stay off for a while, just to be safe. Alas, the city’s first-ever hybrid-electric ferry would arrive at Governors Island fuelled by diesel from a thirty-four-hundred-gallon tank. Captain Gracely was unfazed. He powered up the diesel generators and motored away from the dock. (Governors Island later said, in a statement, “The Harbor Charger has successfully operated on battery power over the last several weeks.”)

In the Gulf of Mexico—or the Gulf of America, as it's now known—a homing pigeon flew into the ship's bridge. The crew named the bird Pidge. "We let him rest, gave him food and water, and then he left when we got close to the coast," the captain recalled. "I guess you can consider Pidge the first passenger." ♦

Adam Iscoe, who began contributing to The New Yorker in 2021, has written about mental illness, contemporary art and film, private aviation, Afghanistan, climate change, mass incarceration, cryptocurrency, boats, corporate malfeasance, guns, cannabis, restaurants, and politics. In 2024, he received the Carey McWilliams Award.

Dept. of Tourism

Sign Here! The World’s Greatest Autograph Collection Is Rediscovered

In the early nineteen-hundreds, Josip Mikulec walked the globe, collecting famous signatures (Thomas Edison, Teddy Roosevelt, Admiral Tōgō). Now the mayor of his Croatian home town has purchased the three-thousand-page tome.

By Ben McGrath

August 4, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

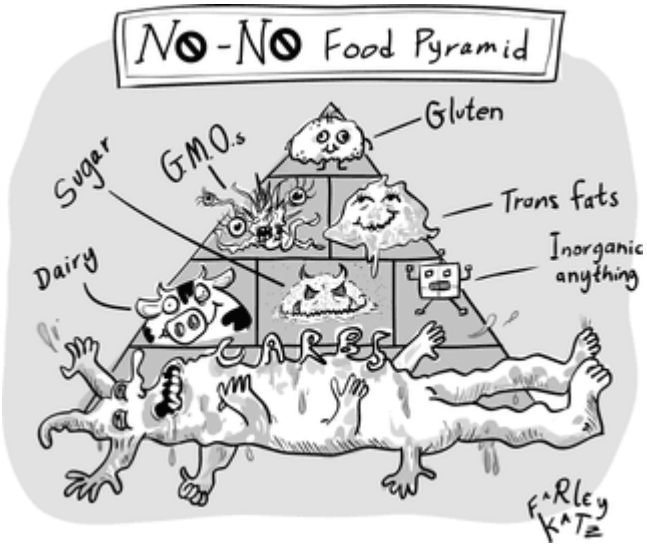
The “world’s greatest pedestrian,” as an old magazine once put it, may have been a farm boy born outside Zagreb, Croatia, in 1878. He has no Wikipedia page (yet!), though in his heyday his press coverage was abundant. “From childhood up he would watch the sun, a fiery ball, going down behind the western hills and wonder where it went,” the Fort Wayne *Journal Gazette* wrote in 1914. His name was Josip—later Joseph—Mikulec. He traversed the jungle in Brazil, the hills of Siberia, Tasmania, and Toledo, Ohio, all in the interest of circumnavigating the globe on foot, paying his way by selling postcards featuring his own likeness. He was said to have walked a hundred and twenty miles without sleeping. He became a brand ambassador for shoemakers. He wore gold rings that he claimed were given to him by Geronimo, and hoisted a fifty-eight-pound leather volume on his shoulder bearing the signatures of other witnesses to his exploits: Nikola Tesla, Prince Albert of York, Admiral Tōgō.

As he grew older, Mikulec began to realize that his aching joints weren’t as replaceable as his rubber soles. He sometimes allowed himself the comfort of trains and fashioned a stroller for his giant keepsake. It dawned on him that the baby in his carriage, containing the penmanship of tens of thousands of dignitaries during a period of rapid modernization, was perhaps more impressive than all the perambulation. In 1923, the *Times* reported on Mikulec’s trip to see a rare-book dealer about his prized possession, which he’d thought might be worth a million dollars. “This is probably the greatest collection of autographs in the world,” the dealer admitted, while declining to offer any money.

Mikulec died in 1933, in Genoa, penniless. The Depression had made itinerancy an unfortunate commonplace, no cause for celebration. Then—in Eastern Europe, at any rate—came Communism. “In Yugoslavia, it was really hard to travel,” Viktor Šimunić, a Croatian politician, said the other day, as a way of explaining Mikulec’s slide into obscurity. “And they maybe didn’t want to show the people it was possible to travel all over the world.” Šimunić is the mayor of Oroslavje, Mikulec’s home town, population six thousand, which erected a statue in the forgotten pilgrim’s honor last October. Dressed in a royal-blue suit, the mayor was in Manhattan for the first time, as part of an ongoing campaign to restore Mikulec’s celebrity. He was accompanied by three of his town’s councilmen, two of whom

grimaced while lugging a square suitcase with a combination lock down the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, around the corner, and into Central Park.

“We have a big history in our city,” Šimunić said as they walked. “We had two castles, but unfortunately, eighty years ago, one was burned, and we now have only one castle. You can see it here.” He pointed at an image on a canvas bag that was held by the third councilman. Tourism is a big priority for Šimunić, who has a touch of wanderlust himself, having already visited more countries (forty) than he has lived years (thirty-four). He spoke of building a museum to go with the new statue, and mentioned that the contents of the suitcase, which he had just shown to a curator at the Met, would serve as its chief attraction.



Cartoon by Farley Katz

They settled in the shade, near a monument to the King of Poland. The councilmen shook their arms in relief. Šimunić bent over the suitcase, thumbed the combo, and removed a couple of foam pads, revealing a leather-bound book that looked to be about a foot thick, with nearly three thousand pages, many embossed with the stamps and seals of scattered municipalities: Mikulec’s baby.

> “Sagamore Hill, Sept 4th, 1914. Joe F. Mikulec has just called here, on foot; he was last here, also on foot, on Jan. 12th, 1911. Theodore Roosevelt”

> “Success, Thos A. Edison, Orange N.J., Dec 1919”
>
> “Globe trotter Mikulec visited the greatest alfalfa center in the world on this date. The Denver Alfalfa Milling and Products Co., Oct 14, 1920”
>
> “To Mr. Samuel Robinson goes this great book on which I have worked for many years. Sincerely yours, Joe Mikulec, Globe Trotter, Philadelphia, Pa., May 28, 1924”

The purchase of the book and some other Mikulec artifacts, from an autograph dealer named Nathan Raab, had cost the council two hundred and twenty-five thousand dollars. Raab acquired it in 2021 from a descendant of Robinson, the founder of the Acme supermarket chain, who appeared to have documented some of his own roaming by affixing postage stamps from India, Lebanon, and Japan on pages Mikulec had left blank. “Not every person can see the value of this story,” Šimunić said, alluding to what he called a “loud minority” back home who questioned his spending. Spying some ants crawling around the margins, he shut the book. “They want, I don’t know, maybe to put asphalt on the roads or something,” Šimunić went on. “Of course we are making the roads, making the sidewalks, but this is the cherry on top. Mikulec went to walk and see the whole world. Now our goal is to make the whole world come and see Oroslavje.” ♦

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

How-To Dept.

How to Make a Movie House with John Wilson

The Ridgewood, Queens, filmmaker, known for his HBO series “How To,” has opened Low Cinema—a neighborhood movie joint, for lovers of odd programming and second-run flicks.

By Madeleine Wulfahrt

August 4, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

John Wilson, the thirty-eight-year-old filmmaker, was drinking iced coffee on his home turf of Ridgewood, Queens, one recent morning. He was in Rudy’s Bakery and Cafe, a venerable neighborhood joint, feeling on edge.

He and his friend Cosmo Bjorkenheim, a film critic, were about to head over to Low Cinema, a tiny storefront movie theatre (forty-plus seats) that they, with another friend, had quietly opened nearby in May. “We have one employee,” Wilson said. “And she’s never, like, fully opened the theatre before.”

Their début bill had been a double feature of the 2002 rom-com “Two Weeks Notice,” starring Hugh Grant and Sandra Bullock, and a short from 1903 called “Rube and Mandy at Coney Island.” Bjorkenheim, who has a wisp of a mustache, said, “Our first full run was a director’s cut of ‘Dirty Work’ ”—Bob Saget’s 1998 dark comedy. They’d followed up with Mike Nichols’s 1996 film, “The Birdcage.”

“We wanted to start out with some stuff that’s kind of hard to argue with,” Wilson said. Toni Binanti, the owner of Rudy’s, had a suggestion: they should show “Grumpier Old Men,” the “Grumpy Old Men” sequel, starring Walter Matthau and Sophia Loren. Wilson, who had on a striped button-down shirt and tan cut-offs, made a note in his iPhone. “All right, you’ve got the Midas touch,” he said.

As the partners walked to their theatre, a few heads turned knowingly in Wilson’s direction. He’s the creator and director of an HBO show, “How To with John Wilson,” which purported to be a series of lessons on such topics as small talk, remembering your dreams, and investing in real estate, but was really a collection of weird New York minutes. Low Cinema’s “inchoate programming sensibility,” as Bjorkenheim calls it, is intentional. Wilson said, “These were Hollywood movies from the nineties and two-thousands, but the framing is what we’re excited about. Making you pry open and rethink stuff that you may have glossed over.” Some have wondered if “Low Cinema” is a reference to the partners’ movie selections, but Bjorkenheim said, “We named it that because the ceilings were really low.”

Besides oldish and 16-mm. films (and a Sunday matinée programmed by a nine-year-old named Evelyn), the owners are trying to bring back the kind of second-run theatre that essentially vanished with the advent of home video and streaming. (“Eddington,” the new Ari Aster comedy, is on the

schedule.) “It’s not really a viable business model,” Bjorkenheim said. “But we think there’s an audience.”

Wilson said, “Cosmo told me the last time a movie theatre opened in Ridgewood was in 1927.”

At one point, there were ten or so in the neighborhood, Bjorkenheim said. “A guy who works at a hardware store nearby said he used to go to R.K.O. Madison on Myrtle, which was, like, a twenty-seven-hundred-seat, single-screen movie palace,” he continued. “He told me his mother took him to see Judy Garland there.”

Even with no fanfare, the theatre has been attracting plenty of walk-ins and selling out shows. Wilson views it as a community space. He relishes the idea of people connecting “over something that’s a bit boring.”

Wilson had passed by the empty storefront “thousands of times.” When the theatre concept came up, he took a walk-through. “There were no windows onto the street, which would be really crummy for another kind of business, but was really good for a theatre. It’s just a rectangle, and that’s all we needed.” Previously, the space was a barbershop and a knife warehouse. In the thirties or forties, Bjorkenheim said, it was a Chinese laundry.

Sometimes patrons assume that the theatre is a stunt. “It’s absolutely not performance art,” Wilson said. “I didn’t open this space to show *myself*.”

Bjorkenheim jumped in. “The space isn’t Season 4 of ‘How To with John Wilson.’ ”

The business partners did a lot of the renovation themselves. “I think, after my show came out, I started to feel a bit more agoraphobic,” Wilson said. “And I tried to resist that by making a space that forced a certain amount of interaction. Just to get, like, what’s the word? A therapy connection going.” He said he’s picked up a similar feeling from the audience. “It’s like they are starved for a kind of communal experience of joy.”

At Rudy’s, Binanti urged them to try to join the Myrtle Avenue Business Improvement District, which, among other services, could help them

remove any graffiti that turned up on their building. Wilson showed her a picture of their first tag, an illegible scrawl. Binanti peered intently. “It could be a gang,” she said. “Could be just a graffiti artist.”

Wilson added, hopefully, “Could be a movie fan.” ♦

Madeleine Wulfahrt is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff.

Sketchpad

New Coins in the Crypto Reserve

Forget gold. Time to stock up on Eggcoin (very valuable) and Scamcoin (not a scam).

By Liana Finck

August 4, 2025

Trump announced the creation of a strategic crypto reserve for the U.S. that would include not just bitcoin but several other digital currencies.

—NBC

[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 "[Mixed Feelings](#)."

Reporting & Essays

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  By Leslie Jamison | It’s the fault people humblebrag about in job interviews. but psychologists are discovering more and more about the real harm it causes.
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  By Adam Gopnik | As plans are laid for a new casino, one can trace, through four figures, a history of rivalry and excess, rife with collisions of character and crime.
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  By Tad Friend | As researchers work to make death optional, investors see a chance for huge returns. But has the human body already reached its limits?
- **ICE’s Spectacle of Intimidation**
  Photography by Mark Peterson | Immigrants showing up for court dates in Manhattan must now navigate past rows of masked federal agents.

Annals of Psychology

The Pain of Perfectionism

It’s the fault people humblebrag about in job interviews, but psychologists are discovering more and more about the real harm it causes.

By Leslie Jamison

August 4, 2025

Admirable striving is one thing, but a true need to be perfect can be terrorizing.Illustration by Golden Cosmos

When Gordon Flett, a psychology professor who has spent his career studying perfectionism, was bringing up his two daughters, he was determined to help them understand that they didn’t need to be perfect. As they grew older, they would tease him whenever he was critical: “Aren’t you supposed to be teaching us it’s O.K. not to be perfect?” Despite his efforts, Flett noticed that his elder daughter, Hayley, showed some telltale signs: highly meticulous, she was routinely deemed perfectionist by teachers who graded the tests she’d stay up half the night studying for. When Hayley was ten, she took a test he’d developed with his longtime collaborator, Paul Hewitt—a questionnaire designed to identify

perfectionism in children. Tallying her score, Flett was surprised to see that she didn't seem to be a perfectionist at all—so surprised that he wondered if there was something wrong with the test. Seven years later, though, Hayley took an adult version, and her perfectionism was beyond dispute. Flett was mystified until she explained that, as a child, she'd internalized the message that she shouldn't aspire to perfection. So, like any true perfectionist, she'd aced the test.

At first blush, it can be hard to take perfectionism seriously as a source of suffering. The lament "I'm a perfectionist" carries a strong whiff of humblebrag—the kind of thing savvy job applicants say when asked their greatest flaw. Reading a book by Flett and Hewitt on the subway, I started feeling self-conscious about the cover, with the word "perfectionism" displayed in huge type, as if I were trying to broadcast that, no matter how good I am, I still need to be better. To claim the mantle of perfectionism can become a game of one-upmanship. A British writer I know recently told me about reading an Anne Tyler novel with a perfectionist character and thinking, *Wow, is that all it takes to be a perfectionist in Baltimore*?

To Flett and Hewitt, the idea of perfectionism as a form of admirable striving is a dangerous misconception, one they have devoted three books and hundreds of peer-reviewed papers to overturning. "I can't stand it when people talk about perfectionism as something positive," Flett told me, as we sat at his kitchen table in Mississauga, a Toronto suburb where he has spent most of his life. "They don't realize the deep human toll." Hewitt, a clinical psychologist, has seen with his therapy patients how perfectionism can be "personally terrorizing for people, a debilitating state." It's driven not by aspiration but by fear, and by the conviction that perfection is the only "way of being secure and safe in the world."

Flett told me about being asked on a radio show to discuss perfectionism in a segment that the producers explained would be something "nice and light" for listeners driving home at the start of a long holiday weekend. Flett warned them that they'd chosen the wrong subject, that the bulk of his work explored perfectionism's links to depression, eating disorders, and suicide. Sure enough, when listeners were invited to call in, the first person on the line was a desperate-sounding man who described the ways his wife's

perfectionism was pushing their marriage toward collapse. Then came two sons calling about an alcoholic father who drank to douse the stress of his perfectionism. Flett remembers feeling vindicated as the number of calls briefly overwhelmed the switchboard.

When Flett and Hewitt started publishing on perfectionism together, in the early nineteen-nineties, not many researchers were working on the subject. These days, perfectionism is everywhere. We live in an era of proliferating cosmetic treatments, Ozempic, and photo-editing apps that have transformed our sense of what perfection looks like. Films like “Black Swan” and “Phantom Thread” interrogate the downsides of perfectionism while bestowing on it a fatal glamour. A shelf in Flett’s house is filled with autobiographies by celebrities who have battled perfectionism—athletes such as Andre Agassi and Ben Hogan, and musicians including Bruce Springsteen, Eric Clapton, Lang Lang, and the late Brian Wilson. Meanwhile, perfectionism has become a hot topic among psychologists, with five to ten new studies on the subject appearing each week. The *Harvard Business Review* publishes a steady stream of pieces with titles like “How to Manage Your Perfectionism.” (Some sound notes of caution —“Don’t Let Perfection Be the Enemy of Productivity”—but none want to throw the baby out with the bathwater—“The Upside of Perfectionism? Creativity”).

Flett believes that young people, especially Gen Z-ers, are facing an “epidemic of perfectionism.” In a survey he conducted among Canadian high-school students, he found that fifty-four per cent identified with the statement “I need to be perfect.” (A 2024 Gallup poll corroborated this general trend, finding that more than one in three U.S. teen-agers feel pressure to be perfect.) Flett suspects that the crisis is largely fuelled by social media: people are tortured by the gap between their actual and their “perfected” lives, not to mention the perfected versions of other people that circulate online. “The need to seem perfect is much bigger now than when we started this research,” he said.

A recent novel by the Italian writer Vincenzo Latronico, “Perfection,” dramatizes the way that digital life compels us to make our lives into perfected artifacts. Anna and Tom, millennial expats in Berlin, rent out their

home as an Airbnb whose surfaces present a tableau of perfection: Scandinavian armchairs, Japanese teapots, sunlight filtering through the emerald leaves of a perforated monstera plant. And yet, as the novel tracks the effort required to sustain their perfect apartment and the life style it represents, we sense the hollowness of their pursuit, which drives toward an ever-receding target. Achieving perfection is the most efficient way to discover how little it offers.

According to Hewitt, this is one thing that distinguishes true perfectionism from a mere pursuit of excellence: reaching the goal never helps, whether it's a top grade, a target weight, or a professional milestone. Achievement, he says, "doesn't touch that fundamental sense of being unacceptable." Perfectionism perpetuates an endless state of striving. It's an affliction of futility, an addiction to finding masochistic refuge in the familiar hell of feeling insufficient. It might not feel good, but it feels like home.

Flett and Hewitt met in the fall of 1987, when they began teaching in the psychology department at York University, in Toronto. They were both thirty, both at the beginning of their careers, both hired to provisional positions and unsure of their footing. (During his job interview, Flett spotted his C.V. on the floor of the undergraduate director's office, with footprints on it.) On walks together from the squat brick psychology building to their classrooms, on the other side of campus, they soon bonded. Flett was a local boy with a working-class background and a hunger to prove himself; Hewitt, before he came to psychology, had spent years training as a classical musician, first as a guitarist, then as an operatic tenor.

Hewitt had already published papers on perfectionism, his interest having been sparked as an undergraduate, when he encountered the concept in a magazine in a dentist's waiting room. The term immediately illuminated a phenomenon he'd often seen in the world of music. Telling me about a time when a piano teacher slapped him on the hand for making an error, he said, "There's a real *anger* when you don't do it right." Flett, who'd written his doctoral dissertation on depression, had read a paper of Hewitt's about the links between depression and perfectionism and told him how much he admired it. Not long afterward, Hewitt invited him to collaborate on developing a model of perfectionism. As Flett recalls it, Hewitt asked, "Do

you know anything about personality-scale construction?," and he replied, "I hope so—I'm teaching a graduate course on it."

After a year at York, Hewitt left for a position at a psychiatric hospital in eastern Ontario. Flett would take the train to visit so that they could keep working, and they ultimately produced a model outlining three major types of perfectionism: self-oriented perfectionism (requiring perfection of oneself), other-oriented perfectionism (railing against the imperfections of others), and socially prescribed perfectionism (believing that others require one to be perfect).

When they submitted their model to the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, it was rejected, but Hewitt called the editor—"a little audacious on my part," he admits—and found that he'd been on the fence. He said that if they could back up their model with a clinical study he would accept the paper. The patients at Hewitt's hospital afforded a vast pool of research subjects, and the fact that they were psychiatric patients rather than college students (as is the case for many studies) helped demonstrate the stakes involved. The revised model was published in 1991, bolstered by a study showing a connection between perfectionism and more serious forms of mental illness. Now known as the Comprehensive Model of Perfectionistic Behavior, it has become the dominant framework in the field.

After publication, Flett wondered if trying to have perfectionism officially recognized as a personality disorder in the *DSM* might get it taken more seriously. Hewitt objected that doing so would lead to its being approached reductively, as a discrete problem to be got rid of rather than a personality style produced by a complex set of forces. (By analogy, he points out that we no longer have such diagnoses as fever or chest pain; instead, doctors diagnose the conditions that produce these symptoms.) One obvious benefit of Flett and Hewitt's approach has been to give people a vocabulary and a framework for understanding an important thread running through a variety of conditions. A clinical psychologist once told Flett that she'd often felt baffled by her anorexic patients: What could account for someone starving herself and thinking, *It's still not enough*? Perfectionism gave her a way to understand this relentlessly self-destructive drive.

Flett and Hewitt have also found perfectionism to be a powerful predictor of suicide, even after adjusting for other variables, such as extremity of depression. (As Flett and Hewitt write, perfectionists "may construe an unsuccessful suicide attempt as the ultimate failure.") In the case of Alina Templeton-Perks, a thirty-three-year-old British woman who suffered from crippling self-doubt and took her own life in 2008, perfectionism was even listed among the official causes of death. Jonathan Drummond-Webb, a pediatric cardiac surgeon in Arkansas who killed himself in 2004, appears to have been an other-oriented perfectionist. A star in his field, he left a five-page suicide note cataloguing the faults of those around him and declaring, "The world is not ready for me."

Three years ago, Flett received an e-mail from a woman named Carol Fishman Cohen, sharing the story of her son Michael, who had died by suicide in 2018, at the age of twenty-eight. Michael was her firstborn son, the eldest of four, a baby who almost never cried and who became a generous, adventurous man. After three and a half years working at startups in China—while there, he'd made a list of thirty places he wanted to visit and checked off every single one—Michael fell into a major depressive episode that revolved around a feeling of falling behind. He started looking for a job but would get discouraged—thinking he needed to have every qualification listed in a posting—and end up not applying, convinced that he was unemployable. He hid the depths of his depression, and his suicide stunned everyone close to him. By the time his mother reached out to Flett, she felt she understood something more about what had happened to Michael. She told Flett, "Our son died of perfectionism."

Sigmund Freud's essay "The Ego and the Id," from 1923, introduced the concept of the superego, an inner voice whose demands for perfection the ego labors endlessly to fulfill. In the century since Freud introduced this model, psychoanalysts have articulated, in a variety of ways, the subjective experience of perfectionism and the forces driving it. Alfred Adler—a onetime participant in Freud's famous Wednesday-night gatherings, who later parted ways with him—is most known today for his notion of the "inferiority complex," the idea that human nature is shaped by the desire to overcome personal deficiencies. (Adler, among the first psychologists to see

birth order as a crucial shaping force, had an inferiority complex about his older brother—who was, incidentally, named Sigmund.)

In 1960, D. W. Winnicott put forward the theory that most people will develop a False Self that hides and protects a more essential self by complying with the expectations of others. In the seventies and eighties, Hilde Bruch drew upon her work with anorexic patients in framing perfectionism as a response to a deep-seated sense of inadequacy. “All her efforts, her striving for perfection and excessive thinness, are directed toward hiding the fatal flaw of her fundamental inadequacy,” she wrote of the typical patient.

The critic and psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has written that the superego, with its relentless demand for perfection, is a “boring and vicious soliloquist with an audience of one.” If so, why do we keep listening? Phillips suggests that it’s because the soliloquist promises to “know us in a way that no one else, including ourselves, can ever do.” Any avid self-deprecator immediately understands this logic: if we believe that the worst version of ourselves is the true one, we’re protected from being ambushed by our own inadequacy. Better to overestimate our flaws than to fail to see them in the first place. But this strategy is fundamentally isolating, leading us to create a brittle carapace of a “perfect” self that doesn’t need anything from anyone. Perfectionism estranges us from everyone else, Phillips argues, and traps us in endless conflict with ourselves: “We continually, if unconsciously, mutilate and deform our own character. So unrelenting is this internal violence that we have no idea what we’d be like without it.”

An 1843 short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, “The Birth-Mark,” reads like a fable about such violence. A “man of science” named Aylmer is so determined to remove his wife’s only imperfection, a hand-shaped birthmark on her cheek, that he ends up killing her. (The story offers a dark inversion of the ancient Greek myth of Pygmalion, a sculptor so disappointed by the flaws of the women around him that he creates a perfect one from ivory and, when she comes to life, marries her.) The most unnerving part of Hawthorne’s story is how readily Aylmer’s wife, Georgiana, becomes his co-conspirator. “Either remove this dreadful Hand, or take my wretched life!” she says. He manages to do both, concocting an

alchemical potion that dissolves the birthmark but poisons her in the process:

> As the last crimson tint of the birthmark—that sole token of human imperfection—faded from her cheek, the parting breath of the now perfect woman passed into the atmosphere, and her soul, lingering a moment near her husband, took its heavenward flight.

If humanity is imperfection, the only perfect woman is a dead one.

In 2009, Flett was invited by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to speak at a conference. Addressing the agents, Flett said that many terrorists could be categorized as "malevolent perfectionists," citing the Unabomber as a textbook example, and offered some tips about how to avoid hiring such people: in interviews, don't just ask candidates for their biggest mistake—ask them for their *second*-biggest mistake. Flett has spoken about perfectionism to a wide array of audiences. He has talked to mothers' groups about its links to postpartum depression and has addressed a sports-psychology conference on the so-called perfection paradox: the more you want perfection, the more you thwart yourself from achieving it. Andre Agassi's memoir describes a coach telling him that perfectionism was making him miss shots, because he wanted to "hit a winner on every ball," and one study has found that psychology professors who hold themselves to a perfectionist standard were "less likely to produce publications, receive citations, and publish in high-impact journals."

“Braaaaains, braaaaains, but also someone who’s cute and can make me laugh but isn’t looking to, like, start a family right away.”
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

Flett is all too familiar with this dynamic, having supervised the research of countless grad students hounded by perfectionism. “Once you start studying something, you attract students who are drawn to it because they struggle with it,” he told me. In his living room, he showed me a photograph from the early nineties, of himself and a student named Tom, planting a maple sapling in Flett’s back yard. Tom was charming and gregarious, Flett told me, full of talent and promise, but he held himself to impossible standards and was prey to procrastination fuelled by a deep fear of failure. Tom seemed hostage to an imaginary audience criticizing his every move, poking holes in the work he’d already done and in the dissertation he hadn’t yet written, and telling him that he had no right to feel depressed about his predicament. Tom co-authored several papers with Flett about perfectionism and procrastination, but his Ph.D. was taking so long that he fell into debt and had to put his work on hold. Later, he resumed, paying off his debt and starting a new dissertation, but by then he was dealing with long-term health problems worsened by chronic stress. He died at the age of forty-one, and Flett is convinced that perfectionism contributed to his early demise. In the picture Flett showed me, Tom is grinning beneath a Cleveland Indians baseball cap as he steadies the spindly young tree. That day, they planted two saplings: one eventually died, but the other towers over the yard, shading the lawn with a thick canopy of leaves.

The physical toll of perfectionism has been a particular focus of Flett and Hewitt's research. Perfectionists experience higher than normal rates of ulcers, hypertension, fibromyalgia, arthritis, irritable-bowel syndrome, and Crohn's disease, but they are also slow to seek care. Their fervent desire to "be O.K." (or to seem that way) can hinder them from looking for the help they need. Samuel Mikail, a psychologist who has co-written a book with Flett and Hewitt, has researched the links between perfectionism and chronic pain. He told me about a patient in his late thirties who was totally debilitated by flareups of excruciating pain. The man started treatment in a state of despair: pain made it impossible to get down on the floor to play with his kids, and also to have sex with his wife, so he felt he was failing as a father and a husband. One Saturday, before watching a hockey game on TV, he went to buy a case of beer but, instead, sat crying in his car outside the store, paralyzed with shame, because he realized he wouldn't be able to carry the beer back to his car.

I asked Mikail how he differentiates between the emotional exhaustion that anyone suffering from chronic pain would feel and the sharpened anguish of a perfectionist. He said that another patient who could no longer play on the floor might focus on other ways of connecting with his kids, such as reading in bed or sharing an ice-cream sundae. But perfectionists live in an all-or-nothing world: because something has been lost, *everything* has been lost. That attitude is likely to carry over into recovery, with the perfectionist thinking, *I need to be just as I was before*, rather than appreciating partial progress. When I asked Mikail if therapy had helped this particular patient, he said, "Yes and no." The man had come to appreciate bonding with his children in other ways but still found it hard to think of himself as a "real husband" to his wife. Mikail added that a case like this also requires the therapist to surrender the ideal of perfect recovery—to accept that patients can heal in meaningful ways even if their healing isn't complete.

As with any kind of suffering, the burdens of perfectionism are not evenly distributed. In the early eighties, the epidemiologist Sherman James coined the term "John Henryism" to describe "the determined hopeful manner in which numerous black Americans engage day-to-day life stressors." The phrase derives from a folktale about a railroad worker named John Henry who was said to have outperformed a mechanical steam drill and then died

of exhaustion. John Henryism involves pressure not just to be good but to be *impossibly* good—superhuman, better than a machine, whether the machine is literal (the steam drill) or figurative (systemic racism). Kiese Laymon, in his memoir "Heavy," writes about growing up under the "directive to be excellent, disciplined, elegant, emotionally contained, clean, and perfect in the face of American white supremacy." Michelle Obama summed up the dilemma in her memoir, "Becoming," writing, "There's an age-old maxim in the Black community: *You've got to be twice as good to get half as far*."

James understood John Henryism in historical terms. In the aftermath of the Civil War, "a newly freed people faced . . . the daunting task of creating for themselves an American identity," one that expressed "core American values such as 'hard work,' 'self-reliance,' and 'freedom.' " A century later, James designed a twelve-point scale to measure, among other things, his subjects' "single-minded determination to succeed," by asking how fully they agreed with such statements as "Once I make up my mind to something, I stay with it until the job is completely done" or "When things don't go the way I want them to, that just makes me work even harder." As an epidemiologist, James focussed his research on the relationship between John Henryism and hypertension, a condition that disproportionately afflicts Black Americans, making them more likely to suffer strokes and kidney disease.

In the four decades since James introduced the notion, John Henryism has found much broader cultural traction. In Colson Whitehead's novel "John Henry Days" (2001), a journalist called J. travels to West Virginia to cover a festival celebrating the release of a special John Henry postage stamp. On his first night there, while a local baritone croons a ballad about John Henry ("I will beat that steam drill down / Or hammer my fool self to death, Lord"), J. nearly dies choking on a piece of prime rib from a complimentary buffet. The scene exposes the mythic hero and the choking mortal as two sides of the same coin: the fantasy of striving as salvation, and the ugly truth of its price.

The rat race of American capitalism, with its ethos of competitive individualism, is fertile soil for perfectionism, but it has thrived in other

cultural traditions, too. Flett told me about a graduate student from China who informed him that Confucianism requires perfection on as many as five different points: benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom, and trustworthiness. When this student conducted research with Chinese schoolchildren about the pressure to be perfect, a group of Chinese teachers she presented her findings to told her that they'd never heard anyone even speculate that perfection could have a downside.

Still, other cultural practices suggest that different paths might exist. The so-called "Persian flaw" refers to the way traditional Persian-carpet weavers would deliberately include a flaw in their rugs to acknowledge that only God was perfect. The Law of Jante is a social code prevalent in Scandinavia that encourages people not to strive for exceptionalism. It takes its name from a 1933 novel by the Danish Norwegian writer Aksel Sandemose, in which a fictional town, Jante, is governed by ten rules designed to guard against the threat that individual ambition poses to social harmony. One rule is "You shall never indulge in the conceit of imagining that you are better than we are."

Flett and Hewitt, thirty-five years into their collaboration, strike similar silhouettes at first glance—sixty-eight, genial and quick to smile, devoted fathers and grandfathers, and fluent in the role of intellectual ambassadorship. But they bring different lenses to their shared subject: Flett, chatty and digressive, specializes in quantitative research that demonstrates patterns and correlations. Hewitt has the measured demeanor of a practiced therapist, and his insights often arise from the nuances of clinical work. If Flett is surveying the forest, Hewitt looks closely at each individual tree. He wants to discover when and how a patient arrived at perfectionism as a solution, and what problem it was unconsciously designed to solve.

In many cases, a frustrated desire for parental acceptance has produced a tyrannical taskmaster driven by a false conditional: *If I am perfect, then I'll be loved*. Hewitt told me about a forty-five-year-old woman who sought help with chronic anxiety. She needed to keep up a façade of perfection but didn't know where this need came from. After a few weeks, they started to discuss her having been adopted; after a few more weeks she told him about

the conversation in which her parents revealed this information to her. They framed everything with great tenderness and care, she stressed, lovingly telling her the story of “going to the place with babies” and specifically selecting her to bring home with them. They said, “We fell in love with you, and chose you.” Her parents had wanted to make her feel loved rather than abandoned, but the more she and Hewitt talked the clearer it became that this framing had led her to imagine that adoption worked like shopping. From that point onward, she’d carried a subconscious fear that, if she wasn’t perfect, she might not be wanted anymore—and could potentially be returned.

Hewitt told me that perfectionists are often acutely uncomfortable in his office waiting room; he sees it in their body language. It’s difficult for them to submit to a dynamic that continually obliges them to expose their vulnerabilities and shortcomings. Many also have an intense fear of relinquishing their perfectionism, which feels like the only thing that is holding them together. A lot of the time, what prompts a perfectionist to go to therapy is an issue such as chronic anxiety or depression, with perfectionism only gradually revealing itself as an important force. The precipitating incident may be a tangible failure that the patient is struggling to get past, but sometimes the larger problem is success—specifically, that success has not delivered the expected dividends of happiness and self-worth. For this reason, middle age is often a time of crisis in the life of a perfectionist, though the affliction manifests at all ages. “I even see patients in their nineties, still trying to please parents who are long dead,” Hewitt said.

Once a patient surrenders the notion that being perfect is a viable solution, another problem can arise: the patient may become perfectionist about getting rid of her perfectionism. She may try to be an exemplary patient, never showing unregulated emotions and coming up with insights that demonstrate how readily she has internalized the message. But exactly the opposite needs to happen: the patient needs to enact her struggle in the room, to be messy, irrational, resentful, out of control. Progress comes when the patient reveals her ugly imperfect side and learns that, as Hewitt puts it, “the therapist isn’t repulsed—the sky doesn’t fall.”

Hewitt can sense when a patient is letting her imperfect self into the room: she may preface whatever she says with phrases like “I’ve never said these words out loud before.” Such moments remind him of the sensation of singing onstage, the terror of going out there with nothing but your naked, human voice. Hewitt’s musical training has made him extremely attuned to shifts in vocal tone; he can detect when a voice starts to issue from a different part of the throat and finds that these shifts can be clues that something important is happening. He tries to instill this habit of close listening in his students. He’ll play back recordings of therapy sessions for them, and when there’s a shift in the patient’s tone he’ll ask, “Did you hear that?” He’ll play it again and again, until they do.

Sometimes the physical tells are more dramatic. Mikail once treated a mother in her early forties plagued by fears that her husband would leave her. She dealt with these fears by transforming herself into a domestic paragon, keeping her home and kids immaculate and spending hours producing spectacular meals. Mikail noticed that whenever he gave the woman a compliment she glanced down at the floor, breaking eye contact, and appeared to be holding her breath. “It seemed that she was unable to take in not only the affirmation, but the very air that carried it,” he later wrote. For her, it felt like dangerous complacency to accept the false refuge of a compliment when the work of forging an impeccable self—a self that could not be abandoned—remained unfinished.

This is classic “self-oriented” perfectionist behavior. Conversely, an “other-oriented” perfectionist may respond to the discomfort of the therapeutic process by blaming the therapist. Hewitt told me about a patient who grew aggressive toward a grad student training as a clinician. Knowing that Hewitt, the student’s adviser, was observing the session, the patient started leveraging this against him: “You’re trying to get your Ph.D.—your supervisor is watching and won’t like what he sees.” But Hewitt *did* like what he was seeing, precisely because the patient’s hostility suggested that the student was getting somewhere important. The analyst Elizabeth Spillius wrote about a time when she felt that sessions with one patient were going badly; then she realized that her perfectionist patient was subtly “trying to make me want to be perfect and then to feel discouraged and

despairing, just as she expected herself to be perfect and was constantly disappointing herself."

Hewitt has found that perfectionists can benefit when he acknowledges his own errors, whether small (misremembering a name) or large (forgetting an important confession). Once, he asked a patient, near the end of their four-year relationship, what had been most helpful for her. She said, "The thing that was most helpful was when you made a mistake you recognized it, and we got through it." When the perfectionist sees her therapist owning up to a mistake, she has an opportunity to see that imperfection "just *is,*" Hewitt told me. "There's no devastating consequence." All the same, he still remembers his surprise at learning that it was his mistakes, rather than his insights or compassion, that had proved most useful.

For the past decade, Flett has been devoting much of his attention to what he calls "the psychology of mattering." As with many psychological concepts, the importance of mattering sounds self-evident, which Flett suspects is why it's been neglected as a field of study. But mattering isn't just about being loved or having a sense of belonging; it's about feeling essential and unreplaceable. As Flett puts it, "Feelings of mattering are often rooted in having someone recognize our distinctiveness."

Flett's work on mattering was spurred in part by a near-death experience in his forties; a protracted illness put him in the hospital for weeks, during which he got sicker and sicker, losing almost forty pounds and turning orange from jaundice, as doctors tried to discover what was wrong. (It turned out that a medication he was taking was inducing liver failure.) One day, in the hospital bathroom, Flett found himself uttering a kind of prayer: "If anybody is listening, this is too soon. I've still got work to do." He told me, "When you have that kind of experience, you just want to use the rest of your time to do things that matter."

Flett was inspired not only to do work that mattered but also to think about how we come to feel that we matter in the first place. He recalled a childhood experience: his grandmother managed the cafeteria at an asbestos factory, and sometimes he got to go see her there. On those trips, he felt like a visiting celebrity. He got as much free food as he wanted (usually cherry Jell-O and chocolate milk), but, more than that, the workers took evident

delight in his presence. He remembers them hanging on his every word, giving him a sense of mattering that has resonated ever since.

Flett has come to understand mattering as a counterpoint to perfectionism, a more viable way to arrive at a sense of self-worth. One doesn't have to be perfect; one just has to matter to someone. Indeed, feeling invisible or undervalued—a feeling Flett calls "anti-mattering"—is often what fuels a perfectionist's neurosis. Flett's first peer-reviewed paper on mattering, published in 2012, reported a significant correlation between anti-mattering and perfectionism among hundreds of university students. Perfectionism may arise as an attempt to overcome a sense of insignificance, but it's a poor strategy, because each step toward perfection is a step away from distinctiveness, from the flawed, messy unrepeatability that we crave in others and want others to witness in us.

Flett has published two books and more than fifty papers on mattering, but last fall he went through a transition that made the issue more personal—retirement. When I suggested we take a look at York University's campus, he was initially hesitant. He hadn't been back since leaving, and there was a sting in his voice as he recalled having to vacate his parking spot the day after his position formally ended. Still, Flett's current work offers other ways to matter. When he gives talks on mattering, he often sees audience members crying. "It hits them somewhere so deep," he said. Caregivers of all kinds—doctors, social workers, mothers, teachers—have thanked him for acknowledging this realm of human experience. His wife's cardiologist said that, during the pandemic, his way of staving off burnout had been to tell himself, "People need me right now."

Mattering grants everyone dignity, even as it brings with it a certain humility. In the course of a day, we all pivot between contexts in which we matter quite a bit (nursing the baby) and ones in which we hardly matter at all (just another commuter on a crowded subway car). This can produce a sense of whiplash, but we might think of that feeling as an invitation to find ourselves right-sized. It can be a reprieve from the illusion that perfection was ever necessary, or even possible, and a reminder that we all matter, and also don't—that both feelings are true and worth remembering. ♦

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American Chronicles

The Engines and Empires of New York City Gambling

As plans are laid for a new casino, one can trace, through four figures, a history of rivalry and excess, rife with collisions of character and crime.

By Adam Gopnik

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A policeman checks a roulette wheel seized in a 1943 raid on a Manhattan apartment.Photograph by Seymour Wally / NY Daily News Archive / Getty

A dream book is an anatomy of dreams, with numbers trailing after. For more than a century, dream books served as the bibles of New York gambling. Their mystic authors—often women, often claiming a Caribbean origin—would pair dreams with numbers, and those numbers would be used to play the locally run lotteries:

> COFFIN—to dream of a coffin signifies that you will soon be married. . . . Play numbers 9-49-50; TOMBS—to dream of being among the tombs denotes a speedy marriage. Play numbers 7-8-31. TUMMY—to dream of one's tummy as great and large predicts a fair and large estate. Play numbers 10-11-22.

A dream book uses the irrational to rationalize the irrational. Something uncontrollable, a dream, gets translated into something controllable, a set of numbers, which can then supply the winning digits. Gambling proceeds out of such cycles of hope and superstition.

There's an unchanging principle to gambling: people like to lose money guessing at the outcomes of unpredictable events. We convince ourselves that the next thing about to happen—the outcome of a horse race, the turn of a card—can be known before it does, and that believing in our prescience will allow us to take money from those who believe in their own. Of course, gamblers think they *don't* like to lose money; the gamblers' conviction, naturally, is that they will not lose but win. Yet this happens so rarely that even the greatest overseer of gambling in New York history died because of his gambling debts.

Indeed, a point made repeatedly during the public hearings on whether to bring a casino to Times Square—a competition likely to be settled before long, likely in favor of the inside-track runner, Caesars Entertainment—is that casinos are a unique kind of business. It's not just a matter of paying for a service; it's a service designed, at its core, to drain you of your money. As one person remarked at the hearings, "There's no Theatre Anonymous. There's no Restaurant Anonymous! No one has to protect working people from losing their money seeing Broadway shows."

Though gambling, in the long run, leads to ruin, it offers, in the short run, moments of illusory triumph. The mystic's goal, to live wholly in the present, is available to the fervid, sweating gambler in a way that it is not to the rest of us. The inside move of a Thoroughbred on the homestretch, the last roll of the dice—such moments pulse with urgency and splendor. Guessing crazily at the future, the gambler is granted, briefly, the gift of now.

Given our civic predilection for the now, it's no surprise that New York City has, throughout its history, been the national center of illegal gambling. As Gay Talese once observed in conversation, "Life in New York is in its nature a gamble. It's the city where you come to be lucky—so it's the place to come and be unlucky."

As plans are being made for a new casino in the city, one can trace, over the past century, four chief eras of gambling in New York. Call them, in order, high-stakes gambling, high-hopes gambling, back-room gambling, and big-room gambling. Each has its own protagonist, its own art form, and, this being New York, its own tangle of ethnic and racial coalitions and rivalries.

Nineteenth-century gambling in New York was a rich, if essentially provincial, affair, centered on the now forgotten card game of faro. Only in the nineteen-tens and twenties did high-stakes gambling take this universal human urge, spike it with bootleg hooch, and transform it into a lucrative, criminal, and increasingly national enterprise.

In the middle of this transformation was Arnold Rothstein. Rothstein is to gambling what Houdini is to magic—the one name from that world which people with little interest in the pastime may recall. The reason for the parallel resonance of gambler and magician lies partly in timing: both are icons of the twenties, the dawn of an era when local legends became national celebrities. Rothstein's persona endures, too, in his guise as F. Scott Fitzgerald's Meyer Wolfsheim, in "The Great Gatsby"—though Wolfsheim's human-molar cufflinks seem outlandish for such an Anglophile dresser.

Rothstein was a major figure long before Prohibition. His later myth—of a wise man thrust into crime by circumstance—owes more to Hollywood than to history. In reality, Rothstein was a louse, forever at odds with his Orthodox father, Abraham, and upright brother Harry. He was the image of the "wicked son" of the Passover Haggadah: contemptuous of his heritage and dismissive of its demands, marrying outside the faith and, more flamboyantly, mistressing outside it as well. He kept a roster of Ziegfeld Follies girlfriends scattered across town, but, like his racehorses or his English suits, they were little more than trophies, accessories for a man in his position. His wife, Carolyn, recalled that even after he'd become wealthy—owning a couple of hotels, including the Fairfield on West Seventy-second Street—he would go out late at night to collect the smallest of debts. In photographs, he strained for geniality, but what lingers is a peculiar rictus: his nearly invisible upper lip clamped over a row of sharp false teeth. In every portrait, he appears more raptor than rabbi.

Nick Pileggi, a longtime chronicler of New York's underworld, calls Rothstein "the key figure in the history of organized crime, the godfather to both Meyer Lansky and Lucky Luciano, the man who taught the untutored Italians." One way to understand Rothstein is as a player in the city's endlessly evolving wars of ethnic succession. He began by courting—and then manipulating—the fading Irish bosses of Tammany Hall, who ruled New York through their intricate collusion of politicians, police, and clergy. Tim Sullivan, once the city's dominant boss, was first Rothstein's patron, then his dependent, ultimately borrowing money from him to pay off his gambling debts.

But Rothstein's true significance lies elsewhere. Just as Houdini understood that his real audience wasn't in the theatre but in the national press, Rothstein knew that New York gambling could be scaled up. He became the master of the "layoff." The bookmaker's challenge, from the beginning, was simple: if too much money poured in on the favorite, the bookie risked ruin. The solution was to balance the action by "changing the line," adjusting the odds in order to encourage wagers on the underdog. If that failed and the favorite was still too heavily backed, the bookie would "lay off" the excess bets with another bookmaker, essentially betting on the favorite himself, to hedge.

Starting in the nineteen-tens, with his acquisition of a string of Long Island casinos, and continuing into the twenties, Rothstein was the first to regionalize—and then nationalize—the layoff. He grasped the essential truth: everyone loses in the end, so the real art isn't to pick winners but to have enough money to lend to those who imagine that they can. His two most famous nicknames—the Brain and the Big Bankroll—were interchangeable, since the bankroll proved the brain. The bankroll also let him hunt for tiny arbitrage opportunities by shifting odds across different books, squeezing profit from the ceaseless churn of other people's hopes.

“Well, this cicada decided to stay.”
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

As Rothstein’s operation expanded, independent bookmakers became nodes in his network. He put the “organized” in organized crime. The next generation of gangsters—those who carved New York into families and divided the country into regions under a single Commission—inherited the scope and the national infrastructure of his layoff system.

Yet the reason Rothstein’s legend endures is mainly because of two much debated mysteries: the fixing of the 1919 World Series and his murder, on November 6, 1928. Both have inspired a literature far out of proportion to the sordid events, perhaps because each holds a certain moral voltage: evidence that even the invulnerable can be undone, that anything can be fixed, and that anyone can be killed.

Did Rothstein fix the World Series, as Fitzgerald’s Wolfsheim, and most early histories, would have it? More recent, careful scholarship by the lawyer William Lamb suggests that it was the ballplayers themselves, not the gamblers, who were behind the scheme. The favored Chicago White Sox were divided by class—well-educated, Ivy League types looking down on rougher, less literate teammates such as Joe Jackson and Chick Gandil, who ultimately arranged the fix. It now seems likely that there were actually two separate schemes for throwing the Series, and that confusion between them helped expose the whole affair. Whatever the truth, Rothstein profited immensely from people *thinking* that he had fixed the Series.

The second great enigma of his life was the manner of its end, what the crime writer Nick Tosches has called “the bullet from nowhere, the theody

in the gloam, the silent stones.” Rothstein had lost a substantial sum—by the standards of the day, a fortune—in a poker game run by George (Hump) McManus, an Irish political fixer and a gambler whose brothers were, fittingly, a priest and a policeman. On the night of November 4th, after a tense hour-long conversation with the newspaperman and short-story writer Damon Runyon at Lindy’s restaurant, Rothstein received a call from the Park Central Hotel. He told Lindy’s nighttime cashier Abe Scher, “I’m going over to see McManus.” (The Park Central, on Seventh Avenue in midtown, is weirdly unaltered over the years: the barbershop where Albert Anastasia was later murdered is still there—though now, of course, it’s a Starbucks.) An hour later, he was found in the service entrance of the Park Central, shot in the groin and bleeding out.

What happened? The most probable scenario is that McManus’s gun went off by accident—either when McManus threatened Rothstein or when McManus, feeling threatened himself, pulled it. A 1929 account by a newspaperman who’d known Rothstein noted his habit of keeping his right hand in his jacket pocket, finger pointed, which may have contributed to the panic. Only one shot was fired, and the gun was flung, in haste, out a window and onto the roof of a passing taxi—details that seem to rule out any elaborate plot.

The real mystery is why Rothstein, a seasoned pro, was so sure he’d been cheated—a suspicion his friends found hard to credit—and so enraged by the idea that he wouldn’t simply shrug and settle, as a pro should. Recently, though, the magician Allan Zola Kronzek, in a little-known book on poker cheats, described what may actually have happened: a “diabolical” scheme called “papering the neighborhood,” in which sealed packs of marked cards are planted in likely retail spots. The target, thinking himself clever, buys and introduces the cards into the game, unwittingly outfoxed. In small Midwestern towns, entire blocks of shops might be papered; in New York, a single block—or, in this case, a hotel gift shop—was enough. The story is corroborated in the magician John Scarne’s privately printed notes from the nineteen-fifties. In the end, Rothstein—a master spider—was ensnared in a web even more ingenious than his own, woven, maddeningly, by lesser spiders.

His final hours, shadowed as they were, took on a comic turn—thanks, in part, to that conversation with Runyon, who recast Rothstein's last night as a spirited yarn, transforming the sinister, ambitious figure into an appealing Runyonesque character, the Brain, in the evergreen story "The Brain Goes Home," which became a radio drama. There is a peculiar New York tendency—it endures into the Trump years—to entwine comedy and corruption so closely that one obscures the other. Once Runyon's story had circulated, it became difficult to see Rothstein as anything but the amiable Big Brain, despite his sidelines in cocaine and heroin trafficking. Today, he is often lazily identified in biographies with Nathan Detroit, from Runyon's "Guys and Dolls," though in truth Nathan, a sweaty, small-time hustler and a lovable loser with a showgirl fiancée, bears no resemblance to Rothstein. Such collisions of caricature and crime are still the stuff of New York lives, and scandals.

The rise of Rothstein's network marked a turning point in New York's underworld, as entrenched Irish bosses clashed with rising Jewish and Italian syndicates. The next chapter saw a newly confident Black gambling establishment in Harlem confronting Rothstein's downtown system. The policy and numbers rackets of the twenties and thirties became, by all accounts, something like a cult—or even a substitute religion—in Harlem. On the whole, these games were honest, and sometimes yielded life-changing results: Colin Powell's father, for instance, bought the family home in Queens with his winnings.

For much of their history, policy and numbers were not only under local control but, frequently, run by Black women. Policy—the precursor of the numbers racket—involved drawing a winning number from a rotating drum, usually in a gym or a church basement. The numbers game proper used a three-digit number published in a public source, such as a newspaper, which kept things more or less on the level. "Basically, policy was played in Chicago, and New York was the place for numbers," says the historian LaShawn Harris, the author of "Sex Workers, Psychics, and Numbers Runners." By December, 1930, numbers bankers were using the pari-mutuel total—the sum wagered on a particular horse—to determine the day's number. Among the era's ironies is that the winning number in one

gambling racket was, for a time, produced honestly by the results of another.

Numbers in Harlem was the subject of anxious debate—caught between the demands of Black “respectability” politics and the temptations of ordinary American greed. Many Harlem pastors denounced the racket; others participated as contentedly as their Roman Catholic counterparts downtown did with bingo night. As Harris explains, “There were some churches that got people to come if the pastor was known for giving out lucky numbers. If you were religious and still played the numbers, you could go to church and get a religious number—Matthew 5 or John 8.”

Outside the Black church, a whole industry sprang up—populated by Orientalized, often vaguely Muslim, numbers gurus and fakirs, who, free from ecclesiastical constraints, could go fully mystic. From this world emerged the great era of the dream books, a remarkable chapter of entrepreneurial Black publishing. Dream books offered augury, poetry, and purpose—a kind of secular scripture for the numbers game.

It was this world which the racketeer Stephanie St. Clair came to dominate in the early nineteen-twenties, when she became known citywide as the Queen of Numbers. Though she always insisted on her French nationality, she seems to have come from Guadeloupe by way of Quebec. She understood the value of conspicuousness. She lived in one of Sugar Hill’s most fashionable buildings, 409 Edgecombe Avenue, and was often photographed in furs and pearls.

Exactly how she ran her book—and kept it safe from rivals—remains mysterious. But by the nineteen-thirties she had forty or fifty numbers runners collecting bets for her and ten comptrollers, along with bodyguards and maids. Her reputation as Harlem’s most stylish woman was legendary; her neighbor, the playwright Katherine Butler Jones, remembered St. Clair “breezing through the lobby” of their apartment building in exotic dresses and brightly colored turbans. In 1930, in an act of extraordinary audacity, St. Clair even testified against the N.Y.P.D. for corruption. Her testimony led to the suspension of thirteen officers.

Unlucky number! On a fateful November day in 1931—just three years after Rothstein's murder, and still known in Harlem as Black Wednesday—a large, loosely coördinated group of bettors all played the same number: 527. The choice represented the date of the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday (November 25th) and the sum of that date (two and five). Disastrously, 527 was the official number produced by the pari-mutuel the next day. St. Clair and the other Harlem numbers bankers, unable to lay off the bets, were instantly insolvent—a possibility that Rothstein's Jewish and Italian networks downtown had long anticipated. The Harlem bankers simply didn't have enough pooled resources to absorb the blow.

And so one of Rothstein's protégés, Dutch Schultz—who, thanks to the layoff networks, had access to ready cash—began lending to the Harlem numbers bankers, at ruinous rates. St. Clair's empire began to crumble overnight. The mythology, which has already inspired at least one film, casts St. Clair as boldly resisting Schultz's incursion: a lone queen defending a thriving Black business against a predatory assault by white gangsters. In reality, what felled her was not just one gangster's greed but an entire organization's—the inheritors of Rothstein's operation—zeroing in on a mom-and-pop, or at least a mom, business, as big enterprises always do. (Schultz's heavy-handed foreclosure on the Harlem numbers was, no doubt, one among many reasons that his colleagues had him gunned down soon afterward. St. Clair was rumored to have sent a telegram to his hospital bedside: "As you sow, so shall you reap.")

It was during these years that St. Clair, in another public flourish, married Sufi Abdul Hamid, the leader of a Harlem cult. Said to be ferociously antisemitic, Hamid was something of an early Louis Farrakhan—newspapers called him Harlem's Hitler. When she discovered him having an affair, she shot him, Frankie-and-Johnny style. He survived; she went to prison. The other woman turned out to be a dream-book entrepreneur who styled herself as Fu Futtam. The irony was that Harlem's numbers queen, a model of rational risk-taking, found herself in a love triangle with a dream-book mystic—then took to the newspapers to denounce Futtam's obvious impostures.

Historians tend to approach the era's mysticism and invented names with understandable tact—after all, Harlemites had as much right to adopt Islamic personas as their Jewish Zionist contemporaries did when assuming new Hebrew names. Still, the pure rascality in these extravagant self-inventions shouldn't be overlooked. Nor should the contradictions surrounding St. Clair's undoing. A woman running something like a private bank, she was felled by a classic structural trap: her business had been effectively redlined by the larger Mob banks downtown, leaving her with no reserves to draw on when crisis struck, only predatory loans. Then, too, just as Rothstein was undone by his blind faith in his cleverness—a cheat out-cheated—St. Clair lost her balance on a tightrope she'd stretched between mysticism and materialism. The pseudo-mystics soon invaded her private life, pushing her toward violence and, ultimately, ruin. Hamid and Futtam, for their part, reinvented themselves as Buddhists, opened an "Enlightenment Temple," and, in Hamid's case, met an untimely end in a plane crash—leaving Futtam, the supposed clairvoyant, to explain why she hadn't seen it coming.

Rothstein and St. Clair represent two great nodes of organized crime as it wrapped itself around New York gambling—each a cultural figure who controlled the games. But the steady, thrumming heartbeat of New York gambling wasn't the big games run by Rothstein or the neighborhood numbers of St. Clair but the countless unrecorded card games and bridge sessions unfolding compulsively in apartments and back rooms.

Jack Richardson, for instance, was a playwright of enormous promise who gave up playwriting for card games in the back room of Elaine's, the storied restaurant on Second Avenue. From his years at the table, Richardson took —or perhaps gave—a single embittered, poetic confession: a book now almost forgotten, but shimmeringly alive on the page.

That book, "Memoir of a Gambler" (1979), may be the most distinguished literary work to emerge from the world of New York gambling. It's the story of a boy who was born in 1934, grew up in Queens, and, in the spirit of those ascending times, made his way to Columbia, then into Army intelligence in Europe, picking up Anglophile manners along the way. He stares out from the dust jacket, horse-faced and glowering in tweeds—the

plaid just a bit too loud, well over the Rothstein speed limit. He was one of those people friends and lovers forgave—at least up to the last breach of faith or the last bad loan. (Richardson's first wife, the novelist Anne Roiphe, wrote in the nineteen-seventies an alarming roman à clef about their marriage, "Torch Song," ascribing to him various erotic exoticisms that were possibly more shocking then than now, but are still pretty shocking.)

Richardson's first play, "The Prodigal," was a sensation when it premièred, in 1960. A retelling of the saga of the House of Atreus, it reimagined Orestes as a kind of Zooey Glass figure: fluent, funny, defiant, and at odds with both the militarism of his father, Agamemnon, and the counterfeit piety of his stepfather, Aegisthus. For a moment, Richardson seemed poised to become a major theatrical presence, photographed alongside the likes of Edward Albee and Arthur Kopit.

But his later plays flopped, and, by then, the gambling bug had already entered his soul. Strange as it may sound in today's New York, his one professional ace was his friendship with a Village restaurateur named Elaine Kaufman. In the early nineteen-sixties, when Kaufman moved uptown to what was then the no man's land of the upper Upper East Side, also known as Yorkville, Richardson became her very first literary regular. (As Nick Pileggi put it when discussing the era, "You have no idea now what a desert East Eighty-eighth Street was then. Chicken Delight itself wouldn't deliver north of Eighty-sixth Street.") Richardson was a favored child at Elaine's, and for years she presided over his nightly back-room poker game. The table attracted a shifting cast: the director Robert Altman, the occasional Hollywood star, and, most often, his fellow-writer Bruce Jay Friedman. It was, so to speak, an expense of shame in a waste of spirits.

David Black—the novelist, biographer, and showrunner who shared the high Elaine's years with Richardson, and who gave him a chance to write his final drama, an arresting episode of "Miami Vice" inspired by Fritz Lang's "M"—spoke about him not long ago over lunch at the mediocre French bistro that now occupies the old Elaine's space. Though the Park Central remains eerily intact, no trace of the legendary writers' restaurant survives, and the staff tending tables today seems unaware of what the place

once was. As so often in New York now, physical erasure meets generational amnesia.

Looking around warily, as if half expecting phantoms—perhaps seventies novelists still chained to their advances, like Marley's ghost to his moneybags—Black recalled Richardson's high, imperious style: "He would lift one eyebrow, and then lift his chin, and that was Jack, dancing." He laughed. Black and Richardson had shared books and talk—and, as Black ruefully admitted, cocaine—in the back room at Elaine's. "His fate was ultimately tragic," he added, "because he knew everything, spoke every language you can think of, and he was always talking about the Enlightenment. Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot—he'd say, 'They made the worst bet in the world. If there is a God, I'm damned. If there is no God, I'm facing the void.' "

In his memoir, Richardson attributes his turn toward gambling to a glimpse of that void, in the form of his exposure to Gödel's proof. As a philosophy student in Munich, Richardson was shaken by the Austrian logician's demonstration that even mathematics is "incomplete," lacking secure foundations and harboring truths it cannot prove. On a memorable summer day, he wrote, "As I stared into paradox, I vowed never again to think formally about anything that mattered or worry that I hadn't earned the right to express anger about, and snatch relative pleasure from, a universe that tolerates no sincere predicates." In such an absurd universe, the sordid becomes the sublime. If life is a meaningless roll of the dice, the only meaning lies in the rolling itself—however little comfort that offers those waiting at home for the grocery money from the roll.

Many have read Gödel and come away chastened by the limits of certainty—without concluding, as Richardson did, that the logical next step was to spend your life playing cards and paying prostitutes. (Richardson, a man of his era, did not call them sex workers.) Yet his memoir—a book very much in the spirit of William Hazlitt or Thomas De Quincey, and worthy of standing beside them—probes his descent into compulsion. Stripped of glamour, his dissolution produces a kind of glamour of its own: that of pure addiction, the allure of never saying no. He careers from New York to Vegas

to Hong Kong to Macao, trying to win, trying not to care about winning, making love to anonymous women.

In Macao, Richardson claims to have met the Devil—and, according to Black, however cocaine-fuelled the episode, Richardson truly believed it. The Devil, in Richardson's telling, says that he is as dead as God, and that the old Baudelairean quest for the ecstasy of sin through chance is now as doomed as the mystic's search for the ecstasy of God. "The excitation, the energy, the joy, despair, manias and mopings—in short, the high-fevering of life that gambling gave you may once have been the devil's element, but I assure you it is no longer," the Devil explains. "I've no desire now to take the measure of those whose souls would add heat to hell itself, because I discovered long ago that it's all one whether I trip a Caesar or a fool. . . . You're so desperate to believe in something you would even believe in me."

Cartoon by Roland High

When the Devil himself yawns at your private abyss and refuses the sale of your soul with a weary shrug, what's left to do? In the book, to end the story; in life, to return to Elaine's and play more poker. "If the soul finds no true action for itself, it must make do with agitation," Richardson's memoir concludes. In that coke-fuelled era, he was a standout performer—the long tail of Arnold Rothstein's shadowy business of drug trafficking coming back to haunt his ostensible business of gambling.

Black recalled that, after drying out himself, he'd eventually persuaded Richardson to do the same. "It was the worst thing I ever did," Black reflected. "A body that depended on cocaine could not long survive its absence." Richardson had a heart attack soon after sobering up, then,

depressed, another in the taxi coming from the hospital, and was gone by 2012. He no longer haunts even his haunt, but “The Prodigal” deserves a revival, and his book deserves to be reread.

Richardson’s game was perhaps among the last in the city to retain a trace of cloistered sophistication. By the nineteen-nineties, what had formerly been private damnation was becoming public spectacle. A once obscure poker variant—Texas hold ’em—had soared in popularity, owing in part to the invention of the “hole” camera by the poker player (and Holocaust survivor) Henry Orenstein, which let television audiences see the players’ hidden cards. Into this new scene parachuted Molly Bloom, who eventually ran a high-stakes game in Manhattan—an episode later recounted in her memoir, “Molly’s Game,” and in the Aaron Sorkin film based on it.

Bloom arrived in the city in 2009, fleeing the fallout of a celebrity-studded poker game in Los Angeles that she had first managed for a dubious boss, then taken control of, and finally lost. Raised in Colorado, with a salubrious background in Olympic skiing, she found New York’s poker scene to be the realm of “billionaire boys’ club” types, Wall Street titans, and old-school gamblers, where the buy-in alone could hit a quarter of a million dollars.

Taking over a series of suites at the Plaza, Bloom set out, as Rothstein and St. Clair once had, to wrap gambling in a halo of glamour. She assembled a crew of young women to craft a carefully curated fantasy in which finance guys playing cards after hours in a rented hotel room could imagine themselves as mavericks.

“That was the plan,” Bloom said recently, laughing from her home in Colorado. Still striking, she’s become a thoughtful analyst of gambling psychology. “That was the pre-game talk: *Please don’t sleep with these guys*. It’s a great job until you get involved—then it all falls apart. The more you could raise the stakes in the room, without making it trashy or truly illegal, the more it felt like you’d entered a different world.” She was acutely aware of the dream she’d conjured: “Sometimes the men would think they had feelings for me, and I’d have to tell them, This is not real life! Here, I’m the anti-wife. In a real relationship, I’d make you take out the trash. Here, I’m the one who says, You *never* have to take out the trash.”

Within months, Bloom and her team were running Manhattan's big game. At first, she shrewdly played the innocent impresario, subsisting only on tips from the players—a legal compensation. Temptation arrived in the form of the "rake," that tiny cut which gradually transformed her role from hostess to outlaw. New York's gaming laws, like its morals, permit a little vice for pleasure, but punish it for profit. "By the end, I was gambling just as much as they were," Bloom admitted. "I was gambling on my ability to outwit criminals, competition, federal statutes, and debt sheets. I thought I had an edge—human psychology."

The games were marked by excess and anxiety: fortunes shifted across the table, hedge-fund prodigies sat elbow to elbow with film stars and men of ambiguous reputation, all of them suspended in the Plaza's shimmering twilight. Where once the ballplayers were the easy marks, now athletes sat at the top of the hierarchy. "Bringing in an A-Rod or a Knick gave the room real cachet," Bloom said. "These big finance guys would become starstruck twelve-year-olds again."

As the pots grew, so did the dangers. The curtain fell, as always, with a predawn knock, handcuffs, and a federal indictment. What remains, in Bloom's telling, is less the memory of cards or cash than the spectacle itself—the interplay of aspiration and appetite. Never especially interested in gambling as such, she now describes the period with detachment. "Poker was simply having a moment," she said. "Nothing to do with me. It could have been Go Fish."

Bloom suspected, from a distance, that the era of glamour games was already ending. Even casual card games, she noted, have been transformed by the arrival of the "quants"—math-minded players who know all the odds and play accordingly. "Now it's men in sunglasses, playing the algorithms," she said. " They would never have been allowed in my game. Mine was still the Wild West—people trying to read each other. You look at the final table at the World Series of Poker, and it's not guys in cowboy hats anymore. It's not Doyle Brunson. It's people who study 'perfect poker' all day long."

No doubt the proliferation of probability brokers—who can break down every hand, every proposition, into its likeliest outcomes—has leached some of the mystery and excitement from gambling. Today, earnest

twentysomething Ph.D. candidates dive into their phones, use their training in statistics to play perfect poker, and hunt for the fine arbitrage advantages that Rothstein once had to enforce at gunpoint.

If there's anything startling about games today, it's that the more thoroughly they're "solved," the less compelling they become. Baseball, famously, grew dull as it became more perfectly understood, reduced to its three true outcomes—strikeouts, walks, home runs—while the color and chaos of the bunt, the stolen base, the suicide squeeze, and the pickoff became little more than decorative frosting.

Gambling, too, now divides the world between those who know enough to make it boring and those who—bored—prefer not to know. They play and lose anyway. Thrilling games, like thrilling cities, thrive on enigmatic imperfections: the small market anomalies that quants scour for an edge, the tells and giveaways that reward the observant and elude the rest. Once all is understood, all is dull. *Gambling may once have belonged to the Devil, but I assure you it does no longer.*

The arrival of organized gambling in its casino form has stripped away even the faded glamour of old miscreants like Rothstein and St. Clair. When, at last, detailed renderings of the proposed Caesars Palace emerged, they were hilariously decorous, showing not crowds of modern Harry the Horses and Nathan Detroits but elegantly dressed men and women in dignified black, playing in poker rooms that looked ready to host a seminar on, well, Gödel. (The only certainty is that Caesars Palace will persist without its possessive apostrophe—a Las Vegas tradition meant to Everyman the Roman-imperial ideal.)

Yet, however the thing is finally realized, Times Square will no doubt be diminished by the arrival of a casino, with its endless rows of slots, tables, and mechanical, emotionless losing. Casinos have a chancy reputation for a reason: they promise economic growth but tend to end up as factories of bad faith, processing steady columns of disappointed players.

Gambling is guessing, and guessing at future events is a way of hoping they might turn out better. Once gambling becomes just a set of algorithms to be parsed, it becomes severed from even its debased romantic aspiration, from

its original wellspring of unreasonable expectations—for a sudden shower of fortune. In gambling, as in history, we have to work our way back from the book to the dream. Otherwise, it's nothing but numbers. ♦

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Brave New World Dept.

How to Live Forever and Get Rich Doing It

As researchers work to make death optional, investors see a chance for huge returns. But has the human body already reached its limits?

By Tad Friend

August 4, 2025

Operating at the fringes of science, biohackers are trying to extend the human life span by decades—or perhaps indefinitely.Illustration by Bianca Bagnarelli

Peter Diamandis is five feet four and has pipestem legs, but his torso widens into broad shoulders, powerful biceps, and a craggy, Homeric head. The composite effect is of a genie emerging from a lamp. Our wish is his

command, and our wish, surely, must be for more time to make wishes: for limitless life. In December, Diamandis stood before two hundred doctors and scientists and vowed that in the coming decade our wish would begin to come true: “It’s either a hardware problem or a software problem—and we’re going to be able to fix that!”

Diamandis was at the Buck Institute for Research on Aging, north of San Francisco, to address the Roundtable of Longevity Clinics. He wore his customary outfit: black sneakers, black jeans, and a black T-shirt. Having one look and one message—*Life just gets more abundant!*—spares him decision fatigue. An ebullient spirit whose confidence is tempered, at times, by his reverence for data, he acknowledged that the task was immense. “We have forty trillion cells in our body, and every cell is running one to two billion chemical reactions per second,” he said. “It’s not possible for any human to understand this. We are linear thinkers in an exponential world.” Yet with robots soon able to run a million experiments a day, and with A.I. poised to parse our cellular code, how long could immortality take?

He observed that his clients at Fountain Life, a longevity clinic he established, were already on their way to freedom from disease. They’d have early access to emergent tech, such as a blood filter that can “filter out metastatic cancer” and a transmitter that uses high-frequency waves to diagnose strokes and zap depression: “Remission in a *week* with ten-minutes-per-day therapy!”

Diamandis, who is sixty-four, has a bachelor’s in molecular genetics and a master’s in aerospace engineering from M.I.T., as well as a medical degree from Harvard. But he’s not a practicing doctor, engineer, or scientist. He’s an emissary from the realms of possibility. After growing up on Long Island in a family of Greek immigrants, he began making his dent in the universe by founding some two dozen businesses, many of which involved voyaging to space. As a young entrepreneur, he formulated Peter’s Laws, which included “If you can’t win, change the rules” and “When forced to compromise, ask for more.”

He promotes the inevitability of longevity through a multitude of channels. There’s the clinic, which he started with two doctors and the motivational speaker Tony Robbins. There’s a newsletter, two podcasts, and books on the

future and how to stick around for it. There are partnerships in venture funds devoted to A.I. and biotech; an annual conference, Abundance360, which showcases advances in nanotechnology and brain-computer interfaces; and a semi-annual Platinum Trip, where, for seventy thousand dollars apiece, people get to meet eminent longevity scientists, invest in their experimental therapies, and secure those therapies for personal use.

Diamandis's network, known to its constituents as the Peterverse, is largely peopled by slim, graying, well-off men who finger their Oura rings like horcruxes. America's richest now live a dozen years longer than its poorest, and they intend to widen their lead; Jeff Bezos, Yuri Milner, and Sam Altman have all funded anti-aging research. Joel Huizenga, the C.E.O. of Egaceutical, a startup whose "water-based drink" aims to reverse cellular age, told me, "We don't work in mice. We work in billionaires."

Near the back of the Buck sat the biological theorist Aubrey de Grey, stroking a beard the size of a beagle. In 2004, de Grey coined the phrase "longevity escape velocity" to describe the moment when science stops us from getting older, so that, with further advances, we can begin growing younger. At the time, de Grey was viewed as a brilliant crackpot. He is now seen as a sort of Alfred Wegener, whose theory of continental drift lacked only a practical understanding of how it might work.

The rise in de Grey's reputation corresponds to Diamandis's long struggle to encourage longevity research by establishing a prize—his favorite promotional device. In 1996, Diamandis launched the *XPrize*, a ten-million-dollar award for advances in commercial spaceflight. Eight years later, a team funded by the Microsoft founder Paul Allen sent a manned rocket aloft and won. *XPrize* went on to establish lucrative awards in domains as diverse as carbon capture, deep-ocean exploration, and literacy software for children.

In 2007, de Grey suggested a longevity prize. Diamandis loved the idea: ever since med school, when he learned that Greenland sharks can live for five centuries, he'd wondered, *Why not us*? But impediments loomed. There was no agreed-upon framework for interventions; aging isn't even classified as a disease by the F.D.A. And there was no obvious way to measure competing therapies, short of running a protracted competition to see how

long it took participants to die. Perhaps most important, none of the more than fifty billionaires whom Diamandis approached to fund the prize seemed to believe you could turn back time.

The field gradually caught up to him, though. Health became a competition, encouraged by the advent of watches that track your vital signs and biomarker-based "clocks" that measure your aging. Podcasters converted sad-sack men into biohackers, who juiced themselves with everything from Ayurvedic herbs to electromagnetic-frequency beds. (Most biohackers are men, for the same reason that most gambling addicts are men.) In 2013, there were fewer than a hundred longevity clinics around the globe; a decade later, there were more than three thousand.

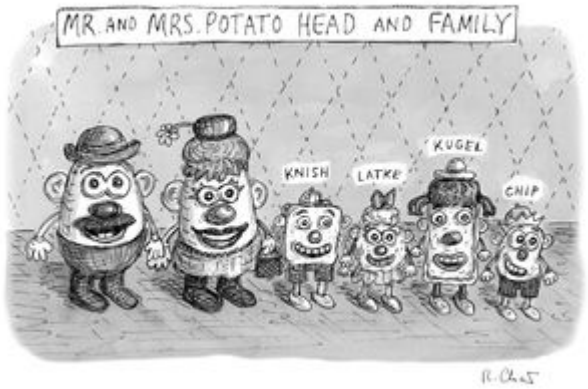
So, at the Buck Institute, Diamandis declared that he'd finally been able to establish a prize in longevity. The goal was to devise a treatment by 2030 that made patients' muscles, brains, and immune systems twenty years younger; the winning team would get as much as eighty-one million dollars. David Sinclair, a prominent geneticist whose lab recently reversed the effective age of cells in lab animals, told me that the prize had galvanized the field: "It's helped change the focus from mouse studies to 'Let's do something in humans!' It's our Wright-brothers moment."

Many of the clinicians I talked to seemed skeptical about hitting such a difficult target. At the Roundtable, the C.E.O. of the Buck, Dr. Eric Verdin, cited a recent paper in *Nature Aging* which concluded that we're already bumping against our biological ceiling. He warned about overpromising: "I do worry for the credibility of our field!"

Diamandis was undeterrable. (Peter's Law No. 22: "The day before something is a breakthrough, it's a crazy idea.") From the stage, he exhorted his colleagues to rise to his level of certainty. "Mind-set is very important," he said. "Optimists live fifteen per cent longer than pessimists."

Humans are the only animals known to be discontented with natural selection. Sure, it created us, but we have a few notes. For instance: diabetes was beneficial for our ancestors, because eating fat and sugar shifted them into insulin resistance, helping them withstand cold and

famines. Nowadays, chugging a Big Gulp is less evolutionarily shrewd. A feature has become a bug.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

For millennia, we've sought a fix for debility and death. Medea, of Greek myth, rejuvenated her lover's father by replacing his blood with plant extracts and foam from a sacrificed werewolf—or, another source has it, by boiling him in a golden cauldron. The first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang, may well have died from mercury in an immortality potion concocted by his alchemists.

Today's biohackers sometimes look to antiquity for inspiration. This usually involves hormesis—a mild ordeal, such as exercise, fasting, or cold plunges, that can shock cellular pathways into better health. The *CAROL*, a resistance bike that promises the benefits of a full workout in minutes, spurs users to pedal all out for twenty-second intervals by imagining they are being chased by a sabre-toothed tiger. "Neanderthal man didn't jog," the bike announces. It's unclear how *CAROL* knows that, or why emulating Neanderthals would improve our longevity, as those who escaped the tigers typically died in their thirties.

Most biohackers look to the future. The best known of them is Bryan Johnson, who founded the payments platform Braintree. Once rich and chubby and depressed, Johnson is now, at forty-seven, rich and ripped and determined to live forever. He spends a quarter of a million dollars a year in that pursuit. His regimen has included restricting calories to 1,977 a day, undergoing high-frequency stimulation of his abdomen to simulate the

effect of twenty thousand sit-ups, and stimulating his penis with shock waves for some doubtless excellent reason.

Johnson leads a movement called Don’t Die, whose adherents hope that they, too, can reprogram their bodies and minds. Open-sourcing himself, he publishes his biomarkers online, everything from body-mass index to a total duration of nighttime erections (three hours and thirty-six minutes at one recent climacteric). His habit of requiring employees to sign confidentiality agreements and then gliding among them nearly nude has drawn some negative comment, as have his penile metrics. But Johnson told me that it’s a great way to grab people’s attention. “If you tell somebody to go to bed on time, they’re, like, ‘Whatever,’ ” he said. “If you tell them that not getting good sleep is going to ruin their boners—that if they don’t have nighttime erections, they’re seventy per cent more likely to die prematurely—it really is efficacious. No one wants to lose their nighttime erections. That’s a masculine thing.”

Diamandis chooses his words carefully when he talks about Johnson. “Bryan has done more to popularize longevity than any single person,” he told me. “I kind of wish he hadn’t gone down the erection pathway.” Where Johnson seeks to embody biological optimization, Diamandis seeks to articulate the case for its feasibility. His goal is to mobilize a consortium of entrepreneurs, scientists, and investors to help us double our life span and grow rich while we do it.

For Diamandis, the first step to creating the future we want is to speak of it as if it’s already here. He doesn’t watch the news, which he calls “the amygdala-stimulating dystopian from the clickbait media”; he gathers data from conferences, scientific papers, and pitch decks. He checks his colleagues’ claims, but he’s a generous grader. When the noted artificial-intelligence researcher Dario Amodei speculated that A.I. could double the human life span “in five to ten years,” Diamandis immediately began touting the quote—the caveated forecast of someone expert in A.I. but not in medicine—as confirmation that enhanced longevity was close at hand. His promise is essentially a world in which you can blithely marry someone forty years younger than you, continue to have children even as your grandchildren are having children of their own, and keep your gaze trained

on the farthest horizons—in which you can stick around to witness, and even determine, where humanity goes next. Joe Polish, a marketing guru who has worked with Diamandis, said, “Peter has learned that a compelling offer is ten times more powerful than a convincing argument. Now people just want to be part of his world and go wherever he’s taking them.”

Thanks to such advances as antibiotics and better sanitation, our life spans have roughly doubled since 1900. Back then, the leading causes of death were pneumonia, tuberculosis, and diarrhea. Now we die of the maladies of old age—heart disease, cancer, strokes, Alzheimer’s. The downside is that we go lingeringly, in ways that we and our children regret. The average American dies at seventy-seven, after twelve years of bad health; if you are old enough to buy a senior-citizen ticket, you are likely to have a chronic disease, or perhaps two.

While the most zealous biohackers seek eternal life, many of the clinicians who oversee their care hope instead to increase their “health span”—the years lived without illness. Traditional life-style therapies, such as Dr. Dean Ornish’s popular approach (“Eat well, move more, stress less, love more”), increase health span. But attempts to target a specific aging dynamic with a specific molecule have mostly just increased scientific vexation. Dr. Jordan Shlain, who runs five longevity clinics, told me, “Everything you do to improve your health span can improve your life span. Everything you do to improve your life span is fucking bullshit.”

It once seemed that improving life span was nearly inevitable. Back in the nineties, a single gene mutation was found to double the longevity of the *C. elegans* worm, and the geroscientists Simon Melov and Gordon Lithgow made predictions on a bar napkin: Lithgow believed that in five years mammalian life spans would double, Melov that they would more than double. Recalling the moment, Melov sighed and said, “The five- to ten-year horizon for huge breakthroughs has never gotten any closer.”

Animal proxies turn out to be not all that proximate. Lab mice share eighty-five per cent of our DNA, and they live only about two years—a useful period when you hope to quickly determine whether a given peptide might be the long-sought elixir. But mice don’t have heart attacks or get Alzheimer’s, and their muscles waste suddenly, rather than gradually, as

ours do. More than eighty per cent of animal-tested therapeutics fail in people.

Our bodies, technically speaking, are just really fucking complicated. The Buck's Eric Verdin told me, "Peter Diamandis says we're thinking linearly in an exponential world, and we'll be able to solve all these problems. But the biological problems to solve also get exponentially harder as you go deeper." Even the indicators are baffling. Hearing loss has been linked to dementia, as has failing to floss. An impaired sense of smell is more strongly predictive of all-cause mortality than heart disease. And the mysteries do multiply the deeper you go. People who have four organs that are "youthful" for their age are much less likely to experience kidney disease or arthritis, yet those with seven youthful organs—which must be even better, right?—have a greatly heightened risk of diabetes and Parkinson's.

In trying to live longer, we're fighting our own imperfection: every time a cell divides, a few thousand mistakes can be introduced into its DNA. We're also fighting the entropic forces—time, gravity, and oxygen—that ravage pretty much everything. The authors of a seminal paper in *Cell* distinguished twelve hallmarks of aging: such signs of impaired self-regulation as DNA instability, mitochondrial dysfunction, chronic inflammation, cellular senescence (when burned-out cells start oozing toxic sludge), and stem-cell exhaustion. Though the authors noted that all twelve hallmarks "are strongly related," they could not establish whether the indicators were diverse expressions of one fundamental process or whether they evolved independently.

Every few years, a new approach promises to turn the switch. These have included taking supplements, such as *NAD+*, that help preserve genomic integrity; maintaining our telomeres, the protective caps on DNA strands which shrink as we age; perfusing our veins with "young blood"; and taking rapamycin, a drug derived from a bacterium discovered on Easter Island.

Yet interventions that arrest one hallmark of aging often accelerate others. Rapamycin is popular with biohackers because it inhibits the senescent cells that cause inflammation—a condition so associated with aging that it's often called "inflammaging." But having too few senescent cells is

dangerous, because senescence helps block tumors. Almost nothing the body does is always bad or always good: we walk a narrow footbridge between atrophy (cells failing to replicate properly) and cancer (cells replicating all too well). Caloric restriction, a “natural” alternative to rapamycin, shares some of its benefits—but it can also shrink muscle mass, lower your libido, and suppress neuronal function. Plus, you’re hungry all the time.

The body seems to require a Goldilocks solution for pretty much everything. And yet, to realize significant gains in longevity, we’ll need to significantly disrupt our natural functions. “If it can’t kill you, it probably doesn’t work,” Matt Scholz, the C.E.O. of Oisín, a biotech startup that’s tackling age-related frailty, told me. “That’s maybe not the best way to put it, but you’re perturbing a complex system, so you need to be really *doing* something.”

Diamandis rises each morning at five-thirty and assesses his overnight biometrics, gathered by an Oura ring, an Apple Watch, and a continuous glucose monitor. Then, as he meditates, he employs three red-light-therapy devices: one for healthy skin, one for lustrous hair, and one to kill oral bacteria. Along with a Ka’Chava shake, he consumes the first of five daily pill packs: this includes a GLP-1 agonist, a mitochondrial stimulant, a stress dampener, and a nootropic for cognitive enhancement. After using a toothpaste tailored to his oral microbiome, he begins his morning Zooms while pedalling a stationary bike. He also pumps iron and pins his daily protein intake at a hundred and fifty grams, one gram for each pound he weighs.

In February, he visited a Fountain Life clinic in Orlando to undergo his quarterly testing. He shuttled between a private room where a video loop of Diamandis himself spoke reassuringly about any worrisome test results —“Wouldn’t you rather find out at the beginning, when you can do something about it?”—and smaller chambers where technicians took blood and saliva and had him blow into a silver bag to test for intestinal bacterial overgrowth.

Aides kept offering him electrolyte-infused fizzy water; the clinic describes itself as “like a country club for precision diagnostics.” Annual membership

is $21,500, plus about $5,000 for supplements and additional tests. This isn't bad, as such plans go: the Superhuman package at Extension Health costs ten times as much, and superhumanity is not guaranteed. Aiming at early detection, Fountain Life runs an annual battery of tests your G.P. doesn't do, such as an A.I.-driven scan for soft arterial plaque. Dr. Bill Kapp, the clinic's C.E.O., told me, "Seventy per cent of people who die of cancer die of a form that's not routinely tested for." Testing is followed by treatments, and then by quarterly follow-up testing. Kapp added, "Just with what we know today, you should be able to get to ninety-five healthy."

The clinic has five branches and twenty-six hundred patients. Most of them hope merely to be able to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro in their seventies. For those with loftier dreams, there's Epic, an eighty-five-thousand-dollar program that includes an exercise coach and a nutritionist, stem-cell "re-education," and treatments such as therapeutic plasma exchange, in which plasma is filtered from your blood and replaced with albumin and antibodies from healthy donors. Diamandis has undergone five T.P.E. treatments, each costing ten thousand dollars. Dr. Helen Messier, Fountain Life's chief medical officer, told me, "I like to say about these men, 'They spent their health getting their wealth, and now they have to spend their wealth getting their health back.' "

As Diamandis was shuttled through a scanner that measures bone density, he imagined a world in which every home became a biodata-mining operation. "My V.C. fund is investing in implantables and insidables, which will be dribbling data to your A.I. at all times," he said. "We're going to have sensors in our toilets, sensors listening to your voice, the sound of your cough, recording how you're walking. This is the future: passive, nonintrusive, constant management, where your A.I. will say, 'Uh-oh—we better test for this.' Your A.I. is going to be the best physician in the world."

He seemed eager for that day to arrive. Having to spend three hours being poked and prodded and prevented from making phone calls rankled; Diamandis is an incorrigible multitasker. Steven Kotler, his co-author on three books, described the experience of driving with him: "You're moving at seventy-five miles per hour, and he's texting *and* also talking on his

phone, closing some deal. It’s fucking terrifying.” When Diamandis visits his mother, Tula, she chides him to “go sit in the sun for ten minutes.”

After his blood draws, Diamandis rejuvenated with a “power cocktail” I.V. and chatted with his younger sister, Marcelle Diamandis-Stamatiou, a functional-medicine doctor who consults on his care. A technician came in with a questionnaire: “Stress level on a scale of one to ten?”

“I’d say six or seven.”

“What is your H.R.V.?” Marcelle interjected, referring to heart-rate variability, or the minute differences in heartbeat rhythm. A low score can indicate stress.

Diamandis checked his phone. “Last night it was a twenty.”

“A good number is fifty or sixty,” Marcelle said. She turned to the technician: “He’s a ten for stress.”

“I’m an 8.5,” Diamandis said, scrolling.

“Pete, listen to me,” Marcelle implored. “You’re chasing all this, chasing these markers of senescent cells. What you need to chase is *stress*. Breathing, and being present, and family, that’s what reduces stress.”

“My God. We’re losing ice twice as fast as originally projected.”

Cartoon by Lars Kenseth

“I hear you.”

“I just want you to take care of yourself, but—”

“*Arketa!*” he said—Greek for “enough!”

Diamandis told me, “My personal health is to some degree sacrificed to the mission. My Faustian gamble is I will do whatever I can for my longevity within a time allotment that seems doable.” He metes out his time in pricey snippets, charging $250,000 for a speech abroad, $100,000 for one on the East Coast, and $70,000 for a talk near his home, in Santa Monica. “I measure everything in how much time I’m away from my kids,” he told me.

His friends say that he began focussing on self-care after his marriage, in 2005—he proposed to Kristen Hladecek on a zero-gravity flight, when they were in midair, like a Chagall painting—and particularly after the birth of their twins, Dax and Jet, in 2011. He told me, “I want to see my great-great-grandkids, and see the world through their eyes.” A few years ago, Diamandis undertook a three-day sequence of guided journeys on the psychedelic DMT, which, he said, “led to a complete release of my fear of death. It dissolved my ego and connected me to the love in the universe, and I got a strong sense that, when we die, we just return to that infinite intelligence.”

But he’s in no rush to return to sender. “There’s so much fascinating stuff happening right now that if I didn’t have a family I would be in meetings and conferences every second,” he told me. “I could literally be on an airplane circling the globe non-stop.”

Growing up in Great Neck, Diamandis longed to achieve escape velocity, not just from Long Island but from Earth itself. His father was an ob-gyn and expected Peter to follow his path. Diamandis was more interested in “Star Trek.” From an early age, he said, he believed that “everything we value on Earth is infinitely available in space, and we must make habitable and occupy as many niches in our star system as possible.”

Restless at Harvard Medical School, Diamandis summoned his courage and told his father he wanted to study aerospace engineering. He got a master's at M.I.T., finished medical school, barely (the dean offered him a degree if he promised not to practice), and looked around for a way to get to the moon.

NASA didn't seem viable: Diamandis reasoned that, even if he was accepted, he'd likely end up a "penguin"—an astronaut who never flies. As a graduate student, he'd co-founded an "International Space University" that convened students from around the world for eight weeks to study the final frontier. Now he began to swarm that frontier from all sides: he designed a rotating bed that would forestall the health issues astronauts faced in low gravity; started a rocket-launching company; and founded Zero Gravity Corporation, which flies a 727 on a parabolic course that enables passengers to experience weightlessness. Then he read "The Spirit of St. Louis," Charles Lindbergh's book about his flight to Paris, and was struck that the impetus for traversing the Atlantic was to win a prize. "I was blown away by the leverage," he told me; aviators had spent a total of four hundred thousand dollars trying to win twenty-five thousand dollars (and six of them died). Not long afterward, he announced the *XPrize* for commercial spaceflight.

Though Diamandis always aimed at the heavens, he kept getting knocked sideways by new ideas. In 2005, he was serving as a glorified travel agent for space tourists when he read another book that changed his life: Ray Kurzweil's "The Singularity Is Near." Kurzweil, now the "principal researcher and A.I. visionary" at Google, is the leading biotech futurist. Decades ago, he predicted that aging would be "dramatically slowed" by 2029, the same year that computers would achieve consciousness. Personalized immune therapies and organ replacements would propel us nearly to longevity escape velocity. The rest would be done by nanobots—cell-size paramedics that zip through our bloodstream repairing aging tissues—and the ability to upload our emulated brains. After our intelligence merges with A.I. in the cloud, we will become mostly digital entities a million times more intelligent than mere humans. This will happen in 2045, a moment called the Singularity.

Reading Kurzweil's predictions, Diamandis recalled, "I thought, Oh, my God, I have to stop all this linear shit in the space business and focus on the content of this book." In 2008, he and Kurzweil founded Singularity University, a kind of weeklong executive M.B.A. in impending technologies; its funders and supporters included Larry Page, Peter Thiel, and Elon Musk. Then, in a meeting with Kurzweil, Diamandis was rocked by another " 'holy shit' moment," he said. "I realized that there's a tremendous amount of energy that hits the Earth from the sun, but that energy is not in usable form. Technology can make it usable, make it abundant. When I started thinking about it, technology can take anything from scarcity to abundance, including time."

Yet he continues to treat time as a dwindling resource. "For someone who's intending to live forever," a colleague of his observed, "Peter's patience is really short." If an enterprise seems broken, Diamandis's impulse is not to fix it but to start a new one. In 2013, having grown frustrated with Singularity University, he started Abundance360, a notably similar forum—so similar that Singularity was all but forced to buy A360 out. A friend of his, Eric Pulier, said, "Anyone who's captivated by Peter's energy is going to be disappointed when he turns his attention to something new. Removing carbon, stopping wildfires, improving life span, building a next-gen financial system—they're *all* the most important thing."

While Diamandis was in Orlando, he spent two days at the Lake Nona Impact Forum, an invitation-only gathering whose speakers included George W. Bush and Mark Cuban. Between events, Diamandis whirled around, making and cementing connections.

In the speakers' lounge, he sought out Jamie Justice, a biogerontologist he'd persuaded to run *XPrize* Healthspan. She still sounded surprised that he'd talked her into it: "I told Peter, 'Getting a ten-year gain in one domain' "—among muscles, cognition, or the immune system—" 'feels *possible*, but all three? That feels crazy.' I had all these facts and figures about how you can only improve VO_2 max and knee-extension torque so much. Peter looked at my data and said, 'Great, you've made your point. Ten years seems very doable, so let's go for twenty!' "

Diamandis laughed. “Ten years wasn’t a big enough challenge,” he said. “Twenty felt audacious but achievable.” When Justice noted that she wouldn’t have taken the job if the prize rewarded life span rather than health span, he acknowledged, companionably, that “words such as ‘rejuvenation’ and ‘age-reversal’ do tend to rile the scientific community.”

For Diamandis, the protocols of scientific caution and objectivity can seem as coercive as the hallmarks of aging. In the corridor, he hugged Hans Keirstead, the head of a biotech company called Immunis, whose latest product is an injection derived from embryonic stem cells. Efforts to rewind the aging clock often focus on stem cells, the undifferentiated cells that transform to make up our hearts, eyes, and bones. When we’re young, stem cells make us resilient; a baby can regrow a severed fingertip. But this font of renewal dries up: an eighty-year-old’s bone marrow contains two hundred times fewer stem cells than a newborn’s. A range of novel treatments attempt to restore our plasticity; some entail extracting stem cells from your belly fat and injecting them elsewhere. Many are restricted in the United States, and biohackers who’ve gone abroad to pursue therapies for facial rejuvenation or sexual function sometimes suffer adverse reactions, including death.

The latest promising idea is to revert normal cells to a state known as “induced pluripotent stem cells.” This process has made mice live thirty per cent longer. But taking it too far produces teratomas, tumors filled with teeth and hair. Immunis seemed to have discovered a work-around: an injection of four hundred and forty molecules secreted by embryonic stem cells. In a clinical trial, elderly people immobilized by arthritic knees, an impediment that hastens muscle wasting, experienced six-per-cent *growth* in their leg muscles.

Diamandis was enthusiastic about the injection, but hardly impartial; the treatment was about to be trialled on two hundred Fountain Life patients, including him. Keirstead is a Fountain Life client and a member of the Abundance community. Diamandis’s biotech venture fund invested in Immunis, he’d showcased the company on a Platinum Trip, and he’d put Keirstead on a panel he moderated at Lake Nona. Immunis is also competing for the *XPrize*.

These kinds of contending interests typify the Peterverse, and the world of longevity as a whole: the influencer who touts a new treatment often owns a stake in (or receives a reciprocal logroll from) the company that makes it. Jamie Justice told me that Diamandis's conflicts posed an issue for the Healthspan prize. Along with Immunis, the competing teams include a biotech company run by his best friend and several longevity clinics that felt slighted by Diamandis's claims that Fountain Life is superior to its peers. "We had to legally remove Peter," Justice said. "He has no say in the judging, and he had to add distance to his statements about Fountain Life."

Diamandis spoke about this enforced separation as a mildly regrettable consequence of his ubiquity. "I don't want my relationships, the way I surround the field, to put a cloud over the prize," he said. "I used to receive a salary"—$250,000—"as executive chairman, and I donated it for the next five years to the prize itself, so now I'm an uncompensated chairman."

In the hallway, Keirstead gave Diamandis an update on another of his companies, which makes multi-pathogen vaccines. "I'll have commercial approval in Indonesia, Sri Lanka, and South Africa this year," Keirstead said. What about the plan to merge it with a firm that Diamandis co-founded, so the two could share a factory? Keirstead shrugged, eloquently.

"Why does it take people so long to do shit?" Diamandis said. "The answer is 'Yes, now, go!' I'm the vice-chairman of the board, and I'll be the loudest voice in favor of it. I'm a walking conflict of interest, but I announce them! At the end of the day, having these ideas succeed is much more important than who makes a little money on them."

We walk around all day estimating the age of passersby from visual cues: wrinkles, hair loss, the inferred weight of sorrows. The eyeball test was long our best gauge, because biomarkers like blood pressure measure health but not aging. A twenty-year-old and a ninety-year-old could each register 110/70.

Then, in 2011, a geneticist and biostatistician named Steve Horvath found a way to estimate a person's age using methylation patterns in the epigenome—the set of proteins and compounds that attach to your DNA and determine which of your genes get expressed. During methylation, a methyl group in

the epigenome turns genes off. It's unclear whether it *causes* aging, but it's strongly associated with an increase in inflammation (bad) and a decrease in making RNA and repairing DNA (worse).

A clock that tells you how old you are turned out not to be that useful; most people already know how old they are. Subsequent generations of clocks, more helpfully, measure your *biological* age—allowing you to calculate both how much time you have left and whether you're doing better than your peers. Almost everyone I spoke to in my reporting casually mentioned the test that gave him the largest delta between his calendar age and his biological age. The biohacker Dave Asprey, who is fifty-two, told me that a clock he's developing says he's actually eighteen. Bryan Johnson is currently atop an online biohackers' leaderboard, aging at .503 years per year, though thousands of people would love to displace him. Dan Sullivan, an eighty-one-year-old previous leader, has fallen to 1,021st place. He predicted, "Bryan Johnson will die of a heart attack in the middle of his fifteenth erection of the night."

I met Steve Horvath at his lab in Torrance, California, so that we could have our blood assessed by two clocks developed in his lab. One was PhenoAge, derived from circulatory proteins. The other was a methylation test called GrimAge. Horvath, a man of mournful good cheer, told me, "I named it after the Grim Reaper. You could also call it the Instantaneous Dropping Dead Probability Clock."

As a phlebotomist drew our blood, Horvath explained, "Methylation represses junk DNA that can wreak havoc. We *need* methylation. But you want youthful-state methylation with peaks and valleys. In an older person, the methylation landscape is flat." A recent paper in *Cell* proposed that, when cells are in need of repair, the molecules that cause methylation help by placing them in survival mode—but then those molecules stay put, causing aging. It would be as if the body dropped cones around a pothole-ridden stretch of highway, then forgot to pick them up. The dream is to collect all the cones and drive a ribbon of new asphalt. When you reprogram the epigenome of mice, you increase their life expectancy. But, again, mice.

Horvath looked out the window. “I invented epigenetic clocks, that’s my claim to fame. But what I’d really like to be known for is a great intervention, something that moves the clocks backward. I’ve hated biology all of my life! You go from one species to the next and the opposite happens —the human plasma-protein clock doesn’t work in the mouse.”

“Do you want to watch a show that I watched alone to see if it was good enough to watch together?” Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

For a time, Diamandis planned to use a Horvath clock as the *XPrize*’s criterion, but he and his colleagues realized that the real index of rejuvenation was function: can patients be restored enough to do youthful things? Function is somewhat theoretical in middle age, when almost everyone can get out of a chair and walk across a room, but after that it becomes starkly tangible. In a study of men aged eighty-five and older, only a quarter of the slowest walkers survived five years, while nearly all the fastest walkers did. Among the elderly, having difficulty bathing is as grimly determinative of mortality as having heart failure.

For the *XPrize*, the protocol will be a single-year trial of healthy people aged fifty to eighty, to determine whether a therapy can improve their functional benchmarks by twenty years or more. The tests for strength currently include VO_2 max, lower-body power, and muscle mass; those for cognition include appraisals of executive function, processing speed, and memory. The tests for immune function, which is harder to measure, will likely involve a blood-based biomarker.

A month after my blood draw, I Zoomed with Horvath and his colleague Bobby Brooke to discuss the results. My GrimAge was 61.2, slightly below my actual age. “You’re doing better than sixty per cent of the population!” Brooke said.

Horvath shrugged: “One way to summarize you, when it comes to methylation, is you’re a very, very average person.”

“But I am cheating death by a tiny amount!” I protested.

“You can be proud, I guess,” Horvath said. “But can I inspire you to become a little more ambitious?” He shared his screen: his PhenoAge was 42.7, more than fourteen years lower than his age. “I was average when I started, like you,” he said. “I got a scare about atherosclerosis and got serious about improving my life style. I exercise thirty minutes a day, not too much. I doubled the statins, to address cholesterol, and I take acarbose to address my glucose. I take omega-3—we just did a nice study on its benefits. In short, I take drugs. The one thing I couldn’t influence is stress. I don’t know how to tackle that.”

“You need a meditation app,” Brooke said.

“My reading of the meditation studies is that they were all disappointing,” Horvath said. “More vegetables—that’s the real secret! I’m a very lazy guy, so I go to the supermarket and I buy five bags of frozen Brussels sprouts. Few people eat more Brussels sprouts than me.”

Biohackers hear lots of conflicting advice about where to focus their energies. Luigi Ferrucci, the scientific director of the National Institute on Aging, suggests that the key is the mitochondria, the battery of the cell. Tony Wyss-Coray, a leading neuroscientist, says that “the brain is the biggest predictor of mortality.” Dr. Peter Attia, who wrote the midlife-health primer “Outlive,” believes that strong muscles are vital: they prevent falls, keep the body from accumulating fat, and even protect against dementia. Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche, a teacher of Tibetan Buddhism, suggests a different course of action: “*Not* paying for a gym membership, *not* struggling to eat the right things, *not* trying to love someone who I have a

difficult relationship with!” There is only one necessity, he says. “I have to get eight hours of sleep!”

Scientists often overlook an organ that has an outsized influence on half of the population: the ovaries. Chiefly owing to the ovaries, which age about 2.5 times faster than women’s other organs, men and women decline so differently that they might almost be separate species. Men die more of heart attacks, women of Alzheimer’s. Women live seven years longer, as a global average, and their immune systems endure better—but they spend a much greater proportion of their lives in poor health. Women benefit more from exercise, because they burn lipids, a more efficient energy source than the carbs that men burn. Yet intermittent fasting can upset the menstrual cycle, and women lose muscle mass from caloric restriction more rapidly than men. So no therapy will work equally well, or even in the same manner, for both sexes. (Because so few scientists are focussed on female longevity, *XPrize* is trying to establish a prize for ovarian health.)

The encompassing issue is that we’re all fighting natural selection, whose sole criterion is the genes we pass on. The theory of disposable soma holds that, once we’ve reproduced, our body—our soma—is no longer useful. A corollary, with the ungainly name of antagonistic pleiotropy, holds that many of the factors that help us to produce and raise children later curtail our lives. “Cholesterol builds your brain and your gonads when you’re young—and it clogs your brain and your heart when you’re old,” Nir Barzilai, a leading geroscientist, told me. “IGF-1 growth hormone is helpful if you’re younger than fifty, because it promotes muscle growth. That same high level, in an older person, kills you. Metformin”—a diabetes drug biohackers take because some studies show that it decreases mortality—“reduces IGF-1, reduces the testosterone we need to build muscle. So, if you’re under fifty and you’re taking it, that’s an idiotic decision.”

After several million years of evolution and two centuries of medical advances, human life spans may already be highly optimized. Whereas most mammals have roughly the same number of lifetime heartbeats, 1.5 billion, humans have about 2.5 billion. Broadly speaking, if you have a finite number of heartbeats, then the faster you live, the faster you die. “We’re all being cooked over time,” Dr. Ronald DePinho, who has done promising

work to strengthen telomeres, told me. “If you want to increase longevity, you basically have to turn the oven down.”

An unhealthy person who starts eating Brussels sprouts and going to Planet Fitness can really turn the oven down. But most of us can’t be bothered. As Dave Asprey told me, “If you would live twenty years longer if you punched yourself in the face as hard as you could three times every morning, no one would do it.” Many people aren’t even willing to undergo much milder distress: in one study, most respondents said they wouldn’t be interested in a drug that made them two years younger if it had side effects such as occasional headaches and loose stool.

Biohackers would take the drug, and maybe even the punches, but their ovens are already set low. Dr. Andrea Maier, who runs clinics in Singapore, told me, “Most of the time, I’m being forced to optimize the most optimized people. What we do in longevity clinics is polish polished diamonds.” According to Dr. Michael Roizen of the Cleveland Clinic, you can make a thirty-two-year difference in your life span by implementing the no-brainer stuff (sleep, diet, exercise, etc.), but you can gain only four years by taking supplements.

Nonetheless, biohackers regularly tweak their “stack” of drugs and supplements, seeking minute advantages. The hope of “combinatorics” is that interventions enhance one another. “In biology, you have to work in combinations,” Dr. Joseph Raffaele, who runs a longevity clinic in Manhattan, told me. “If I give you urolithin A and spermidine and a hormone and nitric-acid products, and your autophagy”—housecleaning of damaged cells—“is increasing, it’s like a great recipe. I may not know exactly what’s contributing what, but over all it tastes good.”

Nathan Price, a co-director of the Center for Human Healthspan at the Buck Institute, works with “digital twins”—virtual clones of a patient that are being developed to test treatments. “Very often, multiple interventions have synergistic effects,” Price said. “Almost no one gets a benefit in staving off Alzheimer’s from Vitamin D. But people could get multiple years of benefit if they coupled Vitamin D with phosphatidylcholine and better sleep and Viagra for increased blood flow.”

Yet combinatorics often backfire: when young subjects took Vitamins C and E before strength training, it blunted many benefits of working out. There's a pharmacological principle that when you combine three drugs you have no idea how they're going to interact, as well as a hepatic principle that the more supplements you take, the more work your liver must do to detoxify them. (Many over-the-counter supplements are contaminated with fungus, mold, yeast, salmonella, and heavy metals.)

When I mentioned the issues with combinatorics to Diamandis, he said, "It's a very valid critique that I've also heard from my mom." He added, "I'd love to start an A.I. company where you'd tell it what you want from your stack—more energy, or nootropics, or whatever—and then give it your genetic data and your medical baseline and the number of pills you're willing to swallow, and it tells you exactly what to take. In the interim," he said, opening a pouch containing his midday pills, "I'm manually doing this." He recently reduced his daily load of supplements from seventy-four to fifty-two, to spare his kidneys, but he's still taking more than any other patient that his Fountain Life doctor sees.

Diamandis is following the evidence that we can, in fact, override our genetics. Numerous papers have concluded that genes determine only seven to thirty per cent of longevity, while behavioral choices play a much larger role. Your health, in this view, is not just an opportunity but a responsibility. If you get cancer and die young, it's your fault for not perfecting your stack. One can imagine a future in which, if you didn't take every conceivable step to optimize your health, you'd face not only disapproval from your A.I. doctor but denial of claims from your A.I. insurance company.

For four days in March, Diamandis held his Abundance360 conference at a resort in Rancho Palos Verdes, California. He began the final day by jogging onstage in gold sneakers to the strains of "Forever Young" and declaring that it was Longevity Day—"the day that will add decades of health and centuries of inspiration to your lives."

The conference curated a world of coming wonders for several hundred C-suite buccaneers who had paid up to fifty thousand dollars apiece to update their mental models and investment portfolios. One entrepreneur announced that his brain-computer interface would soon be surgically installed in

primates; a venture capitalist predicted that we'd have a billion bipedal robots by 2040. There was talk of "neuromuscular activation of biohybrid mobile bots" and of modifying humans with DNA from tardigrades, the nearly indestructible micro-animals, so that we can better withstand radiation during space travel. Diamandis welcomed each innovator to the stage with a hug and jumped exuberantly to the music, urging his audience to do likewise. He told me, "I learned from Tony"—Robbins—"that, if you're the host, and you're having a great time, your guests are going to be having a great time. There has to be an emotional carrier wave to make the data meaningful."

Like the Italian futurists, Diamandis is drawn to dynamism, to the promise of speed. During the first Trump Administration, he told me, Peter Thiel and Elon Musk asked if he might like to run *NASA*, and his response was "colorfully and vehemently negative." Too bureaucratic! He has a venture-capital mind-set: invest in any emergent tech that shows promise, because you never know which unlikely breakthrough will bring mammoth returns.

Yet the risks aren't just financial. In January, the *Times* reported that ExThera Medical, the company whose blood filters Diamandis praised at the Buck Institute, had sold thousands of its devices to a company with a clinic on Antigua that offered miracle treatments to patients with metastatic cancer. The *Times* described harrowingly neglectful care, and said that at least six patients had died after treatment. (ExThera maintains that patients were warned the treatments were experimental.) The story also noted that the company continued to promote the clinic, despite warnings from ExThera employees. When I asked Diamandis about the reporting, he said that it had "paused a lot of Fountain Life's plans" with ExThera. Then he added, "Listen, they've also had some incredible breakthroughs."

He sometimes gets skeptical feedback from his partners at the venture firm Bold Capital. Bold has six hundred million dollars under investment, about sixty per cent of it in health-span companies; on paper, at least, the firm is showing a more-than-fifteenfold return in Oura Ring, Figure AI, and Colossal Biosciences, which recently brought a version of the extinct dire wolf back to life. Teymour Boutros-Ghali, Bold's managing partner, said, "Where some people imagine the fifty ways that tech can go wrong, Peter

sees the fifty ways it could work, and believes that human ingenuity can take care of any problems. But our investors are very happy that we *don't* do all of Peter's deals." One of Bold's founders, Sergey Young, told me, "I'd never advise people to invest more than two or three per cent of their wealth in longevity—it's still very early."

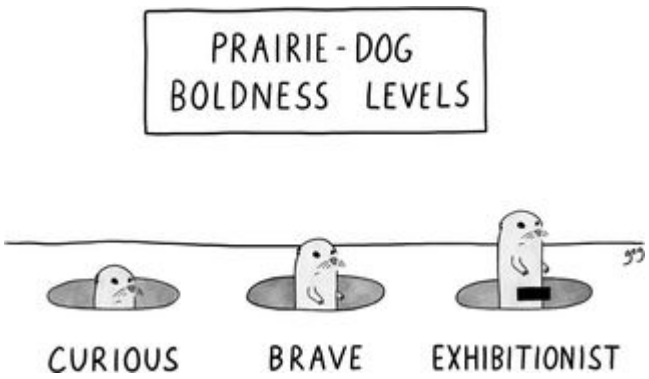
At the Abundance conference, Diamandis's audience seemed receptive to his reminders that "the two biggest wealth-creation opportunities are A.I. and longevity." Part of his appeal is his insistence that extending your own life and growing richer in the process will ultimately benefit the species. He conceived of an "accredited-patient program," an F.D.A.-backed system that would allow select people to invest in treatments unavailable to the general public. "My basic idea is I have enough money, and I'm of sound mind—I'm gonna try it!" He contends that the longevity-pursuing risk-takers he lives among are actually selfless. "Any negative effects from technologies that don't work will be experienced by the wealthy," he said. "You could see it as their sacrifice for others—both financial and, eventually, biological."

Joe Polish, who helped launch A360, told me that its audience found Diamandis's optimism reassuring, but that "what actually drives the Abundance events is scarcity and fear of missing out: *I'm going to be left behind by A.I. or robotics or the fountain of youth.* Even the super-wealthy people there are scared shitless and trying to buy their stairway to Heaven. And nearly all of them are deathly afraid of death."

Most of us just want to remain in decent health and last a bit longer than the actuaries predict. The implications of extreme longevity—of a transhuman future in which we have four careers, six replacement kidneys, and eleven spouses on pods orbiting Mars—are too much for us to absorb. But Diamandis is ready for it all. Dan Sullivan, who co-hosts a podcast with Diamandis called "Exponential Wisdom," said, "Peter really believes that immortality is a reality. I told him, 'Living to one hundred and fifty-six seems reasonable, but living to seven hundred? I don't know, Peter—I think you're going to get lonely.' "

Our awareness of death has an upside: it imbues our lives with beauty and meaning. Immortality would redefine the nature of both empathy and

morality, because it would strip us of a common fate. I once asked Diamandis about the oppressive consequences if a deathless Jeff Bezos amassed seventy trillion dollars, or if a Vladimir Putin stayed in power for a century. “Another way to look at that scenario is ‘What are the *benefits*?’ ” he responded. “Having some visionary single decision-maker allows you to be Queen Isabella funding Columbus. I fantasize about well-meaning wealthy leaders guiding humanity with pure intent, giving top scientists the capital to take tenfold actions.” Then he grinned, aware from his own fund-raising how fantastical that fantasy was.



Cartoon by Greg Nussbaum

Bob Richards, a close friend of Diamandis’s, told me, “Peter believes that technology will lead us to be kind to each other, to be explorers and artists, not militaristic and greedy and self-serving, the way we are now. But just living forever is not going to change that.” Diamandis told me that our hardwired inclinations toward selfishness did trouble him sometimes, in the middle of the night. He added, softly, “I am hopeful that when there is no scarcity, the better angels of our nature will prevail.”

Nearly every longevity advocate believes at least two things that can’t yet be proved: we will soon discover the secret to eternal life, and we will be better off once we do. Bryan Johnson, like many others, maintains that A.I. is on the verge of unlocking the medical obstacles to immortality. But, he acknowledged, “I don’t think that anyone knows” exactly how it will do so. Faith without proof is a religious outlook, and Johnson announced earlier this year that a religion is what his Don’t Die movement would become. “The words ‘community,’ ‘ethical framework,’ ‘philosophy’—humans won’t devote their whole identity to them,” he told me. “Religion, for better

or worse, is a framework that has motivated people to do phenomenal things."

Diamandis bridles at this idea, worrying that framing the quest as a religion will "discredit longevity in people's minds." Yet he knows that his own prognostications are impervious to fact checking. "Some people tell me, 'Well, you've created a religion around abundance,' " he said. "And there are elements of faith in that mind-set." During A360, Diamandis interviewed his own avatar, which had supposedly time-travelled back from 2082. The avatar, which resembled a young Rafael Nadal, reported that the Singularity took place on schedule and that artificial intelligence "essentially solved all material-scarcity problems," so that "the jobless became the free, living better than 2025's billionaires."

Implicit in this narrative is the belief that technocrats aren't hogging resources for vanity projects; they're fixing the world. One *XPrize* Healthspan donor, Daniel Krizek, a biotech-fund manager who plans to invest a billion dollars in longevity, espouses the values of effective altruism. That principle, popular in Silicon Valley, holds that philanthropists should save the most lives they can, including the billions of future lives that might be enabled by a particular action. "You could put a trillion dollars into Africa and feed the continent forever," Krizek told me, "but I believe it's better to spend the trillion on going to space, because all the scientific advances that come from that will save many more lives in the future." Bryan Johnson's movement aligns with this belief: his ultimate goal is "species maximization—trying to get life in this part of the galaxy to flourish."

Unlike some of his peers, Diamandis is eager to save current lives on Earth as well as future lives in space. He told me, "I think there is a single tide that floats all boats. A.I. will feed the hungry, solve the climate crisis, *and* get us to space."

At seventy-seven, Ray Kurzweil takes eighty supplements a day, has an artificial pancreas to manage his diabetes, and appears to be in great shape. As he waits for technology to tide humanity onward, he is bewildered that some people have other plans. He used to have lunch with the economist Daniel Kahneman, who won a Nobel for his work on how irrational factors

cloud our decisions. Over lunch in late 2023, when Kahneman was eighty-nine but in decent health, they debated the wisdom of extending your life. “We’re at a point where problems can be reversed,” Kurzweil said. “Your kidneys are failing? Well, so what? It could be solved next week.” Kurzweil told me that Kahneman wasn’t persuaded. “He said, ‘Look at history! Billions of people have lived, lost most of their capabilities, and then died! Nobody’s escaped that!’ ” Three months later, Kahneman wrote to his family and friends that he had decided to die by assisted suicide: “I have believed since I was a teen-ager that the miseries and indignities of the last years of life are superfluous, and I am acting on that belief.” Kurzweil sighed, recalling the loss. “People really don’t want to be nonfunctional. But it’s *death* that’s the tragedy. Death is the loss of information, beauty, love—everything we know!”

For many biohackers, the ultimate goal is simply the preservation of their own consciousness. One constraint on retaining information forever is that our neurons mostly don’t replicate themselves; they just shrink, deteriorate, and die. But Kurzweil has a fix for that, too. Decades back, he predicted that we’d soon be able to scan and copy our connectome—the intricate web of a hundred billion neurons that constitutes the human brain.

At A360, a nanotechnologist named Michael Andregg declared that Kurzweil’s prophesy was all but realized. Andregg co-founded a startup called Eon Systems. His hypothesis is that, because consciousness arises from bioelectric signals, you’ll be able to turn your digital brain on in the cloud and experience a thoroughly satisfying life up there (or out there, or wherever), because A.I. will predict your neuron’s next signal: brain autocomplete. He showed an emulated fruit fly whose connectome had been copied to a Kinko’s level of fidelity. It skittered around onscreen, in a somewhat staccato fashion, and it knew enough to groom itself and to avoid bitter tastes (though how there could be bitter tastes in the digital realm was never explained).

Andregg said that the human connectome was only a million times more complex than a fruit fly’s, so all we have to do is model our brains’ structure and activity and, voilà, emulation. We could be scanned and wake up in a

digital body by 2030. “This is a whole new body, a whole new brain—this is transcendence!”

No one can fully emulate a C. elegans worm yet, despite fourteen years of trying; the best program can’t even make the worm move backward. Yet Andregg told me that the difficulties he foresaw were chiefly psychological: “The first person to do the upload, it will be destructive. We pause you, lock down all your proteins, and slice your brain with a big deli slicer—but much finer, at the hundred-micron level.” Nonetheless, he said, “We have at least ten volunteers who want to be the first to do it. Well, the second.”

When I asked Diamandis about the plausibility of whole-brain emulation, he pointed out that Andregg was featured in the “Moonshots” part of his program. He was ambivalent about eventually uploading his own connectome: “Destroying myself to upload feels like suicide. And if I’m somehow still here after the upload, destroying myself because my peer in the cloud says, ‘I’m good, you can kill yourself’—I’m not sure I’m ready for that.” Uncharacteristically, he acknowledged having qualms about Kurzweil’s nanobots, too, particularly if they cross the blood-brain barrier. “I’d *probably* do nanotechnology,” he said. “But it begins to enter a reëngineering of the brain, and of our personas. You have to ask, ‘At what point do we stop being human?’ ”

In May, at an auditorium near Gramercy Park, in Manhattan, *XPrize* Healthspan introduced the hundred semifinalists who’d advanced from the more than six hundred teams that signed up. Before the ceremony, in a conference room upstairs, Diamandis and Jamie Justice gave thirty investors a preview of the competition and urged them to fund teams that fired their imaginations.

“We aren’t just going to slow aging,” Justice said, “but to improve function in just one year.”

Diamandis clarified: “Effectively a functional reversal. I want to get the word ‘reversal’ in there.”

Downstairs, he welcomed a standing-room-only crowd by asking, “Who wants an extra twenty years of healthy life?” Everyone, pretty much. “Who

wants more than that?” Woo! He went on, as if the prize had already been won, “That twenty years will be the bridge to the next twenty years, and that twenty years will be the bridge to the twenty years after that!”

The semifinalists, from more than thirty countries, were pursuing an extraordinary array of approaches, including A.I.-based short-chain fatty-acid modulation; extracellular vesicles derived from cow plasma; ultrasound to target senescent cells; kidney-strengthening tinctures; olfactory enhancement with forty odors, including eucalyptus and lavender; coffee that targets the mitochondria with exogenous ketones; and a longevity village called FuturVille, where the health practitioners are holograms. Perhaps because the testing period doesn’t begin until 2026, the room shimmered with the optimism of a hundred as yet undisproved hypotheses.

Aubrey de Grey was present, delighted that the competition he’d suggested nearly twenty years earlier was robustly under way. And yet, he told me, the tests for strength, cognition, and immune function that will determine a winner “are unlikely to be sufficiently spanning of all the pathways of aging that they would increase life span. For life span, *every* pathway has to be delayed. If you delay changes in ninety per cent of the pathways, you’re still going to die—and probably right on schedule.”

Even many of Diamandis’s close friends don’t quite believe that we’ll reach longevity escape velocity anytime soon. Dave Blundin, his partner in an A.I. venture fund, told me, “When you’re Peter’s age, you’re right on the longevity cusp. That’s the tragedy of the whole Peter story—he could live forever, or he could miss by a year and not live any longer at all. It’ll be *close*.”

When I asked Diamandis about his friend’s observation, he looked stricken, as if Blundin were consigning him to an early grave. “I acknowledge that a lot of the initial research hasn’t panned out, that rapamycin, caloric restriction, *NAD*+ are individual pebbles dropped in an ocean of biochemical complexity,” he said. “We don’t really understand the biology of aging yet.” He fell silent, running projections. “If we’re not able to move the needle so everyone gets twenty to thirty more healthy years in the next twenty-five years, I’d consider that a failure.”

Then he brightened: “That’s about the buffer in years that I’m going to need to get to the moon.” He mentioned one more seminal book, Robert Heinlein’s sci-fi collection “The Man Who Sold the Moon.” The man in question, D. D. Harriman, longs to go to the moon, but his vision and salesmanship are so vital to the moon-colonization program that his colleagues maneuver to keep him on Earth. “Anyway,” Diamandis explained, “Harriman finally sneaks up to the moon on an illegal flight and dies there.” He laughed. “I don’t want to *die* on the moon, exactly. But I’d love to start a city there, a base we could mine asteroids from! The last time something like this happened is when the lungfish crawled out of the ocean onto land.” Diamandis looked off, somewhere between ahead and above. “The equation of humanity moving into the cosmos is complicated,” he admitted. He knew that it might not happen, or be optimal for all of us if it did. “But it still gives me permission to dream.” ♦

Tad Friend has been a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1998. He is the author of the memoir “In the Early Times: A Life Reframed.”

Portfolio

ICE’s Spectacle of Intimidation

Immigrants showing up for court dates in Manhattan must now navigate past rows of masked federal agents.

Photography by Mark Peterson

August 4, 2025

A federal agent takes a man into custody at 26 Federal Plaza. Dozens of people have hearings in New York’s immigration courts each day, and now face the possibility of being arrested just by showing up, regardless of the status of their cases.Redux

Since the spring, at the federal courthouses in downtown Manhattan, hundreds of officers from *ICE* and other government agencies have lined the hallways and lobbies, waiting to detain some migrants as they leave their immigration hearings. Many of the agents are masked and armed, and they are dressed in tactical gear, even though all visitors to the buildings must pass through airport-level security.

Dozens of observers, migrant advocates, and members of the press show up each day to witness the arrests, which often take place with little regard for due process. It might not even matter how a judge rules in someone’s case. Migrants seem to be in shock as agents approach; family members might scream or sob as their loved one is taken away.

Portraits of President Donald Trump and Vice-President J. D. Vance hang in the lobby of 290 Broadway.

An ICE agent wearing a “Defend Liberty” T-shirt takes into custody a man who has just walked out of his court hearing at 26 Federal Plaza. Photo and video journalists can work only in the hallways outside the courtrooms.

The photographer Mark Peterson spent several weeks this summer documenting such scenes at Federal Plaza. “It’s an image that I imagine the Administration wants out there—these guys, fully armed and masked and with body armor, arresting people,” he said. “The government is obviously looking at what pictures people are making.” Peterson has come to understand the rhythms of the place. Sometimes the agents make small talk while waiting for hearings to let out. One asked Peterson about the type of camera he uses. Others nicknamed one of his colleagues the *goat* after they learned that she had won a prestigious photography award.

ICE agents at the courthouses tend to be armed. The halls and waiting rooms are eerily quiet as the agents survey the migrants in attendance.

A protester outside holds posters of detainees bearing the question, in Spanish, "WHERE ARE THEY?"

Caught in the middle are the ordinary people—the single men, the young couples, the little children made to walk through this state-sponsored spectacle of intimidation. Peterson's black-and-white images, heavy with flash and shadows, evoke film noir and the urban-crime photography of the nineteen-thirties and forties. "If someone is doing everything right, and then they still get detained, it's a crime scene," Peterson said. A growing number of migrants are now skipping their court dates altogether—and setting themselves up for deportation—because they would rather go into hiding than face the danger and humiliation that Federal Plaza may bring. One can only imagine that this, too, is part of the point.

—Jordan Salama

Takes

- **Jane Mayer on John Hersey’s “Hiroshima”**
  By Jane Mayer | His monumental report changed history, journalism, and me.

Takes

Jane Mayer on John Hersey’s “Hiroshima”

By Jane Mayer

August 3, 2025

August 31, 1946

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

Thirty years after this magazine published John Hersey's "Hiroshima," I sat in his classroom at Yale, hoping to learn how to write with even a fraction of his power. When "Hiroshima" appeared, in the August 31, 1946, issue, it was the scoop of the century—the first unvarnished account by an American reporter of the nuclear blast that obliterated the city. Hersey's prose was spare, allowing the horror to emerge word by word. A man tried to lift a woman out of a sandpit, "but her skin slipped off in huge, glove-like pieces." The detonation buried a woman and her infant alive: "When she had dug herself free, she had discovered that the baby was choking, its mouth full of dirt. With her little finger, she had carefully cleaned out the infant's mouth, and for a time the child had breathed normally and seemed all right; then suddenly it had died."

Hersey's candor had a seismic impact: the magazine sold out, and a book version of the article sold millions of copies. Stephanie Hinnershitz, a military historian, told me that Hersey's reporting "didn't just change the public debate about nuclear weapons—it *created* the debate." Until then, she explained, President Harry Truman had celebrated the attack as a strategic masterstroke, "without addressing the human cost." Officials shamelessly downplayed the effects of radiation; one called it a "very pleasant way to die." Hinnershitz said, "Hersey broke that censorship." He alerted the world to what the U.S. government had hidden.

Soon after "Hiroshima" was published, the influential *Saturday Review* ran an editorial condemning "the crime of Hiroshima and Nagasaki." America's military establishment tried to quell the outrage with a piece in *Harper's* by Henry Stimson, a retired Secretary of War. The article—ghostwritten by McGeorge Bundy, a future national-security adviser—claimed that dropping nuclear bombs on Japan had averted further war, saving more than a million American lives. Kai Bird, a co-author of "American Prometheus," the definitive biography of J. Robert Oppenheimer, told me that this pushback was specious: "Bundy later admitted to me that there was no documentary evidence for this 'million' casualty figure. He just pulled it out of thin air."

Hersey's report helped transform *The New Yorker*. Although the magazine had published dispatches from brilliant war correspondents, including Janet

Flanner, it was still widely considered a weightless amusement. “Hiroshima” marked a new, more serious era. It also changed journalism. For many reporters of my generation, “Hiroshima” was a model of what might be called the ethical exposé. It was built on rigorous reporting and meticulously observed details, and, through its quiet, almost affectless voice, the reader became another eyewitness. Hersey’s narrative approach was deceptively simple. Threading together the stories of six survivors, he described the destruction from their perspective, which implicitly made the point that nuclear warfare posed an unconscionable threat to humanity. People usually think of investigative reporting as relying on obscure documents and dry financial data. But Hersey, whose 1944 novel, “A Bell for Adano,” won a Pulitzer, showed that to truly affect readers such reporting must be paired with literary craft and be propelled by a sense of urgency.

Hersey, the secular son of high-Wasp missionaries to China, transferred an almost stern sense of morality to his work. As a professor, he was priestly, soft-spoken, and intimidating. His reverence for journalism as a sacred duty could be self-righteous, but it set a standard for conscientiousness that I still try to meet. His seminar Form and Style in Non-Fiction Writing required students to analyze and emulate the techniques of great writers from Homer to Thornton Wilder. In fact, “The Bridge of San Luis Rey,” Wilder’s 1927 novel, which unfurls the personal stories of characters who die at the bridge, had inspired the form of “Hiroshima,” and Hersey hoped to teach us through such examples. Private tutorials were equally inspiring and mortifying. Some of my Yale classmates still burn with embarrassment when recalling them. One remembers Hersey pulling out a copy of Fowler’s “Dictionary of Modern English Usage” and asking, “Are you familiar with this?” Another will never forget Hersey, who marked comments in pencil, noting that she’d misspelled “masturbation.” A third says that Hersey, a stickler for accuracy, criticized a description of fingernails “bitten to half the normal length” as hyperbolic. After making each point, Hersey erased his notes. The message was clear: now we were on our own. ♦

Read the original story.

Hiroshima

Jane Mayer, The New Yorker's chief Washington correspondent, is the author of "Dark Money" and the winner of a 2025 George Polk Award, for her exposé of Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth.

Shouts & Murmurs

- **A Vaccination Parable**
  By Steve Martin and Harry Bliss | You've got to read the literature!

Shouts & Murmurs

A Vaccination Parable

By Steve Martin and Harry Bliss

August 4, 2025

Steve Martin is an actor, a musician, and a writer. His memoir about his career, "Number One Is Walking," was illustrated by Harry Bliss.
Harry Bliss has contributed cartoons and covers to The New Yorker since 1998. He is the author, with Steve Martin, of "A Wealth of Pigeons." He also wrote the memoir "You Can Never Die" (2025).

Fiction

- **“An Unashamed Proposal”**
  By Kiran Desai | Look, Sunny said, however progressive my mother is, she is an Indian woman from another generation. Do you really think I can tell her that we sleep in the same bed?

Fiction

An Unashamed Proposal

By Kiran Desai

August 3, 2025

Illustration by Anagh Banerjee

One gusty day in May of 1997, a mailman trudged down the streets of Fort Greene in Brooklyn and plucked a letter from his bag. It almost flew from his hands, but it didn't, and he dropped it through the stiff brass mail slot of a sober, liver-colored brownstone, where it lay on the dulled parquet until Lou Orsini, who'd lived forever on the second floor, scooped it up, almost tossed it out with the Panda Garden delivery menus, but didn't. He saw it in time and propped it on the stairs. When Ulla and Sunny returned from the Korean deli with toilet paper, tofu, sprouts, and six assorted artisan ales, Ulla almost trod on it but didn't. She made pincers of her fingers and picked it up despite her hands being full. Ulla was the girlfriend Sunny had never happened to mention to his family, although for more than a year now they had shared a lease, a bed, a Con Ed utility bill, a laundry basket, and, on some absent-minded occasions, a toothbrush.

"What does your mother say?" Ulla asked, unlacing her sneakers.

Sunny would come to regret not bundling the letter away, but in this moment it was so astonishing that he exclaimed, "Look! I have a marriage proposal!"

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

Oh, how could he have forgotten that love, when it arrives, arrives always twinned to its destructive force, as inevitably as God and Devil, life and death, home and the leaving of it; that information collected during sweeter moments will be turned to ammunition and discharged during war; that what is innocent in the morning will not remain so at nightfall.

Ulla took the letter from Sunny.

"*My dear boy,*" Babita Bhatia had penned in her customary envy-green ink.

> I am writing to give you the news that we are the target of an intrigue—your grandfather has sent me this unashamed proposal of marriage for you from his neighbor, the lawyer Shah, on behalf of his granddaughter, who is studying in some flyspeck of a college in America. Like the one Sara Habib's son attended, where he received a degree for inventing a Frisbee that flies 0.1 per cent faster than other Frisbees. Incredibly, the letter lists all her faults and says she wishes to get married because she

is lonely. Anyway, I thought you'd have a hearty laugh, and now I can tell your grandfather, who doesn't wish to offend his friend, that I have dutifully forwarded the letter to you.

It was delivered by the Allahabad padre, who was on his way to a faith convention. He brought along some marvellous kebabs made by the Shahs' cook, who originally came from Lucknow—filthy as can be, but it's the dirt under the fingernails that imparts the flavor. In the morning, two of the kakori had vanished. I called Vinita and Punita, who professed ignorance. "Who ate them then? A ghost?" When I told their mother, she said, "Beat them with a broom, make them sleep under the stairs, starve them. Teach them how to behave."

"You are overestimating me," I told Gunja. Although now I think it was a ploy of hers, to attack the girls so I had to save them.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Kiran Desai read "An Unashamed Proposal."

As a boy, Sunny used to put his fingers in his ears and shout, "Mummy, please stop this gossip!" But her letters held a grotesque fascination for Ulla, who found them as riveting as "Masterpiece Theatre."

Sunny had explained to Ulla that Vinita and Punita were his mother's servant girls, daughters of his mother's cleaning maid, Gunja, who had eight living children—three had died in infancy (Babita used the phrase "popped off")—and Gunja's husband was a drunk who sold chicken and mutton bones for a living, collecting them from dhaba eating places, then transporting them to a bone-meal-fertilizer factory. Gunja could not afford to have six daughters at home; she'd have to marry off the two oldest girls. To give Vinita and Punita a little more time, she begged Babita to keep the children in exchange for housework. Vinita, the elder of the pair, had already been taught how to make pigs in blankets and a chicken-liver pâté with brandy; the younger one, Punita, was enrolled in a neighborhood charity school but helped her sister in the evenings. Even though she had two servant girls for free, Babita was to her mind involved in a social experiment to uplift society.

The gray modernist house in which the Bhatia family lived had been designed by a disciple of Le Corbusier's and built by Sunny's paternal grandfather, a former finance minister who had swiftly acquired several palatial properties in a manner that could be explained only by corruption, although by the time Sunny was born the properties had been lost to further corruption, save the Panchsheel Park house, which had been sectioned into three, one-third for each of the minister's sons, Ravi, Ratan, and Rana. When Sunny was eight, his father, Ratan, died of a heart attack, and nobody in his father's family had spoken to Babita since—they accused her of driving Ratan to despair with her harangue. Sunny's widowed grandmother had composed a will leaving the property, which was in her name, to Ravi and Rana, compensating Babita with a slim portfolio of investments and a set of Spode eggcups in a woodland-rabbit design, which she had always coveted.

The value of the investments had fallen, and Babita contested the will in court, but, because the courts were so overwhelmed that they usually resolved such cases well after everyone involved was dead, she expected to stay on in Panchsheel Park until her own demise.

When Babita exited her front door, she turned her nose up and to the right if she saw elder brother-in-law Ravi to her left, and she turned her nose up and to the left if she saw younger brother-in-law Rana to her right. The eggcups, held ransom, resided in brother-in-law Ravi's glass display cabinet, and once in a while, to annoy his sister-in-law, he lingered over breakfast in his garden, where she might espy him gloating in his paisley dressing gown: "My, oh, my, what a cunning eggcup, and is this little Peter Rabbit under the blackberry bush?"

When Ulla laughed, exclaiming, "Crazy!," Sunny saw an ageless Ulla, all the way from what she must have been as a pixie baby to what she would be when she was a pixie ancient.

Ulla opened the second letter enclosed with Sunny's mother's letter, and she pounced. "What's this?" And there was Sonia. Tall, slender, a braid down to her waist, standing against snow-laden Vermont firs, in a disconcerting, mustard-colored coat.

“It’s the custom to send photographs, of course,” Sunny yelped, but he dared not peek. The shift in Ulla’s voice made him adopt an impenetrable expression as he put his laptop, which resembled a tubby flying saucer, into his satchel. Just another half hour and he could exit with the righteous haste of someone on his way to work. Sunny worked the night shift at the Associated Press, where he had been employed straight out of his graduate program at Columbia University, in an entry-level position, learning the rules of the A.P. Stylebook, editing and sending out on the wire the news that came winging in at all hours. His part in the enterprise was small, but it felt crucial because the stories were urgent: thirty Black churches in the South burned to the ground in eighteen months; there was violence between Israel and Hezbollah; an earthquake hit China; Osama bin Laden declared war on the United States; and Charles and Diana divorced. Sunny longed for the day he might see his byline in a print newspaper and considered pitching a story to the news desk; it was permissible to do so.

Ulla, annoyed by his vague expression and his desire to flee from his mother’s missive, said, “Are you sure this letter is innocent?” If he weren’t behaving guiltily, Ulla wouldn’t have been suspicious. If she weren’t suspicious, he wouldn’t be behaving guiltily. To have kept Ulla hidden from his mother, as he had, or to remember his Indian life made Sunny turn from Ulla sometimes. It was his remoteness in these moments that made Ulla long for him even when he was in the room, which made her love him more despite their arguments, and be provoked by him more, which increased their arguments.

“There’s nothing sinister about the letter,” he said. “Everyone gets these at my age, forwarded by relatives, friends, people who’ve never set eyes on you—a great pile arrive when you finish college, and the flood continues until everyone is settled. Then there is a lull before they begin marrying off the progeny of these mishaps, each generation lesser than what came before, because what hope can you have from such a process?”

At this moment, Sunny’s phone rang. Sunny and Ulla maintained two phone lines so that Sunny could give his mother his private number and tell her that he lived with a housemate. Both Sunny and Ulla knew the caller would be either his mother or Satya, his closest friend, who telephoned him daily.

Sunny didn’t answer the phone. “I am an ineligible, poor journalist, so only one such letter has arrived,” he said, placating Ulla a little more. “Satya, who is going to be a doctor, must have a hundred. Whenever he gets depressed, he orders takeout from Punjab Hut, locks himself in, listens to old film songs while rereading his marriage proposals, and he cheers up.”

This didn’t cheer Ulla, however. She had first thought Sunny was shy, if a bit childish in his inability to admit openly to a relationship. But now she understood the consequences and perhaps the true purpose of this secrecy: Sunny was keeping his options open. “Surely,” she said, “surely your family in India realizes that it is disrespectful to me?”

Silence.

Ulla yelled, “They don’t realize it is disrespectful to me, because they don’t know I exist!”

Sunny kept his gaze averted. “Look, however progressive my mother is, she is an Indian woman from another generation. Do you really think I can tell her that we sleep in the same bed? If I was taking this proposal seriously, wouldn’t I have hidden the letter instead of saying, ‘Look, Ulla’?”

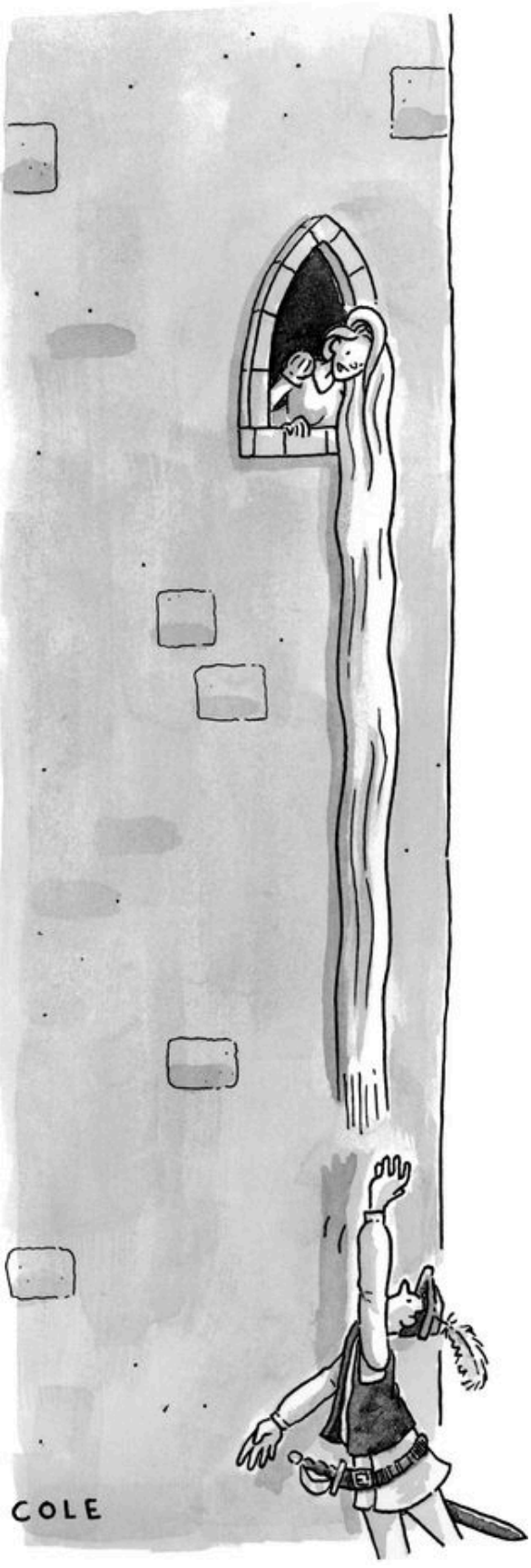
Ulla sighed. “I should be feeling angry, and I am so angry, yet I also feel bad for this poor girl who is being marketed. It’s a scandal that they treat women like this.”

“Well, they treat men the same way and you’re not showing me sympathy.”

At 9 *P.M.*, Sunny fled for the subway, wishing he were as uncoupled as the purple wind that blew through the city. Even in this country, where he’d assumed love was different from the Indian version, it was not a private endeavor, but a public event. If you didn’t stamp and stamp love with legitimacy and acknowledgment, and stamp it some more, silver and gold, with further legalities and recognitions, the ghost of future lost love infiltrated, and your love became irrevocably unformed, the lack folded into its substance.

In the elevator of the Associated Press Building at Rockefeller Plaza, Sunny’s brows trembled. He observed his clay-colored shoes, the geometric

print of his navy shirt. He remembered the story about a Chinese philosopher who had dreamt he was a butterfly. The dream had inspired the question: Was he a man dreaming he was a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he was a man?


COLE

“You need to be at least six feet tall.”
Cartoon by Tyson Cole

He couldn’t articulate to Ulla, lest she claim to be the victim of his ambivalence, that his life now seemed at a remove, that it was sometimes unrecognizable even to him. Whenever he walked up the creaking mast of stairs to their seagull’s-nest apartment, he was surprised anew by Ulla’s elfin beauty, by the pine floors, by the white *Ikea* couch, by the Western lightness and comfort that were, apparently, his. He often couldn’t determine exactly how he felt about his new life, and it was how he happened to behave at such times that elucidated his emotions. But he was also unsure whether he was behaving from honest impulse or merely playing a part, taking his cues from the people, the weather, the food, even the objects around him: the bowl from a North Carolina potter filled with farmers’-market heirloom tomatoes; the deceptively simple cut and calm gray of his first coat that was not a parka; snow and darkness in the afternoon; an omelette filled with smoked salmon and dill cream cheese.

One thing seemed certain: if India existed, then America could not, for they were too drastically different not to cancel each other out. Yet, despite this fact, they refused to remain apart. India invaded his life all the way from the other side of the world, and then life here became instantly artificial. He became an impostor, a spy, a liar, and a ghost.

By 10 *P.M.*, Sunny had settled into his cubicle in the deserted newsroom. He was editing a story on Dolly the cloned sheep when his phone rang. He knew it would be his mother. He had thought he would be able to love her better from New York.

Sunny and Ulla had first met by Riverside Park, in the cafeteria line of a hostel for international students and American students interested in an international experience. This hostel may have had an academic purpose, and it may have looked staid from the outside, but in actuality it was a hysterical airport of love affairs as students from around the world—menaced by perpetually expiring visas and the panic of limited time—romanced one another in fast-forward, having but two or four years to trick their native fate, leapfrog into another nation, another class, another skin, and to sample all the world offered. It was a wonder anyone managed to achieve a degree.

A Danish dancer chased a Senegalese student of engineering; a Hungarian Communist teacher's son stalked an American soy-sauce baron's granddaughter; a girl from the Midwest tracked the lone Scotsman. There was a slapstick randomness to these loves conducted in dozens of languages during movie nights or dance lessons, or in the cafeteria, where everyone went despite the dullest food in the city in case a potential romance awaited by the steamed-vegetable medley.

For Sunny and Ulla, these were their most joyful days: when he had first found himself vulnerable to her hedgehog hair style and the way she swayed so freely at ballroom dancing; when she had first been stirred by the old-fashioned grandeur of his hawk nose and his hawk eyes, his formal bearing and correct manner as he waited with his food tray and his folded New York *Times*, reminding her a little of her Kansas grandfather who had emigrated from Sweden.

Ulla lived in a part of the hostel that was divided into mini apartments—three students sharing a kitchenette and a bathroom—and one of the young women in Ulla's apartment, Mala, came from Delhi, just like Sunny. He'd been considering asking Mala to broker a formal introduction to Ulla, when one night in the cafeteria, as if Mala had divined his interest, Sunny overheard her begin to denounce the disheartening and repetitive occurrence of Indian boys running after white American women, always picking the most pallid, androgynous ones, the kind who withdrew to spend moody hours scribbling in diaries. This was what attracted them, Mala said, because no Indian woman was allowed enough privacy to thus indulge in a solipsistic obsession with her own psychology—encouraged to chart the fluctuations of her temperament in response to deep crises that were inevitably banal. These women, meanwhile, realized they could snag a Third World man far higher up the ladder of class and money than any fellow-American, with whom their prospects were dim, simply by using the bargaining power of their citizenship and their pale complexion.

"You're Mala's friend," Sunny said, when he realized he'd have to address Ulla directly.

"I wouldn't put it quite like that," Ulla responded.

“Why not?”

They built their first bond, Sunny and Ulla, on their mutual resentment of Indian women in general and Mala in particular, tumbling into this conversation because they had no other. No matter what Ulla was doing, Mala had to be doing that *and* something better, Ulla complained. “If I say I’m working at a summer camp in Maine, she says she’ll be working at an orphanage associated with the Dalai Lama. *And* she is applying for a Fulbright. If there are two peaches, Mala has to eat the best peach, or both peaches. She would never in a million years eat only the lesser peach.”

Sunny gave a little bow of acknowledgment both externally to Ulla and, secretly, internally, for he had identified similar embarrassing hungers in himself but was determined to suppress them and loathed them in others. Something about arriving in America, he’d observed, made one want to grab enough for past, present, and future all at once. He wanted to protect America from those like him, but then, if others were gobbling and grabbing, he should, too, or he’d be left behind. The next instant he felt sickened by self-disgust. That was why he ran from Indian women, he told himself.

“Why do they do it?” Ulla asked.

“Well,” Sunny said, “in India there are too many people and men control everything, so they have to get what they want in primitive ways, with fake friendliness. Here there is much less opposition and much more to gain—so here, my God, these women become monsters.”

Thus Sunny adopted an expert’s role on the unfortunate qualities of Indian women, oblivious of the fact that, before Mala and Ulla’s friendship had been tattered over peaches, Mala had educated Ulla on the miserable personalities of Indian men: Indian men and their controlling attitudes, Indian men and their mummies, their jealousies, their pride, their rages and entitlements—the way they became lecturing gurus telling everyone everything about everything before the first gray hairs fringed their ears, the way a disproportionate number were driven by the ambition of finding a white woman—all the better to escape India.

“Why?” Ulla had asked.

Well, Mala had said, they might then reclaim India with dignity once they had a safety raft and finally manage to be nice to fellow-Indians so they could make use of India in earnest now that they had lost the fear of being swallowed back. Or they might go in quite the other direction and pretend they were not Indian at all. Say all the bad things about the country so white people didn't have to.

Either way, they no longer lived an *honest* life, Mala said.

Sunny was touched by how Ulla's dislike for Mala hadn't translated to dislike for all Indians. Or perhaps he was flattering himself into thinking he was therefore utterly unlike other Indians.

And Mala had made one severe misjudgment: Ulla wasn't outraged by Indian men chasing American women. She loved to be desired, and if being American or freckle-skinned or a pixie blonde delivered her to the top of the heap, well, would any woman turn away from her natural advantage?

Only later did Sunny wonder if Mala had both made their relationship possible (Indians were no longer foreign or unknowable to Ulla) and also impossible (she had provided Ulla with all the avenues of complaint). Certainly, together Sunny and Mala had granted Ulla a complete lexicon of arguments against Indians, male and female. As if each gender of a certain class, the Westernized class, hoped to make it in the United States by waging mutual war. It was because of Indian men that Indian women were forced to run. It was because of Indian women that Indian men would do anything to get away.

For the first days of living with a girlfriend, everything had been surprising —the fact, for example, that Ulla and Sunny had different ideas of privacy. Astonished to find no lock on the bathroom door of their new home, Sunny rushed, expecting Ulla to come in at any moment, and she often did, wandering in to chat about trivial matters while Sunny was in the shower, or even to nonchalantly pee. When he went to the hardware store to buy a latch, she collapsed into giggles: "How can you be so shy!"

She would throw off all her clothes and wander about the apartment, delighting in the Brooklyn sunshine spangling through the leaves of a maple.

“It’s far easier,” Ulla, however, said, “for you to say you’re from Delhi than for me to say I’m from Prairie Hill, Kansas. New York favors foreigners.”

Sunny had been startled to discover that Ulla’s real name was Mary but that she had decided in high school to go by Ulla. Frequently, when asked where she was from, she said New York City, not Prairie Hill, betraying the place she loved and which she could enchant Sunny with by recalling a land so flat and empty you could see your friends arrive from miles away, where stars blossomed at your feet at nightfall, where the wind never stopped tussling.

Ulla showed Sunny how to snip open cartons, buy fabric softeners and dryer sheets, telephone for a gas connection, order a hamburger. (How lucky she was to be with a Hindu who ate beef she had no idea.) She gave him all the information on American life that you couldn’t get from having read “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” or “Slaughterhouse-Five” or “Two Serious Ladies.” These stories had not been practically useful, but it was the eccentricity of America and Americans as conveyed by them which had first powerfully drawn Sunny to this country.

If Ulla enjoyed her role too much to be discreet about it, she was nevertheless kind and painstaking. “Say ‘A,’ ” she said. “Say ‘P.’ ” She tutored Sunny to pronounce words so he would be understood: “parrot” not “barrot,” “vegetable” not “wedgetable.” She taught him to say “Good!” when asked how he was instead of “Terrible,” because nobody likes a cynic.

By then, Ulla was collecting proof that he avoided words like “bra” or “panty hose.”

“Say it!” she would insist. It was presented as a game, but he experienced it as a taunt, and, as he more intractably refused and nurtured the beginnings of resentment, Ulla began to feel oppressed in turn.

“If you tried to dance,” she said with some bitterness, “you might like to dance.”

“Why don’t you eat fish?” Sunny responded.

“She eats only salad for lunch, and when she orders pizza it’s always a plain cheese pizza,” Sunny reported to Satya.

Not only did Ulla prefer a pizza pie without anything but a tomato base and mozzarella, Sunny had discovered she considered a simmering complexity of sauces or a mix of spices a barbarous invention. Should a puddle of yellow begin to race across the plate to join with a puddle of brown, she felt *fear*. When they went out to eat, she prayed with all her concentrated might the restaurant would be Italian.

They began to notice that although they could each be stung at various times by their own inadequate cosmopolitan flair, they rested their pride on their vulnerabilities—on refusing to give up what, perhaps, they most hoped to lose. And what they most hoped to lose, then, was what they fought for most and what most defined them. At a certain point, it became a tragedy. A tragedy when you took the wider perspective and considered the fact that Sunny belonged to the first generation of men of his class in India who actually cooked and didn't direct women and servants while claiming the praise.

"Whatever I eat, I find he's slipped curry in there," Ulla announced in the indulgent tones of the owner of a weird foreigner to a group gathered at a tapas restaurant to celebrate the birthday of Ulla's friend Natalina, who used the occasion of having an Indian at the table to recount a recent trip to teach the women of Rajasthan how to use solar ovens: "My God, being a blond woman travelling alone in India, they just go mad—they cannot conceive of you as a person. A man on the platform reached through the train window and grabbed my breasts, and as the train began to leave the station he ran along with the train, still holding on."

Sunny steadied a slight tremble in his hands by very precisely slicing a bacalao croquette using a knife and fork. Wasn't there a suggestion that he was in some way responsible, in a long series of associations? He felt insulted and guilty, then annoyed at having to feel guilty or insulted, especially while eating at a restaurant in the West Village that would gouge his bank account. He delivered a triangle of *tortilla española* neatly to his mouth and chewed with his lips firmly closed, to place himself at a level of civility far removed from his nation, to prove with his table manners, familiarity with the foods of Spain, and sympathy for female travellers that he was not like those men to be found on every street corner in India, staring

lustfully, bestially, as if they were no longer human, at women they didn't consider to be human.

"Did you get sick?" someone asked. "I hear everyone gets sick in India."

Sunny sipped his Basque wine. Secretly he was thinking that this woman had some nerve to fly across the world from her New York City apartment—no doubt equipped with a stove, microwave, toaster, fridge, blender, coffeemaker, hair dryer, vacuum cleaner, television, computer, music system, heater, fan, and air-conditioner, if not also a bicycle or car—to tell women in India to cook their rice in a cardboard box covered with silver reflective paper so as to prevent deforestation and climate change.

At home, Sunny said, "Ulla, why did you say I put curry in everything? I put spices in everything, not curry in everything. There's no such thing as curry, in fact. It's a fake word invented by the British."

He distinctly heard his mother's voice in his ear say, *Who is this stupid person*?

Ulla said, "Well, then all of India must have been conned by a British mistake. In every Indian restaurant I've been to, I see curry written all over the menu." Later, when she thought Sunny had left for work, she telephoned her father: "He says he doesn't put curry in everything, but he does. It drowns out all flavor in a burning inferno of pain."

Sunny moved closer to listen, as gingerly as possible, but the floorboard made an equivalently slow toothache moan, and Ulla hastily hung up.

"I heard what you said." Jig of brows. "Curry doesn't equal chiles! You're even getting what you have wrong *wrong!*"

"You were eavesdropping!"

"Maligning people is a worse crime."

"It's awful to be a snoop."

Why was it that, in the Western world, snooping to uncover a crime was a worse crime than the actual crime? Ulla's civilization was built upon wandering about naked and not snooping. Sunny's civilization was based on donning your clothes and listening to every conversation.

How on earth had it come to pass that, in this Brooklyn idyll of triumphant multiracial calm, they'd reached such distrust? They reconciled this time at a bar on Lafayette, and from their reflection in the salvaged mirror behind the counter they saw they had reason to reconcile, for they were simply so beautiful together. As beautiful as or more beautiful than any of the other mixed-race couples in this neighborhood renowned for the beauty of its mixed-race inhabitants. The owner of the establishment had once asked if they were looking for work.

"Doing what?"

"Waitressing, bartending. I'm opening a restaurant on DeKalb called Urbane, and I want it to reflect how cool this neighborhood is." Sometimes they fell to wondering if there was a joke being played, if the joke was on them. A joke like that of an Indian paying a lot of money to eat at a restaurant named Le Colonial.

"Should we leave for another neighborhood?" they sometimes asked each other. But then, seeing the new arrivals—Icelandic-Peruvian, Rwandan-Vietnamese, Dutch-Japanese, Cuban-Kazakh-Irish—beginning to produce children, the likes of which had never before been seen on Spaceship Earth, Sunny and Ulla couldn't bear to leave this compelling scene that they themselves had helped to create, all these couples, two by two, who had begun to shove out the poorer residents, most of them Black. In a few years, nobody would remember this. But now, when they hurried home, Sunny and Ulla couldn't avoid the anger that gathered in the shadows. They were wary of being mugged by residents of the projects just beyond.

Once, Sunny had been mugged as he walked home from his night shift at five in the morning, by a boy who appeared to have a gun, but it might have been a stick held under his shirt. When he woke Ulla, she insisted that a reluctant Sunny report the incident. The cops arrived and drove Sunny

around in their patrol car to see if he could spot the boy again. But when Sunny saw the boy he looked away.

“No?” the detective asked, lean, alert, chewing nicotine gum.

“No.”

“But if I go on vacation to relax and recharge everyone will expect me to come back relaxed and recharged.”
Cartoon by Daniel Kanhai

“Why did you do that?” Ulla was upset when Sunny told her. “They get away with a small thing, then another small thing, then they do a big thing.” But she knew that, if Sunny had identified the boy, she’d have taken the opposite side of the argument.

“We are *more* guilty,” Sunny said, “in the scheme of things.”

“Get out of our neighborhood, you bourgeois white motherfucker!” a man had shouted at a new neighbor moving in next door. And, although Sunny’s sympathy lay with the man who yelled, he knew it was a hypocritical sympathy. He hoped, in fact, to get a free pass, that as a dark-skinned person he’d be seen to have more legitimacy here than a white person. But his smiling at Black people on the street felt false and condescending, rooted in a wish to be accepted into this neighborhood of elegant brownstones and a quick subway line to Manhattan, while also cohabiting with Ulla, who was essential to his self-respect. He wondered if Ulla felt less guilty to be

invading the place because she was with him. Both of them, in conversation with others like themselves, made certain to mention the well-off African Americans buying homes, to shift the conversation from race to class.

Sunny registered his own hypocrisy, too, when he looked away from other Indians he saw on the street—Indians who were also avidly ignoring him, trying to make it in America by avoiding one another, as if it were better to be one Indian than two Indians, better to be two Indians than three Indians. And better an Indian in New York than an Indian in India. Even more so an Indian in a village in France that was entirely empty of other Indians, especially Indians of the same class who would undo your poise, shine a light upon your shame, your lies.

And then there was Satya. Satya was Sunny's childhood friend who would never in a million years comprehend that it might be better to be one Indian instead of two Indians or two Indians instead of twenty Indians. They'd attended Tiny Tots in Delhi together, in miniature blue shorts and miniature ties already knotted onto elastic bands that fit under their collars. They'd gone to Mount St. Mary's in Delhi together, they'd had mumps together, they'd taken a delightful trip together when Sunny was a bachelor's student following a story in Mysore about the government's curtailment of subsidies for traditional weavers. In a case of misjudged importance, Sunny had been assigned to a scheme encouraging journalists to promote tourism and invited to stay at the Lalitha Mahal Palace Hotel. They had gone swimming in the maharaja's pool at sunset, a warm wind carrying the aroma of the sere hills and stirring the papery bougainvillea. Satya—black hairs on his chest so extravagant they whorled and formed black roses upon him—couldn't swim, but he pawed with such wild energy that his splashing carried him from one end of the pool to the other.

When they had dined in a romantic alcove of enamel-and-gold mirror-work, it had seemed a little peculiar, Sunny registered, to have Satya opposite him sharing a mango kheer and later to have Satya snoring by his side in bed, the pillows lavished with sandalwood perfume and rose petals. Their friendship had begun to take on the attributes that should have been assigned to a romantic partner, and perhaps they had each begun to wonder if their formative moments would take place not with wives or children but with each other. Together they had decided to apply to study in the United States,

Satya for medicine, Sunny for a master's degree in journalism. But here their paths had diverged—Sunny's to New York City, Satya's to Rochester. They missed each other, and one weekend, when Sunny and Ulla were still residing in the international students' hostel, Satya had taken a Greyhound bus all the way down.

Ulla had claimed a deadline for a class, and Sunny was embarrassed by his girlfriend's departure, as if she did not love him. Then, trying to look at Satya through Ulla's gaze, he thought Ulla was disdainful of Satya's roly-polyness, encased tightly within a home-knitted pullover, and his ardent and frank conversation. Keenly aware of Satya's lack of sophistication, Sunny felt exposed by it—as though he'd tricked Ulla.

Satya didn't mention Ulla as they walked about Union Square and Washington Square Park, and neither did he show the slightest tourist interest in Manhattan on this his very first visit. He noticed neither the skyscrapers nor the homeless people on the subway grates, neither the Buddhist monk on a skateboard nor a gaggle of models with poodles in booties. Interspersed with some aimless humming, he told Sunny about his running battle over the television in the residents' lounge, where only Satya wished to watch "Golden Girls." And why was it against the rules to dry his underwear out of the window?

Back in Sunny's hostel room, Satya made a phone call: "Double the dose of amlodipine, test for uric acid and glucose, check the potassium level, prescribe gabapentin for the nerve pain." He was being asked to give his opinion on a patient for whom he had been part of the monitoring team. How the different parts of Satya melded was a mystery.

He began to tuck sheets about the inflatable mattress on the floor, and got plumply into bed, folding both hands under his cheek as in a child's picture of godly sleeping people. Sunny climbed into his bed as well and burst out, "So, what did you think?" For Satya not to have an opinion on the first occasion either of them had met a proper girlfriend was impossible.

"About what?"

"Ulla, of course."

Deep soul sigh. “Ulla sees you as an Indian, and you see her as an American. The whole thing is based on a misunderstanding.”

“She isn’t only an American to me.”

“How can she not be an American to you?”

“I said *only*.”

“The main reason you want her is that she is American. You will get very angry at me for saying so, but, when you fight, you won’t be able to tell the real fight behind the fight.”

“A person is not only their nationality and race, Satya,” Sunny persisted. “After a bit, you no longer notice you’re a different color. At least inside the house you don’t notice it anymore.”

This had been a revelation to Sunny and Ulla, this mystical lightness.

When Ulla had heard Sunny with Satya, she’d said, “How chatty Indian men are!”

“Quarrelsome Bong!” she’d said of a Bengali she’d met at the gym.

“Tambram snob!” she’d said of a colleague. She’d pointed to a woman skipping the line “in her Indian manner.”

“I can say ‘Bong’ and ‘Indian manner,’ ” Sunny had said, “but you cannot.” But where could she have learned to brandish local prejudice with insider’s pride but from Sunny himself, or from Mala, her old nemesis?

“You criticize America all the time!” she’d retorted.

“God, you Protestants, don’t you ever talk openly?” he had said. And then, when he didn’t receive an answer, “Why don’t Americans have passports? Weren’t your parents curious about the world?”

“They had other priorities—like saving for my college fund. They weren’t rich.”

“With a big house and two big cars?”

“Two cars are a necessity where we live. And, in fact, my parents did go to Mexico.”

Ulla’s parents had exulted in Cancún because of the exchange rate; Sunny remembered a previous conversation about how they’d been excited to eat four tacos for a dollar twenty-five.

“Why do Americans endlessly talk about the best deal?”

“All travellers talk about the best deal.”

“No, the British still exchange the weather: *Today a spot of sun, such fun; tomorrow rain, such a shame*.”

“And what do Indians say?”

“Indians come up close and stare: ‘What, you are *bald* and *still not married*?’ ”

They’d laughed then.

“My hot samosa,” she’d called him.

“Ulla, you are not to say that!”

Almost choking with laughter: “O.K., O.K., my bad-tempered Bengal tiger.”

There was no hope all over again.

“Flaky blonde!”

“Bossy Indian patriarch!”

They were failing to keep their arguments personal, or unique and respectful to their individual beings, or even to the situation. Was it true, then, that there had been something to Satya’s warning? Should you live with an

American in order to beat the American over the head for being one? Should you find an Indian to complain about Indians?

In the apartment below, through a gap near his shower pipe where there were some missing tiles, Lou Orsini could hear them fighting in their bathroom. If he were ever regretful that he was divorced, by the time he'd flossed his teeth he was inspired to compose a new song for the band he played in called the Love Handles: *Thank the Lord I am divorced / You could not drag me back by force!*

And, returning home one spring evening from the Korean deli, Ulla and Sunny unlocked their brownstone's front door to find the letter from Babita propped on the stairs by the great carved mirror, oriental in its decorative details and its crown of colored glass glimmering in the dark of the entryway.

Babita Bhatia had left the house with her bulbul nose pointed sharply to the right, as Uncle Ravi, exiting his door, turned his squat nose to the left. She turned her bulbul nose sharply to the left as Uncle Rana, looking from his window, turned his philandering nose to the right. After collecting her mail at the gate and bringing it into her living room, Babita picked up her silver-inlay letter opener and sliced open the envelope sent by her father, the Colonel. She read the missive and studied the photograph of Sonia, then snorted and considered throwing the letter away. She spoke aloud to the ghost of her husband: "*Ratty, when Sunny marries, I will be more alone than I am now. You didn't take care of me! Is this a country where women can manage on their own*?"

She got up and surveyed herself in her three-panelled dressing-table mirror. Did her sari's pink run too garish for someone her age? She was forty-nine years old, her skin was still as plush as a magnolia petal, her profile still pert.

Angry at feeling old when she was yet young, and wanting to defuse a threat by ridiculing it, Babita sat down at her desk and composed a forwarding note to enclose with the marriage proposal for Sunny. As she wrote, though, her malaise worsened. How desolate it was to have to hoard one's thoughts and jokes for future company, how tedious to translate them into a letter.

She put down her pen, walked out on her bedroom terrace to look across the street at a building site. In the early years when Delhi's one-story bungalows were being built up into flats, the taller residences had been divided into three flats, but now they were a level higher and being divided into eight.

Babita watched the laborers' children playing astride a tunnel drainpipe, made steady by a heap of sand, as their parents worked. Swaying from side to side, they sang a song in a language Babita could not identify. Where did they come from? Their hair was reddish and rough, their bellies swollen with malnourishment. She found she was surprised, then dismayed by her own assumption that poor, malnourished children did not have songs to sing. When they saw her looking, ten mischievous faces sparkled at her; they were too young to know their lives offended.

She went inside, applied deodorant to her underarms, and called, "Vini-Puni, gym shoes!" Then, hitching her sari higher, she laced the gym shoes, leashed her dog, Pasha, and prepared to set off on her evening constitutional, picking up the letter she'd just sealed. She paused. Why needlessly upset Sunny with a girl who would not interest him?

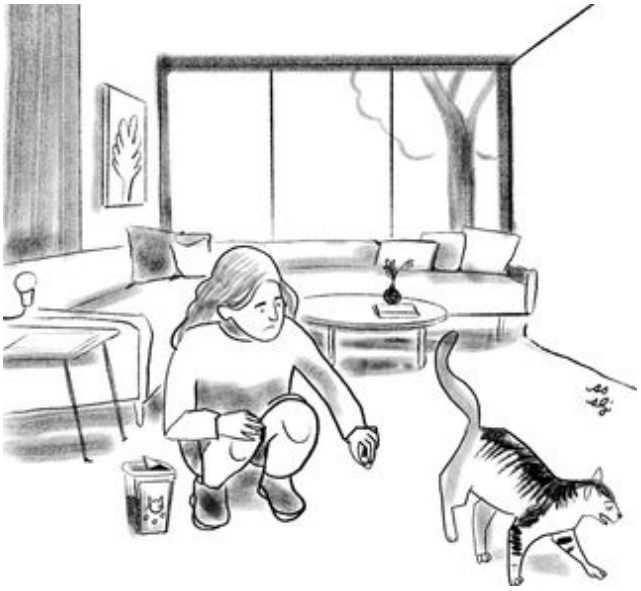
But to reiterate her good character to herself—she had been asked to forward it, after all—she gave the envelope to Vini-Puni to post.

"And don't go making eyes at the drivers," she warned.

Vinita glowered because the drivers were making eyes at her, not she at them.

In Lodhi Gardens, Babita walked briskly and competitively, accelerating to overtake others, shouting "Right" to alert people that she was approaching them to their right, or "Left" if she planned to triumph to their left. They inevitably became confused, for they had never heard of this protocol, and scattered like brainless fowl as she sped about the paths that circled the turbaned tombs dating from the fifteenth century. When Pasha tried with all his might to pull her toward the pond filled with barely treated sewage water, people stopped and chuckled at the sight of a rich woman being humiliated by her expensive dog. As she dragged unwilling Pasha along—she knew if he managed to get into the pond, he'd sit obstinately in the opaque sludge

crawling with mosquito larvae until nightfall—she caught a gentleman pissing into a rosebush and pounced. “For shame! Because of people like you our nation won’t improve.”



“No, thanks, I’m trying to squeeze into a shoebox this year.”
Cartoon by Sophie Lucido Johnson and Sammi Skolmoski

He hurriedly zipped up, but, this evening, the usually life-affirming activity of overtaking other walkers and having altercations with men pissing in public depressed her. Perhaps it was the weather that disheartened: muggy, spore-ridden, and netherish. Perhaps it was the tossed picnic plates that lay on the scummy pond surface without sinking, or the irritating fact that from the bushes the legs of lovers protruded, their upper bodies entwined and shrouded by foliage, the better to hide their kisses. She felt like chasing them out, too, just as she had the pissing man. Perhaps she was wearied by the long drive to the park in office traffic—whatever health benefits she’d accrue by a loop about Lodhi Gardens would be undone by breathing in petrol fumes.

Once she was home, Babita showered. The water spurted momentarily hot from the roof-tank pipes that had been heated by the sun all day, but eventually they disgorged cooler depths. She powdered herself with Pond’s Dreamflower talc, and when she sat down to dinner she maintained the protocol she’d set, alternately praising and criticizing to instruct yet encourage the staff: “The fish is fried crispy, but the pudding is too tight.”

The girls would never be excellent cooks, no matter how meticulously she trained them—what it took was a thoughtless measure of spice, a certain nonchalance about the kitchen.

Vinita ignored her.

Babita felt her temper rise. “Didn’t you hear what I said?”

“*Haa*.”

“What ‘*haa*’?”

“*Ji haa*.”

“And what did I say? Repeat what you heard so I know you’ve understood me correctly.”

“*Ji haa, Auntyji,* the pudding should be less tight,” Vinita said. Babita sensed a mocking tone.

“Don’t put that hair oil in your hair, you are overwhelming the house like an attar shop near Jama Masjid.”

At night, Babita tossed so much that her nightgown wound around her and she suffered indigestion. She listened to the watchman bringing down his wooden staff and blowing his whistle on his rounds. She thought this kept only the watchman safe—thieves learned that they might rob on the other side of the neighborhood from where he was. On the other hand, if he hadn’t been instructed to march and whistle, he’d feel free to nod off. She switched on her lamp. For a span of time, after her husband’s death, which had occurred when she was thirty-three years old, she and Sunny had shared a bed. One day, Sunny had returned to his own room without a word. This had upset her profoundly, but she’d had no way to articulate her upset. Her response was irrational. They hadn’t spoken for a week, and neither of them had ever made mention of this episode. Years later, Sunny had burst out with “*I am not your spouse. You have to let me be. It isn’t fair!*”

It had been necessary to send him to New York to make his own life.

Babita sought her water glass. She confronted the fact that it was not Vini-Puni's insolence or the too-tight pudding. It was not the people at the building site with their close-up poverty. Not her precarious position as a widow in a household united against her. Not the ammoniacal fumes of men pissing in the park. Nor the legs of kissing couples protruding from the bushes.

What curdled was the photograph she had enclosed in the letter to Sunny. It was Sonia's face planed like a panther: thick eyebrows and blazing eyes, sad and defiant, angry and accusing, a magnificent mouth of down-turned reproach.

Two weeks later, early in the morning, when in Delhi and across the nation widows and widowers made their phone calls to reassure themselves they were not alone although night had informed them otherwise, Babita telephoned Sunny from the phone on her bedside table. "*Sunny*," she said. "*Sunny, did you receive that very silly letter*?"

The crows outside her window raised their wings of doom and cawed. Soon the sun would wrest control, everything set by then in stone.

Sunny heard his mother's voice enmeshed in a thicket of *kava kava kaw* that transported him to his home city and made him remember that each waking moment of a crow's life is aggressive: their voices warned, their wings sliced like swords, they robbed and killed all day.

"I should let you work," Babita began. "Work comes first." She feigned indifference, but her armpits itched. "Do you remember that family in Allahabad?"

"No, and less do I care," Sunny said. "Don't meddle, Ma. You think it's harmless, but it is harmful."

Leap of heart. "Who is meddling?" she exclaimed. "You'll find someone on your own when you are ready." She hurried this sentence to prove it wasn't that she didn't want Sunny to find someone, just not *this* person *now*.

"Well, I did find someone!" It came bursting out, stimulated by Ulla's bitterness.

“What do you mean?”

“I have a girlfriend!” he shouted, as if he’d been afflicted with one.

“*Who*?”

“It doesn’t matter who! Anyway, it’s not going to last.”

“It isn’t?”

“*No!* Not with all the nonsense you’ve been dragging into my life.”

Babita immediately telephoned the Colonel, raising her voice above the crows at both ends of the line now. She reported, “Sunny is not interested. He will need somebody more modern.” Dismissing Sonia, she considered the staggering news of an American girlfriend.

Vinita came in with the tea tray and the newspaper. Babita turned to the travel page first and found an account of an Alaskan cruise. It had become something of a fad for Indian children who’d achieved an American life to treat their parents to an Alaskan cruise, to allow them to experience for a week what they’d bequeathed their children for a lifetime—the bliss of being able to pretend they were not Indians and that India didn’t exist. They might see enough white people and empty white landscapes there to convince them that this was so. What was so odd, Babita reflected, was that this striving to escape India felt patriotic: if you were a worthy Indian, you became an American. ♦

This is drawn from “The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny.”

The Critics

- **The Iranian Revolution Almost Didn’t Happen**
  By Daniel Immerwahr | From a dying adviser to a clumsy editorial, the Revolution was a cascade of accidents and oversights.
- **How the Poet James Schuyler Wrung Sense from Sensibility**
  By Dan Chiasson | Schuyler once told a friend that “life had been after him with a sledgehammer.” But the poet’s work was sharp and humane, a marvel of twentieth-century literature.
- **Briefly Noted**
  “The Sisters,” “Necessary Fiction,” “Make It Ours,” and “Exophony.”
- **There Is More to French Opera Than “Carmen” and “Faust”**
  By Alex Ross | The Bru Zane label is recording dozens of forgotten works that testify to a Romantic golden age.
- **Sterling K. Brown’s Upstanding Archetype**
  By Vinson Cunningham | In Hulu’s soapy “Washington Black,” about an early-nineteenth-century slave who escapes to Halifax, Brown rises above the material.

A Critic at Large

The Iranian Revolution Almost Didn’t Happen

From a dying adviser to a clumsy editorial, the Revolution was a cascade of accidents and oversights.

By Daniel Immerwahr

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In the summer of 1979, Ruhollah Khomeini saluted fellow-revolutionaries at a rally in Qom. His own image looms above him, while a portrait of his dead son, Mostafa, overlooks the crowd.Photograph by Abbas / Magnum

Strange to think, but there was a time when the United States' most steadfast ally in the Middle East was Iran. In 1953, the C.I.A. had backed a coup that ousted Mohammad Mossadegh, the popular Prime Minister, and restored power to the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, the Shah. For a quarter of a century thereafter, Washington watched in satisfaction as the Shah kept the peace while a U.S.-dominated consortium sold off Iran's oil.

There was rather a lot of oil, making the Shah one of the world's wealthiest men. For his forty-eighth birthday, in 1967, he staged a glitzy coronation for himself. Standing before a golden throne, he steadied onto his head a crown rimed with 3,380 diamonds. His third wife, Empress Farah, processed in a bejewelled, mink-edged Christian Dior cloak that took eight attendants to carry. After the ceremony, the royal couple waved stiffly to the crowds from a horse-drawn gilded carriage that had been crafted in Vienna by one of Europe's last remaining coach-makers. Planes dropped 17,532 roses, one for each glorious day of the Shah's glorious life.

Iran's display of floral ballistics hinted at another beneficiary of its oil revenues: the military. In 1972, President Richard Nixon gave the Shah carte blanche to buy any arms he desired short of nuclear bombs. The Shah amassed the world's fifth-largest military, his toy chest brimming with supersonic jets, laser-guided bombs, and helicopter gunships. Reportedly, he relaxed by reading arms catalogues.

A fair assessment would have conceded that not all Iranians shared the Shah's purring contentment. Liberals sought rights, Communists sought revolution, and clerics wanted a restoration of their power. One ayatollah in particular, Ruhollah Khomeini, needled the Shah incessantly. In 1967, he condemned the coronation. In 1971, when the Shah staged an even more expensive celebration to honor twenty-five hundred years of monarchy in Iran, Khomeini declared that to attend the "abominable festival" would be "to participate in the murder of the oppressed people of Iran."

This was more annoying than intimidating, though. Khomeini, by then an old man, inveighed against the Shah from Najaf, Iraq, because he hadn't been allowed in Iran since 1964. Iran's secret police force, *SAVAK*, known for its use of torture, had effectively cleared the country of the most vocal

dissidents. By the seventies, opposition leaders were generally behind bars or in exile, with few replacements stepping forth.

Cartoon by Brian Frazer and Sam Frazer

If anything, the Shah's grip appeared to be strengthening. In 1975, he abolished Iran's two permitted political parties and established a single one in their place, which every adult was required to join. All public buildings and many homes displayed the Shah's portrait. You couldn't throw a stone without hitting one, the joke went—though you'd be arrested if you did.

At a New Year's Eve celebration in Tehran in 1977, President Jimmy Carter made a toast. "There is no other head of state with whom I feel on friendlier terms," Carter said. In a troublesome region, Iran was an "island of stability."

Predictably, Khomeini fulminated about Carter's visit. Iran's leading afternoon newspaper, *Etalaat*, struck back with an accusatory editorial, prepared by the government and likely at the Shah's behest. Khomeini was simultaneously the agent of Communists and of reactionaries, the editorial charged. He had ties to India, and possibly to British imperialists. Or

perhaps, the paper insinuated, he was a sensitive soul who'd written love poetry in his youth. (Perhaps he was. After Khomeini's death, his followers were dumbfounded by the publication of "The Wine of Love," a collection of his mystical poems. "Release me from these countless pains," one goes, "from a heart cut in pieces and a breast pierced like a kebab.")

The Shah had attacked from a position of apparent strength. "My power, both under law and due to the special spiritual link that I have with my people, is at its highest peak," he boasted in the month that the editorial was published. The peak, and also the precipice. After the editorial appeared, on January 7, 1978, seminarians incensed by the slander of Khomeini staged large demonstrations in Qom. The police opened fire, killing some. It didn't seem like a huge deal. Yet somehow the unrest continued, increased, and in thirteen months brought the Shah's regime crashing down. A Khomeini-led Islamic state rose in its stead.

In a timely new book, "King of Kings" (Doubleday), the reporter Scott Anderson discusses *Etalaat's* editorial in a chapter titled "The Butterfly Effect." Like the fabled butterfly wing flap that causes a hurricane, it split the heavens and loosed a revolutionary deluge that transformed the Middle East. If "events had played out just a little differently," Anderson asks, might the Iranian Revolution have never happened?

Tiny causes with huge effects have long been intriguing. The seventeenth-century mathematician Blaise Pascal offered the example of Cleopatra's nose. Had it been a different size, the Roman general Mark Antony might not have loved Cleopatra, sided with her, lost the Battle of Actium, and inadvertently caused Rome's transformation from republic to empire. (Interestingly, in Pascal's "unattractive Cleopatra" scenario, her nose was too small, Pascal apparently having been something of a nose man.) Change Cleopatra's face and you change the face of history.

What-if scenarios seize the imagination when immense power is held by a single person. In the early nineteenth century, no figure held so much as Napoleon Bonaparte. After his defeat, his adopted son Louis-Napoleon Geoffroy wrote a book imagining a world in which Napoleon's Russian invasion hadn't failed. Napoleon would have taken Asia, Africa, and the Americas, Geoffroy hypothesized, uniting the world under one ruler.

Geoffroy's book was the "first recognizable full-length, speculative, alternative history," the historian Richard J. Evans observes. It started a long fascination with counterfactuals: what if Adolf Hitler hadn't been born, J.F.K. hadn't been killed, or, as "Saturday Night Live" once asked, Napoleon had had a B-52?

Such thought experiments delight in the notion that certain individuals can dramatically reroute history. The less fun notion is that they can't, and that major events have major causes. The modern discipline of history cut its teeth on the Napoleon question. On the one hand, he represented a modernization process that clearly transcended any single person. On the other, the fate of that process seemed to hang on Napoleon, a changeable man who was nearly assassinated several times.

Hegel sought to square this circle. History progresses according to a grand logic, he proposed, but "world-historical individuals" channel that logic as the agents of destiny. In 1806, when Hegel was living in Jena and putting the final touches on his masterwork, "The Phenomenology of Spirit," Napoleon arrived with his troops. "I saw the Emperor—this world-soul," Hegel breathlessly wrote. It was a "wonderful sensation to see such an individual, who, concentrated here at a single point, astride a horse, reaches out over the world and masters it." The next day, Napoleon decimated the Prussian military, ending any hope of restoring the Holy Roman Empire. Although Napoleon's troops ransacked Hegel's home and burned his neighbors' houses, Hegel couldn't help but admire the spirit of history and his horse.

In 1971, Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, right, staged an expensive celebration to honor twenty-five hundred years of monarchy in Iran. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini condemned the "abominable

festival," saying that to attend would be "to participate in the murder of the oppressed people of Iran."Photograph by Jack Garofalo / Getty

In "War and Peace" (1869), Leo Tolstoy dismissed the great-man theory of the Napoleonic Wars. He argued in an epilogue that to ascribe historical agency to figures like Napoleon was akin to seeing a herd of cattle and concluding that the cow in front must be in charge. Social forces, not men on horseback, decide the fate of nations, Tolstoy felt. The conservative writer Niall Ferguson credits his decision to become a historian to reading Tolstoy's epilogue. "I remember thinking that can't be right," he has said. "There is and must be a role for individual agency, for Napoleon, for Hitler."

Ferguson, who has published a collection of counterfactual histories, is an outlier among academics. Perhaps their leftward leanings lead them, like Tolstoy, to downplay the ability of individuals to alter their own fates. (The Marxist historian E. P. Thompson dismissed what-if speculations as "*Geschichtenscheissenschlopff*, unhistorical shit.") Either way, the scholarly tendency has been to devalue choice and chance as historical factors. Wars and revolutions might feel chaotic, but they happen for reasons rooted in economics, ideology, geography, and climate. The doings of generals, in this view, are froth on the waves.

Yet, even for those skilled at finding deeper causes behind events, Iran is a hard case. Any sense that history trends in a general direction—toward freedom, perhaps, or toward rights, markets, secularism, or science—is confounded by a large, prosperous country becoming a hard-line semi-theocracy. The philosopher Michel Foucault relished the Iranian Revolution's perversity: it was "perhaps the greatest ever insurrection against global systems, the most insane and the most modern form of revolt."

But why Iran? In Russia, the Bolshevik Revolution had been preceded by two smaller revolutions. Mao Zedong, before his own revolution prevailed, described China as dry tinder awaiting a spark. Few observers saw Iran that way. The factors that in hindsight might explain the country's abrupt upheaval—its swift economic growth followed by a downturn, its rapid urbanization, its authoritarianism, its corruption—were fairly normal. Even

as a large Muslim autocracy in the Middle East weathering the boom and bust of the oil market, Iran wasn't unique. Why did a revolution occur there but not in Iraq or Saudi Arabia?

"The closer one examines it," Anderson writes, "the more mysterious and implausible it all seems." One of the best books on the topic, "The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran" (2004), by the sociologist Charles Kurzman, considers various explanations but rejects them all in favor of an "anti-explanation," dwelling on the Revolution's anomalousness. Gary Sick, who oversaw Iranian affairs at the National Security Council under Carter, sees it similarly. "I've studied this thing for the past forty years," he told Anderson, "and it still doesn't fully make sense to me." Could one of the most consequential events of the twentieth century have simply been an accident?

One reason to think so, Anderson argues, is the "remarkably small number of principal actors involved": the Shah, Ruhollah Khomeini, and Jimmy Carter. All had considerable blind spots, and none took counsel from more than a few advisers. Their actions were idiosyncratic, often improvised.

Carter was the least informed. As is typical for U.S. Presidents, he faced a situation over which he held great power but to which he gave little attention. Carter took five months to select an Ambassador to Iran and another two to get him confirmed. For a surprisingly long time, Carter's Iran policy functioned on autopilot, which meant selling weapons and declining to ask questions. It wasn't until November, 1978, the eleventh month of the uprisings, that Carter began holding high-level meetings on Iran.

Carter had campaigned on human rights, which he described as "the soul of our foreign policy." We now know that he didn't want to pressure Iran about rights, but the Shah, engaging in preëmptive compliance, loosened political restrictions anyway. The Shah's opponents took Carter's speeches as reassurance that they'd be protected. As a leading reformer, the engineering professor Mehdi Bazargan, explained, "All the built-up pressure exploded." For a pre-revolutionary season in 1977, liberals signed letters and staged poetry readings that criticized the government in increasingly frank terms.

In late 1977, when it was clear that Carter wouldn’t press the issue of human rights, the Shah reversed course and cracked down again. Still, there had been a noticeable wobble in his legitimacy. Without realizing, Carter might have kicked a rock that, months later, caused an avalanche.

By the time Iran’s revolution was over, it had drawn in two million people, a greater proportion of the population than any previous twentieth-century revolution saw.Photograph by Michel Setboun / Getty

The Shah could have shored things up. Anderson notes that his closest confidant, Asadollah Alam, had a firm grasp on popular grievances and the need to address them. But Alam was dying of cancer and resigned before the unrest began. That left the Shah to rely for advice on his wife, Farah, whose knowledge of the situation wasn’t extensive. In May, 1978, long after the first unrest in Qom, Farah seemed not to have even heard of the ayatollah who was fomenting rebellion from Iraq. “For heaven’s sake,” she reportedly asked, “who is this Khomeini?”

Getting advice was one problem— taking it another. Unbeknownst to nearly everyone, the Shah also had cancer. (He would die in 1980.) This could explain why he seemed chronically overwhelmed, unsure whether to suppress dissent or to allow it. His haphazard directives combined the worst of both options: soldiers often let demonstrators march but occasionally shot up crowds, supplying fresh outrages that fuelled more protest.

Onlookers urged firmness. “Shoot the first man in front,” the former governor of California, Ronald Reagan, advised. “The rest will fall into line.” In a wonderfully rich account of the Pahlavi regime’s collapse, “The Fall of Heaven” (2016), Andrew Scott Cooper describes a telephone call that Iraq’s President, Saddam Hussein, placed to the Shah in August, 1978.

“This mullah, Khomeini, is causing problems for you, and for me, and for all of us,” Saddam reportedly said. Would it be O.K. to kill him? Saddam stayed on the line while the Shah consulted the Prime Minister and the *SAVAK* director, who lobbed the decision back to him. The Shah told Saddam to stand down.

Anderson’s third principal, Khomeini, was an unlikely leader. He was a scholar of Islamic law in his late seventies who hadn’t set foot in Iran for nearly fifteen years. His relevance had been waning until October, 1977, when his son Mostafa suddenly died. The causes were likely natural, Anderson suggests, but Iranians blamed *SAVAK*. Mostafa’s death returned the exiled ayatollah to the public eye; Khomeini called it “God’s hidden providence.”

One might see Khomeini as a Hegelian agent of destiny through whom historical forces acted. If so, though, he wasn’t a witting one. Khomeini had sharp instincts, but his comprehension of politics was warped by paranoid fantasies about Jews, Baha’is, Freemasons, and the “satanic superpowers.” His fellow opposition leader, the liberal Mehdi Bazargan, expressed astonishment at Khomeini’s “heedlessness of the obvious problems of politics and administration.” Khomeini had launched his anti-Shah campaign “without any plan,” Bazargan observed. “I even wonder if he had any inkling that he was starting a revolution.”

Rebellion crescendoed throughout 1978, prompting the Shah to institute martial law in twelve cities on September 8th. That day, now known as Black Friday, soldiers fired on a large demonstration, killing two or three hundred people. Perhaps, had things gone differently, this could have been avoided—if Carter’s Iran policy had been more considered, if the Shah and his most perceptive adviser hadn’t both been dying of cancer, if a son’s death hadn’t made Khomeini a resistance icon, if Saddam had killed Khomeini in August. But by autumn Iran was slipping from the Shah’s grasp. “For fifteen years everything I picked up turned to gold,” he reflected. “Now every time I pick up gold it turns to shit.”

The Shah, looking exhausted, gave a perplexing speech on television on November 6th. “I cannot but approve of your revolution,” he said. “In these moments of rising against foreign domination, tyranny, and corruption, I

stand by your side.” It was an awkward attempt to co-opt the uprising, and it failed pitifully. Afterward, the U.S. Ambassador to Iran finally broached the topic of the Shah’s potential downfall in a long telegram titled “Thinking the Unthinkable.”

“King of Kings” is a lively tale of palace intrigue. Using almost exclusively English-language sources plus interviews (including with Empress Farah, who is still living), Anderson reconstructs the bumblings that upended Iran. But a revolution, unlike a coup, isn’t the work of individuals alone. It requires mass support. And, by the time it was over, Iran’s had drawn in two million people, a greater proportion of the population than any twentieth-century revolution theretofore.

It was a shock to see so many Iranians who had previously minded their own business—merchants, professionals, clerics, students, housewives—clash violently with police. The economist Timur Kuran explains this change as the consequence of “preference falsification.” Years of *SAVAK* surveillance had taught Iranians to conceal their grievances. Yet when a minor provocation—the publication of an editorial—shook things up, the discontent poured out. The more that people were exposed to their compatriots’ views, the more they shared their own, touching off a chain reaction of disclosure. Khomeini can be seen here as a catalyst. His exile, rather than marginalizing him, gave him the rare platform from which to speak forthrightly.

At a New Year’s Eve celebration in Tehran in 1977, President Jimmy Carter, pictured here with the Shah, made a toast. “There is no other head of state with whom I feel on friendlier terms,” Carter said.Photograph from HUM Images / Getty

Preference falsification explains how a revolution could be both inevitable and unforeseeable. Subterranean pressures mount, unnoticed, until they erupt. If it hadn't been *Etalaat's* editorial, some other jostle would have released that stored political energy. The fact that the Revolution was unexpected—even by the revolutionaries themselves—doesn't mean it was contingent.

Yet Kuran's model of revolution as revelation presumes that people have stable preferences to reveal. Do they? Revolutions are unsettling affairs, Kurzman, the sociologist, notes. People don't know how to act, so they take cues from their neighbors or react to their opponents. With everyone predicating their behavior on everyone else's, norms shift rapidly, and complicated feedback effects ensue. Rebels aren't surprised only by one another's revealed desires, Kurzman maintains; they're surprised by their own.

In "The Loneliest Revolution" (2023), the Iranian sociologist Ali Mirsepassi recounts, during his student days, standing nervously with his friend Hamid as a chanting crowd approached. Even being near a protest could mean prison. "I looked to Hamid and the rest of our group, our eyes scanning the others' for an answer to what to do: run or join ranks," he writes. Hamid suddenly shouted, "Free all political prisoners!," and everyone followed. That was Mirsepassi's first protest. By late 1978, he recalled, "the revolutionary crowd had attained a single will or soul."

The crowd's will mattered because the Revolution had no overarching organization. Rebellion spread more through graffiti, chants, and songs than through top-down orders. Wild rumors swirled about Baha'is poisoning the water, Israeli troops entering the country in disguise, and the Shah personally gunning down protesters from his helicopter. Khomeini tried to shape these unpredictable fluid dynamics, but his directives were often ignored. He was less a commander than an icon, an Islamic Che Guevara.

Khomeini sought to replace the monarchy with a religious state ruled by an Islamic jurist. He knew to soft-pedal that aim in interviews, though, since relatively few rebels initially shared it. (Even his fellow-ayatollahs didn't all want a theocracy.) The streets belonged as much to students, feminists,

merchants, liberals, and industrial workers as to clerics. One could find, among the opposition, hippies and Jews.

Khomeini's vagueness was central to his leadership. Many who would have found his spelled-out vision repellent nevertheless accepted him as a figurehead. Probably they didn't imagine an elderly theologian actually seizing the state. Either way, the Revolution found Communists and liberals following fundamentalists. "It seemed in no way a contradiction for me—an educated, professional woman—to back an opposition that cloaked its fight against real-life grievances under the mantle of religion," the judge (and later the Nobel-winning democracy advocate) Shirin Ebadi recalled. "Who did I have more in common with, in the end: an opposition led by mullahs who spoke in the tones familiar to ordinary Iranians or the gilded court of the shah, whose officials cavorted with American starlets at parties soaked in expensive French champagne?"

Could those discordant elements cohere? In late 1978, Ali Mirsepassi spoke in favor of prolonging a university strike. Khomeini opposed this, Mirsepassi acknowledged, but who put Khomeini in charge? Mirsepassi won over his cheering audience, though he worried that he'd got "carried away" and been "excessively harsh" regarding the ayatollah. While leaving the event, he was stabbed twenty-one times. If there was contingency here, it was less the caprice of leaders than the volatility of crowds.

By 1979, as those crowds clamored for his death, the Shah prepared to flee. "Don't pack too much," he advised his valet. "It is just for a short period of time." He appointed a new Prime Minister, placed him in charge, and took off for Egypt on January 16, 1979.

Khomeini returned from exile and announced a provisional government "based on the Sharia," though with the liberal Mehdi Bazargan as Prime Minister. "Through the guardianship that I have from the holy lawgiver I hereby pronounce Bazargan as the Ruler," Khomeini explained. "Since I have appointed him, he must be obeyed."

Ayatollah Khomeini, appearing here on an image held aloft by protesters, was a scholar of Islamic law in his late seventies who hadn't set foot in Iran for nearly fifteen years. Somehow, he became the symbol of an unlikely revolution.Photograph from Bettmann / Getty

If Khomeini's announced government had the support of God, Iran's still intact government had the world's fifth-largest military. But the contagion of rebellion was spreading there, too. Desertions became so rampant that officers hesitated to have soldiers police crowds for fear that the soldiers would join the protesters. The Army fought for a few days, then abruptly gave up. Millions of Iranians, to their own shock, had caused the region's most powerful regime to simply melt away. "Do you think we actually *planned* to have a revolution?" one of Khomeini's confidants asked. "We were just as surprised as anyone."

"Death to the Shah" had been the Revolution's call, yet that said nothing about what would come next. The post-Shah state was a mishmash of neckties and turbans, with Bazargan as Prime Minister and Khomeini hovering somewhere above. "You often don't even know who's directing traffic," Bazargan complained.

Khomeini exploited this uncertainty. He moved like "a bulldozer crushing rocks, roots, and stones in his path," Bazargan felt. A military organization created by Khomeini, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, and cleric-controlled "committees" patrolled the streets, making arrests, confiscating property, and executing suspected enemies of the Revolution. In this feverish climate, Khomeini acquired a momentum that his non-clerical comrades hadn't foreseen and couldn't match.

In October, 1979, Jimmy Carter reluctantly allowed the ailing Shah to enter the United States for medical care. A week later, Bazargan was photographed shaking hands with Carter's national-security adviser at an event they were both attending in Algeria. These events suggested to some a Shah-Carter-Bazargan axis of imperialism. Militants stormed the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took hostages. Khomeini initially disapproved and directed Iran's foreign minister, Ebrahim Yazdi, to "go and kick them out." But—in another of Anderson's consequential contingencies—Yazdi, rather than communicating that command to Tehran, travelled there himself. By the time he arrived, Khomeini had changed his mind and publicly embraced the hostage-takers. Unable to control the situation, Bazargan resigned. Crowds took up a new chant: "Death to Bazargan."

And death to liberal Iran. A new constitution placed the country under the supreme leadership of an Islamic legal scholar, and Article 107 stipulated that this be Khomeini. Women were purged from positions of power and forced to wear hijabs. Universities were closed, for years. Khomeini, meeting with state-radio employees, insisted that there was "no difference between music and opium" and demanded that they "eliminate music completely"—his opposition drove most music underground.

Firmly in control, Khomeini turned on his former allies, particularly those on the left. They weren't a "real left," he maintained, but an "artificial" one created by Washington "to sabotage and destroy us." In one execution spree, in 1988, Khomeini's government put to death thousands of political prisoners—Human Rights Watch reports "between 2,800 and 5,000," which appears to far exceed the number of political prisoners that were killed in the nearly forty years that the Shah was on the throne. The prisons and torture chambers filled with Communists, liberals, feminists, gays, Baha'is, and monarchists.

One might imagine such cruelties destabilizing the Islamic Republic. They have not done so. Since 1979, Iran has been ruled continuously by just two men: Ruhollah Khomeini and, after his death, in 1989, his former disciple Ali Khamenei. Today, Khamenei ranks among the world's oldest and longest-serving heads of state. He's been Supreme Leader for every one of Taylor Swift's eras, indeed for her entire life.

There was talk that the recent attacks by Israel and the United States might end Khamenei's thirty-six-year reign. "All it takes now is a nationwide uprising to put an end to this nightmare," the Shah's son, Crown Prince Reza Pahlavi, thirstily suggested. He should know. But Tehran has faced war before without toppling. An eight-year conflict with Iraq in the eighties killed hundreds of thousands yet only strengthened Khomeini's position. As Israel has seen in Gaza, it's hard to persuade people to change their government by bombing them.

The larger instability today seems to be in the United States, not Iran. Norms here are shifting wildly, with the chaos centering on a single figure, our Napoleon on a golf cart. The usual questions arise: Is Donald Trump an accident or an inevitability? An erratic blunderer or the spray-tanned spirit of history? It may not ultimately matter. As Anderson's book suggests, an event that is improbable can still be irreversible. A switch is thrown, the train hurtles down an alternate track, and it goes that way for a very long time. ♦

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Books

How the Poet James Schuyler Wrung Sense from Sensibility

Schuyler once told a friend that “life had been after him with a sledgehammer.” But the poet’s work was sharp and humane, a marvel of twentieth-century literature.

By Dan Chiasson

August 4, 2025

Schuyler’s particular brilliance shines in his attention to time—in prying open the passing moments and playing with them.Photograph by Robert Giard / Estate of Robert Giard

The American poet James Schuyler composed his first significant poem during a nine-week stay at the Payne Whitney Westchester psychiatric clinic, in White Plains, New York, in late 1951. That fall, Schuyler, still a fresh face on the New York arts scene after an extended sojourn in Europe, had begun to introduce himself to friends as the Infant Jesus of Prague, a sixteenth-century wax-and-wood statuette clothed in embroidered vestments, and claimed that he had received from the Virgin Mary a

package of Du Maurier cigarettes. The poem, called “Salute”—the word itself implies a toast to good health—was written as a step in Schuyler’s convalescence, between sessions of weaving belts and crafting moccasins for visitors. They included W. H. Auden, Schuyler’s old mentor, who footed the bill for the hospital stay, and a new friend, Marianne Moore, whom Schuyler called “entrancing and somehow a little terrifying.”

“Salute,” like many of Schuyler’s best works, is a form of strenuous mental calisthenics presented as an easygoing nature poem. “Past is past,” it begins:

> and if one
> remembers what one meant
> to do and never did, is
> not to have thought to do
> enough? Like that gather-
> ing of one of each I
> planned, to gather one
> of each kind of clover,
> daisy, paintbrush that
> grew in that field
> the cabin stood in and
> study them one afternoon
> before they wilted. Past
> is past. I salute
> that various field.

You could memorize this mayfly-brief poem in an hour but devote a lifetime to pondering its teachings: “is / not to have thought to do / enough?” In certain moral and legal scenarios, no, not at all, but, for poetry, it seems to be more than enough, and it may be necessary. Though the actual “clover, / daisy, paintbrush” weren’t gathered that day (other, more enticing pastimes likely awaited inside that “cabin”), “Salute” preserves them in Schuyler’s proprietary solution of pert melancholy stirred into gloomy sweetness.

Poets sometimes orphan their early work, but Schuyler stood by “my all-important ‘Salute,’ ” as he described it, perhaps because of its weirdly

elastic temporality. The poem was a souvenir of the fleeting moment of its composition, its irregular right margin suggesting words jotted on scrap paper. Yet Schuyler kept “Salute” around to mark the phases of his career. In 1960, the poem appeared in an influential avant-garde anthology, Donald Allen’s “New American Poetry.” Schuyler used “Salute” to conclude his much belated first commercially published volume, “Freely Espousing,” printed in 1969, when he was forty-six, and to open his “Selected Poems” in 1988. That year, the reclusive poet was persuaded to give his début public reading, at the age of sixty-five. Schuyler took to the stage with some difficulty and, his catarrhal baritone thickened by years of illness, began again at the beginning: “Past is past.”

What We’re Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Nathan Kernan’s intrepid new biography of Schuyler, over thirty years in the making, is “A Day Like Any Other” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). It plucks its title from “February,” another of Schuyler’s early poems. The phrase seems at once blasé and foreboding; we say “it was a day like any other” when, uh-oh, catastrophe awaits around the bend. (“Another day, another dolor,” Schuyler once quipped.) Jimmy, as most everyone called him, knew many such days, when ordinary life gave way to what a friend called his “incandescence”: the normally courteous gentleman in the blue crewneck sweater and wrinkled khakis, a prized playmate of his friends’ young children, might appear in the kitchen and darkly intone, “Harm may befall the infant.” During one spell, in 1971, a housemate contemplated knocking Schuyler over the head with a cast-iron skillet but feared that the blow

would only provoke him. Visitors expecting the serene, beatific presence that we meet in Schuyler's poems sometimes found instead a naked man covered in rose petals or a terrified soul "sitting on his bed, holding out a plate of scrambled eggs in front of him, frozen in place and trembling." Twice, Schuyler set fire to his apartment by smoking in bed; the second time, he ended up in an intensive-care unit for weeks and received extensive skin grafts for third-degree burns. In the seventies and early eighties, at his lowest point, Schuyler lived in a series of institutions, flophouses, and residential hotels, drinking throughout the day and relying on so many pills that a friend said, "You could hear them rattling in his pockets." His hair grew long and matted; after contracting gangrene as a result of diabetes, he had two toes amputated. "Poor Jimmy," Schuyler's friend John Ashbery once wrote. "He told me that life had been after him with a sledgehammer."

Kernan picked a hard story to tell. One problem is that you don't find much evidence of turmoil in Schuyler's poems. "Even at his most deranged," Kernan writes, "he could appear, and perhaps be, calm and rational in his writing." A definitive diagnosis was difficult to make, in part because of the "cocktail of prescription and illicit drugs." Poems and sequences written in the hospital—"Mike," for example, composed during Schuyler's three weeks at the Vermont State Hospital, and "The Payne Whitney Poems"—refuse, as he wrote, to "tell you all of it," unlike the confessional poems of his contemporary Robert Lowell. You can't medicalize his style, the way critics have often sought to connect Lowell's mania with his grandiose ambition and jagged associative leaps: Schuyler always "makes sense, dammit," as Ashbery put it. A friend of Schuyler's described his observational state as "mediumistic": though it's clear that he struggled, in Ashbery's words, to live "daily life as he means to lead it," his poems are usually set on those days when he won the battle—walking in Vermont under an evening sky "the color of peach ice cream," say, and "stopping to take a leak on dead leaves / in the woods beside the road."

Schuyler worked in two primary verse modes, ostensibly opposites: we could call them blips and loop-the-loops. The blips are short, ribbonlike lyrics, trimmed to the moment, their sharp enjambments inspired by the Renaissance-era poet Robert Herrick; the loop-the-loops follow long Proustian arcs in margin-busting lines reminiscent of Walt Whitman. Both

modes suggest a search for an original way of existing in time, and both spell trouble for biographical narrative, which depends on linear cause and effect. The short poems are like bright, scattered beads—their titles, indicating merely the date (“3/23/66,” “June 30, 1974”) or the time of day (“Sunset,” “Evening”) or the rudiments of the setting (“At the Beach,” “Evenings in Vermont”), hint at how hard it might be to string a life story through them.

The long poems pose an additional problem for a biographer: in these retrospective works, written in the seventies and eighties, Schuyler became a late-breaking autobiographer. The poet’s reminiscences form the core of several poems that rank among the glories of twentieth-century American literature. In “Hymn to Life,” “The Morning of the Poem,” and “A few days,” as well as in mid-length works such as the magnificent “Dining Out with Doug and Frank,” Schuyler began to pry open the passing moments, inserting memories of his childhood and early adulthood, homages to old love affairs, and New York gossip from the forties and fifties. These poems invent verbal models of movement through time, their own temporal construction also serving as their subject, always nonchalantly expressed. “Today is tomorrow,” he reports, or “Guess I’m ready for lunch: ready as I’ll ever be, that is. / Lunch was good: now to move my bowels.” Their recursive paths make tweezing out the “biography” in their recollective passages especially tricky. “A few days!” Schuyler exclaims soon after he surfaces from one of these long reminiscences. “I / started this poem in August and here it is September / nineteenth.” It seems a shame to iron flat such a beautifully crumpled time line, but biographers know that it’s the nature of the job, alas. Past is past.

“To be children of a broken home is bad news,” Schuyler wrote. “Ask me—six mental hospitals.” If the example of Schuyler and many of his contemporaries is any evidence, though, a broken home is good news for poetry. He was born James Marcus Schuyler in Chicago in 1923, and spent most of his early years in the aptly named Downers Grove, Illinois, where his mother, Margaret Daisy Connor, a former newspaper editor and Washington publicist for the Farmers’ National Council, was restless. In “Snapshot,” Schuyler, looking for evidence of the man he became, revisits “photographs / of me in white dresses, / with a tin pail and shovel, / playing

with a little girl” and “laughing / with my eyes shut.” The poem, and the fun, abruptly ends when a painful memory replaces those heirloom photos: “Then we moved / to Washington, D.C.”

There, Schuyler’s mother divorced his father, Marcus, “an enchantingly wonderful man, a heavy, jolly, well-read man,” in his son’s view, but a compulsive gambler who drifted back to the Midwest and died young. Though Schuyler reckoned that he had seen him again perhaps twice, Marcus became, Kernan writes, “an increasingly distant figure, but a correspondingly potent abstraction.” In his place, Schuyler’s “gentle Grandma Ella” arrived from Minnesota, “a granny / a child doesn’t / like to kiss,” Schuyler wrote in “So Good,” “the farm smell / a chill sweet- / ness.” She taught her grandson the names of the birds and the flowers, but he learned on his own the crucial lesson of how to find raunchy sex everywhere in the natural world, as when “you touch the pod” of a touch-me-not bloom and witness “the miraculous ejaculation of the seed.” Indoors, Grandma Ella read aloud from a children’s anthology, “Journeys Through Bookland.” Reading and natural observation seemed to complement each other. These two activities, almost conjoined, made up the substance of most of Schuyler’s best days as an adult.

Then, in what seems nearly a plot contrivance, a cruel stepfather appeared. Margaret Schuyler up and married Berton Ridenour, a construction engineer working on a renovation of the West Wing of the White House. Ridenour was close enough to President Herbert Hoover to score the family an invitation to the White House Easter Egg Roll in 1931. Somewhere there exists a photo of little Jimmy, age seven, playing on the White House lawn. But the stern “old book burner,” as Schuyler later called him, was in mourning for his son, who had drowned at the age of twelve. Kernan wonders whether Ridenour saw his shy, effeminate stepson as his “second chance.” Just as Schuyler was told, around age nine, of a distant family connection to the illustrious Elizabeth Schuyler, the wife of Alexander Hamilton, and “felt he had a name to live up to,” his family renamed him: he enrolled that fall in third grade as James Ridenour. It was not until 1947, at twenty-three, that Schuyler, sensing his vocation and embarking for Europe with his boyfriend, reclaimed his surname.

From the unique terroir of Schuyler's early life emerged his version of what Gerard Manley Hopkins called "that taste of myself . . . more distinctive than the smell of walnut-leaf or camphor," the richly individuated interiority, different for every soul, that is the source of style. Years later, the "moods and undercurrents" of Schuyler's Washington years were the subject of his first publication, "Alfred and Guinevere" (1958), a "light" novel, Schuyler said, adding, "but no one takes his lightness more seriously than I." The book is an undersung marvel of twentieth-century literature, as well as one of the great prehistories of American queer life. Looking back at a childhood doubled, or perhaps halved, by family circumstances, and further divided by the early realization of his homosexuality, Schuyler allows us to eavesdrop on a secretive sibling pair, a gallant king and fair queen of childhoods outwardly tedious but full of imagined intrigue. Guinevere likes to read aloud from her diary, where she is "one of the leading women big spenders of her day and her example has done much to further the cause of women" and Alfred is a "polar explorer." But mainly the kids banter in pig Latin or in a screwball repartee fashioned from overheard adult speech. Alfred has a scoop; Guinevere wants it:

"Have you got a quarter?"

"What for?"

"Ask me no questions and I'll tell you no lies."

"I haven't got a quarter anyway. Look."

"Where?"

"Made you look you dirty crook, stole your mother's pocketbook."

"Shut up, stinkweed."

The secret is that their father is "going to Europe" for vague business reasons, and maybe deserting the family. But the deeper secret that Alfred and Guinevere share seems to be childhood itself, its orders and codes and lexicons so mysterious to adults.

The book is also an encrypted history of queer friendship. “I like / to be alone / with friends,” Schuyler once wrote—his line breaks, as always, uncorking multiple meanings. Such friendships did not exclude desire and sex, and in later years often fed artistic collaboration. When Schuyler was fourteen, his family moved to East Aurora, New York, just outside Buffalo, and the claustrophobia of family life began to break. Otherwise a standard-issue suburb, East Aurora was the home of a utopian Arts and Crafts guild, the Roycrofters. To steal away to their community buildings, hand-forged in stone and timber, offered, Schuyler later said, “a certain romance.” In East Aurora, Schuyler met a boy named Bernie Oshei, who pored over glossy fashion magazines with Jimmy and accompanied him to the movies. At Bethany College, in West Virginia, where Schuyler flunked out after two years of doing little besides playing bridge, he formed a similar bond with a young librarian. Then, enlisting in the Navy, Schuyler trained as a sonar “radioman” and was assigned to the U.S.S. Glennon, which docked near New York City, whose “lights and activity, not to mention its sexual possibilities,” beckoned. While on shore leave, Schuyler suffered a “kind of breakdown,” as he wrote, and deserted the ship, remaining in New York for twenty-nine days with an older man who paraded him around as his “cute sailor-found object.” Schuyler escaped court-martial only by what was known as an undesirable discharge, signing his name to a statement that read “I am homosexual and of no use to the U.S. Naval Service.”

Schuyler moved to New York City twice: in 1944, in time to join W. H. Auden’s opera-mad, gossip-loving circle, and again in 1949, after two years in Europe, to meet a slightly younger generation of poets and painters who would come to be known, reluctantly, as the New York School. The first time around, Schuyler and Bill Aalto, his handsome, hotheaded lover, who eventually threatened to murder Schuyler, formed a kind of quartet with Auden and Chester Kallman, whose passions, according to Kernan, were “poetry, opera, cooking, and sex, not necessarily in that order.” At Kallman’s apartment, above a Balkan restaurant on East Twenty-seventh Street, and later at Auden’s home on the Italian island of Ischia, Schuyler fell in with an illustrious circle of mostly gay artists and writers, including Truman Capote and Tennessee Williams, who called Schuyler a “wee wisp of an American belle.” To make a few dollars, Schuyler agreed to type Auden’s poems but was busted fishing his employer’s drafts out of the

wastebasket. Schuyler composed an elegy for the “kind man and great poet” many years later, deciding that he had “So much / to remember, so little to / say: that he liked martinis / and was greedy about the wine?”

In 1951, back in New York, Schuyler no sooner found the first friends “of whose work I was absolutely certain” than he ended up in Payne Whitney, composing “Salute.” When he was released, a social and artistic experiment awaited him. The New York School’s core group of Schuyler, Ashbery, Kenneth Koch, and Frank O’Hara were “brothers,” according to O’Hara’s poem of that name: “John’s most sophistical, / Jimmy seriousest, Kenneth large, / locomotive, / laughing.” O’Hara left himself out of the portrait, but Schuyler and others were happy to add their impressions of the brilliant, broken-nosed poet from an old-fashioned Massachusetts family. O’Hara “usually had the ball,” Schuyler said. “He was in high [gear] all the time,” another friend remarked: “high on himself, and his every waking minute, regardless of what he was doing, was vital, supercharged, and never boring.” With O’Hara as “the catalyst,” according to Kernan, there was really no choice but for the members of this brotherhood to write poems. Poetry became the shared argot, the currency, the unit of exchange, and its value was inflated by almost nightly demand for social performance. All at once, a generation of dazzling young people who had studied the canon in deadening classrooms remembered that poems could be, had always been, anything at all—an invitation, an apology, a thank-you note, a recipe, a valentine.

Even the painters in the scene counted on O’Hara to “kind of cobble everything together,” as Ashbery put it. Yet, likely because some of them had an easier time converting their work into legal tender, they often played host. Emerging artists like Jane Freilicher and Fairfield Porter had more money, bigger lofts, and more inviting summer homes. They sponsored the poets, who in turn worked in various capacities in the art world—O’Hara and Schuyler at *MOMA* and as critics for *Art News*, to which Ashbery also contributed. The scene’s most distinctive gallery was also its publishing house: John Bernard Myers’s Tibor de Nagy printed elegant illustrated editions of Ashbery, O’Hara, Koch, and, finally, Schuyler, whose “May 24th or So,” from 1966, was his first chapbook.

“A day like any other” in this milieu can be exhausting even to read about, and Kernan doesn’t quite solve the problem of how to capture the caroming social and erotic antics of the scene in orderly narrative prose. Around the time “February” was written, Schuyler was sleeping with the classical pianist Arthur Gold—a former flame, and still the musical partner, of Robert Fizdale, who had flings with both Ashbery and O’Hara. Schuyler spent some portion of his days at Gold’s sublet on East Sixtieth Street, and the rest at an apartment on East Forty-ninth that he shared at times with Ashbery and at other times with O’Hara, who had a crush on Larry Rivers, who was dating Freilicher while being pursued by Myers. The classic accounts of the New York School focus on bustling parties and starry openings and jaunty beach weekends, occasions when its entangled personnel met as an ensemble. “What / confusion!” O’Hara wrote in “A Party Full of Friends.” “Someone’s going / to stay until the cows / come home. Or my name isn’t / Frank O’Hara.”

For this brief, rapidly closing interlude, collaboration spurred what the social critic Paul Goodman called the “physical reestablishment of community.” In fact, “the quintessential works” of the New York School, according to Kernan, might have been not the poems but the absurdist plays written by its members and “inspired by the repartee” of their parties. “I used / to write lots of playlets,” Schuyler explained in “A few days,” but “ ‘Presenting Jane’ is lost.” Ah, but in the decades that Kernan spent meticulously researching this biography, a filmed version of the play was turned up, so admirers of Schuyler can now behold the young, frolicsome incarnations of him, O’Hara, and Freilicher, among others, in footage shot during two weeks in the Hamptons. Furthermore, you can listen to Ashbery and Freilicher, in old age, discuss the play with the biographer, during a 2014 oral-history session, later overlaid on the film for a screening put together by Christina Davis and her team at Harvard’s Woodberry Poetry Room. The layered media—a script, a dramatic performance, a film, a video on YouTube—offer a sense of how the New York School has proved adaptable to evolving tastes and technologies. It’s nearly a miracle to see “Presenting Jane” after all these years, especially for those who knew it by reputation, and Schuyler’s “loss” of it suggests how, even while the New York School was taking shape, it began to elegize itself, to write its own history of fleetingness.

By the early sixties, the New York School had, like a wave, risen toward its own collapse, and Schuyler, recovering from a long hospitalization, took up full-time residence at Fairfield and Anne Porter's homes in Southampton and on Great Spruce Head Island, Maine. "Jimmy came for the weekend and stayed eleven years," Anne Porter told their perplexed friends. Her husband was in love with Schuyler; Anne, a discreet, pragmatic Boston Brahmin, may have known that the two men were sexually involved, and was happy to have Fairfield's need for male companionship met. Schuyler became one of Fairfield Porter's most enduring, and enchanting, subjects. There was no problem getting him to sit still. Porter made the study of Schuyler a kind of cozy, personal Mont Sainte-Victoire, depicting him in a variety of states, alone and in groups, at various times of day, but almost always seated, and often reading. These compositions are gorgeous, but they know their limits. They are depictions of the outward appearance of thinking, not of its strenuous contents.

For that, we have the poems, including a sublime elegy written at the Porters' house in Maine for Frank O'Hara, who died in 1966 after being struck on a Fire Island beach by a dune buggy. "Buried at Springs" is a poem that O'Hara would never have written—he claimed that he couldn't even "enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy." But Schuyler channels his friend's sentience: "it's eleven years since / Frank sat at this desk and / saw and heard it all," only "not the same"—new seaweed, new lichen, new evergreen needles. When Schuyler's welcome finally wore out, in the early seventies, he was devastated to say goodbye to the "young spruce against the cold / of an old one hung with unripe cones / each exuding at its tip / gum." Still, the work he'd done at the Porters' homes, in all those chairs, over all those years, was already a significant contribution to American literature.

Kernan's biography should send readers to Schuyler's compact "Collected Poems," where we find what cannot be captured in excerpts, and what sometimes evades even this filigreed and astute presentation of his life: his brilliant use of embodied attention to contour time, when everything off the page was turbulence. Lying low in his childhood bedroom during the Bicentennial summer of 1976, Schuyler decided that the only way to traverse the days was to throw across them a long poem, like a rope bridge.

On a morning he'd designated "the morning of the poem," he began the work that would eventually bear that title, continuing for weeks:

> On
> this miserable Sunday morning ("Jim, are you
> *Sure* you wouldn't like to come to church?") I like to sit in this
> Hitchcock chair and idly pull my foreskin—I'm
> Sitting in my undershorts—and drink iced tea and smoke and have
> a passing sexy thought for someone I won't ever
> Have—the eyes, the wide slope of the shoulders, the thighs—and
> let the tunes play in my head: Carly Simon singing
> "Anticipation," Mado Robin singing "Fascination," golden oldies.

Whitman had "the smoke of my own breath, / Echoes, ripples, buzz'd whispers, love-root, silk-thread, crotch and vine" to keep him busy. Schuyler's celebration of the damaged body and its persistent joys, including a free jukebox inside the brain and a soft-core-porn channel that we call the imagination, made "The Morning of the Poem" the best keep-profane-the-Sabbath poem since Wallace Stevens's "Sunday Morning."

The decades that saw Schuyler composing these spacious, humane poems, the seventies and eighties, were years of special torment, as friends and supporters withdrew from him, and one younger, often straight-identified love interest after another led him on and ripped him off. These men, nevertheless, were his tethers to the world. Many of his short lyrics of this period are love poems, and though they pine and shudder with the best of them, by the end they've usually mellowed, like an unattended highball. What could be more morally attractive than a mild, chivalric claim that Schuyler, in "Saturday Night," makes on a lover who has left him behind to party on somebody's "yacht / or schooner or / whatever it is":

> Per-
> haps tomorrow
> you'll scud
> before a breeze.
> You're physical
> and need that
> breeze. Breeze,

blow for one
I love, stretch
his muscles as
he needs and wants.

That timeless wish—“Breeze, blow for one I love”—could have been written by Herrick, or by Sappho, for that matter. Schuyler’s poems are the ultimate smooth sailing. But, for their author, this hard truth was undeniable: “Poetry / takes it out of you.” ♦

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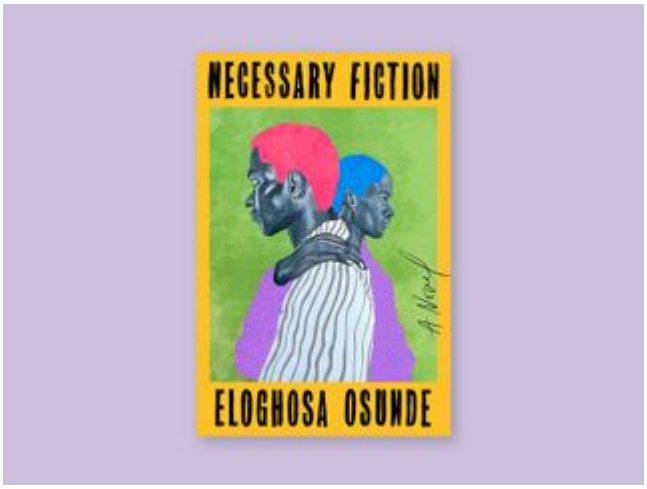
Books

Briefly Noted

“The Sisters,” “Necessary Fiction,” “Make It Ours,” and “Exophony.”

August 4, 2025

The Sisters, *by Jonas Hassen Khemiri (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. The titular sisters of this expansive, lightly metafictional novel, the Mikkolas, are haunted by an intergenerational curse. At the dawn of the millennium, the three girls meet a neighbor who develops a lifelong fascination with their stories. Over more than thirty years, as the characters move across Sweden, Tunisia, and the U.S., the neighbor, Jonas—who shares not only the author’s name but also his Swedish-Tunisian heritage and his occupation—witnesses each sister evolve. Jonas gradually becomes a literary detective, tasking himself with solving the mystery of the Mikkola curse: whom it came from, how it connects him with the sisters, and what must be done to break it.



Necessary Fiction, *by Eloghosa Osunde (Riverhead)*. This polyphonic novel portrays a group of young, queer creative types in Lagos as they carve out space for themselves in an unwelcoming world. “Before we met each other,” one says, “we all had lies we needed to tell ourselves and others if we were going to live well . . . necessary fictions.” Many of the friends are fleeing parents who are abusive or closeted; in some cases, they want to leave Nigeria altogether. What saves them is the community—the family—they build with one another. That and, perhaps, money. At a commitment ceremony, one character says to his groom, “Thank you for being the type of partner who doesn’t think a butler is too extra, who wants to travel the world finding Michelin-star restaurants.”

What We’re Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Make It Ours, *by Robin Givhan (Crown)*. In this biography of the late Virgil Abloh—the founder of the luxury streetwear brand Off-White, and the artistic director of Louis Vuitton's menswear line from 2018 until his untimely death, in 2021—there are few moments that highlight his prowess as a designer. Instead, the narrative centers Abloh's collaborative instincts and his genius for slamming contexts together, often in ways that ironized fashion itself. One episode related by Givhan, a Pulitzer-winning fashion critic, involves Abloh screen-printing flannels produced for a now defunct Ralph Lauren sub-label to create "new" pieces that sold for more than five hundred dollars. As one of Abloh's enduring bon mots has it, "Design is the freshest scam. Quote me on that one."

Exophony, *by Yoko Tawada, translated from the Japanese by Lisa Hofmann-Kuroda (New Directions)*. In these deft essays, Tawada, who writes in both Japanese and German, wanders through cities and languages,

treating every border crossing as an adventure. Meditating on the notion of “exophony”—writing outside one’s native tongue—each installment blends anecdote, literary criticism, and cultural history to examine the “poetic ravine” that exists between languages. Tawada was born in Japan and immigrated to Germany more than forty years ago; as she recounts making her way from Dakar to Seoul, Cape Town to Tübingen, she argues that “human beings in the modern world are repositories for countless languages that unmake and undo one another.”

Musical Events

There Is More to French Opera Than “Carmen” and “Faust”

The Bru Zane label is recording dozens of forgotten works that testify to a Romantic golden age.

By Alex Ross

August 4, 2025

Louise Bertin’s “Fausto,” from 1831, is one of Bru Zane’s major rediscoveries.Illustration by Fanny Blanc

Virginia Woolf, in her essay “The Lives of the Obscure,” savors the potential fascination of reading authors whom posterity has cast aside: “One likes romantically to feel oneself a deliverer advancing with lights across the waste of years to the rescue of some stranded ghost—a Mrs. Pilkington,

a Rev. Henry Elman, a Mrs. Ann Gilbert—waiting, appealing, forgotten, in the growing gloom. Possibly they hear one coming. They shuffle, they preen, they bridle. Old secrets well up to their lips. The divine relief of communication will soon again be theirs."

Similar feelings are stirred by the vast catalogue of the Bru Zane label, which, since 2009, has recorded no fewer than forty-four French-language operas from the extended Romantic era, many of them as obscure as Laetitia Pilkington. Nowhere else will you find Victorin de Joncières's "Dimitri," Louise Bertin's "Fausto," or Benjamin Godard's "Dante." You may know Gounod, Saint-Saëns, and Massenet, but you probably haven't heard their operas "Cinq-Mars," "Le Timbre d'Argent," and "Le Mage." The volumes in the label's "Portraits" series highlight such liminal figures as Théodore Dubois and Max d'Ollone. The word "volume" is appropriate: most releases are equipped with deluxe hardback books running more than a hundred pages. In recent months, I have been wandering in the Bru Zane catacombs, where the shuffling of the obscure becomes a stampede.

The label is part of a larger organization called Palazzetto Bru Zane–Centre de Musique Romantique Française, which researches, records, publishes, and promotes French music from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth. The venture is funded by the heirs of the pharmaceutical pioneer Camille Bru, who invented the effervescent tablet, and has its headquarters, curiously, in the Casino Zane, in Venice. The enterprise has an obsessive, devotional aspect. In an essay on Saint-Saëns's "Phryné," a diaphanous comedy about an ancient-Greek courtesan, Alexandre Dratwicki, Bru Zane's artistic director, speaks of "removing the veils of oblivion"; that phrase could be attached to most of the label's projects, which lay siege to the concept of a fixed repertory of masterpieces.

French opera is always in need of an extra push, since it lacks the global glamour of its Italian and German counterparts. Only three French titles—Bizet's "Carmen" and Gounod's "Faust" and "Roméo et Juliette"—appear among the Met's twenty-five most performed works. The post-Baroque French repertory has no towering titan on the order of Verdi in Italian opera, Wagner in German opera, or Mozart in both spheres. (Bizet might have become such a colossus had he not died at thirty-six.) At the same time, the

lack of a center of gravity encourages the kind of deeper excavation that Bru Zane has undertaken. Thousands of operas were produced in Paris during the long nineteenth century, and it defies reason that only a handful should thrive.

The luxury of listening to recordings is that an opera need not have a decipherable plot or a plausible setting to give pleasure. In the case of Félicien David's Pompeian spectacle "Herculanum," for example, you can enjoy the high-Romantic hurly-burly of the music without worrying about how any of it should be staged:

> (*Earthquake. Vesuvius erupts.*)
>
> C*horus*: Oh, woe!
>
> S*atan, indicating to Olympia the approaching lava*: That is the punishment!
>
> O*lympia*: Well, I defy it!

Massenet's "Ariane," a sumptuous take on Ariadne, Theseus, and the Minotaur, seems almost designed to be heard and read rather than seen. The libretto, by Catulle Mendès, describes the underworld as "far-reaching, fuliginous, enormous, desolate, melancholy, catastrophic."

Among Bru Zane's unearthed scores, none may be as historically significant as Bertin's "Fausto," which received three performances at the Théâtre Italien in 1831 and then vanished. Bertin came from a prominent family; her father, Louis-François, edited the widely read *Journal des Débats*. Stricken at an early age with polio, Bertin studied with Antonin Reicha, who also taught Berlioz, and by the age of twenty-one she had embarked on her adaptation of Goethe's "Faust," decades in advance of Gounod. The opera was well received, despite sexist comments in the press, and Bertin went on to write "La Esmeralda," an adaptation of Victor Hugo's "Notre-Dame de Paris," with a libretto by Hugo himself. This work set off a classic Parisian opera riot, with audiences accusing Bertin of benefitting from her father's influence. Alexandre Dumas was heard to yell, "It's by Berlioz!"—

to the distress of the latter, who admired Bertin's talent. She lived another forty years but wrote little more of consequence.

"Fausto" is notable for its blazing energy, its jolting modulations, its seductive and spooky orchestration, its dramatic urgency. The finale of Act I, with lightning-strike fortissimo chords and cries of "*Papè Satan!*," suffices to explain why Berlioz saw Bertin as a kindred spirit. Arguably, "Fausto" has more of an authentic Faustian tinge than Gounod's treatment of the same material, although Bertin can't match Gounod's chart-topping tunes. If inspiration fades somewhat in the opera's later sections, Bru Zane's performers, under the direction of Christophe Rousset, sway the listener with their fire and finesse. As it happens, Rousset also leads a Bru Zane recording of the long-unheard original version of Gounod's "Faust," from 1859; there, grand-opera trappings give way to a more agile, playful aesthetic, much to the score's benefit.

A surprising number of female composers were able to make their way in France during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Contemporary orchestras show increasing interest in the symphonies of Louise Farrenc, the tone poems of Augusta Holmès, and the choral works of Lili Boulanger. Those three and eighteen others appear on a nine-disk Bru Zane compilation titled "Compositrices." One volume in the "Portraits" series is given over to Marie Jaëll (1846-1925), who won notice as a hyper-virtuosic pupil of Liszt and went on to forge her own idiosyncratic personality. The pianist David Bismuth samples a cycle of eighteen piano pieces after Dante, from 1894; "Appel," from the "Inferno" section, is an eerie study in dissonant minimalism. By contrast, Charlotte Sohy (1887-1955) displays a nuanced mastery of traditional forms. Her pensive, probing Symphony in C-Sharp Minor had never been performed until the conductor Debora Waldman took it up and recorded it for Bru Zane.

The most charming of the obscure men is Baron Fernand de La Tombelle (1854-1928), a gentleman polymath who not only composed and played the organ but also wrote Alexandrines, sculpted, painted, spoke Occitan, took three-hundred-mile bicycle trips, made astronomical observations, and accompanied folk dancers on a hurdy-gurdy. He lived in a gorgeously decorated sixteenth-century château in the Périgord Noir, whose pâtés he

chronicled in a short treatise. Amid all that, he wrote music of exquisite craftsmanship, sometimes imitative, sometimes quietly original. In his Piano Quartet, he builds a complex cyclic structure out of archaic-sounding themes that seem to have wafted in from mist-covered fields.

When Bru Zane isn't reclaiming forgotten composers, it sets about revamping familiar ones. Saint-Saëns, whose enormous output has been reduced to a few hits ("Samson and Delilah," the "Organ" Symphony, "Carnival of the Animals"), is the leading beneficiary of this mission. Bru Zane has so far traversed six of his operas, with a seventh, "L'Ancêtre," arriving in September. Saint-Saëns long had the reputation of being too expert for his own good, spinning emptily elegant spiderwebs of notes. But he could command grand historical canvases—most notably in "Henry VIII" and the Benvenuto Cellini epic "Ascanio"—while also concocting intricate fables such as "Le Timbre d'Argent," in which a starving painter gains wealth and kills another soul each time he rings a silver bell. This was Saint-Saëns's first opera, and the restless brilliance of its invention cries out for more attention.

Listening to the entire Bru Zane catalogue—upward of two hundred hours of music—might be a slog if the label didn't have a deep bench of skilled performers on call. Such conductors as Hervé Niquet, György Vashegyi, Marc Minkowski, and Rousset elicit vital performances from the orchestras of Liège, Brussels, Montpellier, Budapest, Munich, and Monte Carlo, among others. Véronique Gens, Judith van Wanroij, Karina Gauvin, and Karine Deshayes flesh out various endangered heroines. (Deshayes is also dashing in the role of Fausto, which Bertin wrote for a boyish mezzo-soprano.) A few of the regulars wear out their welcome; in a generally electric account of Meyerbeer's "Robert le Diable," the bass Nicolas Courjal saps excitement with a fuzzy-voiced, insufficiently sinister turn as Bertram. But there are no true duds in the bunch.

For me, the M.V.P. of the Bru Zane team is the tenor Cyrille Dubois, an impeccable purveyor of Gallic style. In a wide swath of repertory—Antonio Sacchini's Mozartean "Renaud," Reynaldo Hahn's neo-Baroque operetta "L'Île du Rêve," Édouard Lalo's post-Wagnerian "Le Roi d'Ys," gemlike songs by Clémence de Grandval and Rita Strohl—Dubois maintains a

silver-toned lyric line while enunciating the words with fastidious clarity and activating their interior emotions. A singer like Dubois has the power to call into question the entire hierarchy of genius and mediocrity on which the notion of a limited repertory depends. We need great performances of lesser works more than we need lesser performances of great ones. ♦

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

On Television

Sterling K. Brown’s Upstanding Archetype

In Hulu’s soapy “Washington Black,” about an early-nineteenth-century slave who escapes to Halifax, Brown rises above the material.

By Vinson Cunningham

August 2, 2025

Brown plays the wise elder in a story about a precocious Barbadian escaped slave and his risky adventures in remaining free.Illustration by Julie Benbassat

There’s a certain face that only Sterling K. Brown can make. It is yoked to no particular emotional state, and emerges just as often when the actor is conveying deep glee or charming irony as when his character is lost in sorrow. Brown’s jaw gently churns, his eyes go glassy, and the muscles around his mouth slacken a bit. He’s lost in a reverie of intensity, absorbing life’s shocks and cruelties or its absurd beauties, processing it all by opening some spirit portal via his face. He’s not necessarily about to cry,

but the look is an assertion that high emotion is almost always an appropriate response to life's fluctuations.

Brown's most memorable characters—Randall Pearson, the principled father and adopted son from NBC's tear-jerking drama "This Is Us"; the grieving Secret Service officer Xavier Collins, on the recent eco-dystopian thriller "Paradise"—are strong guys with vulnerable cores. They exist at an elevated altitude of emotion and lead plot-heavy lives whose stakes are written as much in Brown's expressions as in the words that he speaks.

Because of his obvious intelligence, classic handsomeness, and natural respectability, Brown reminds me of Sidney Poitier and Denzel Washington—great movie actors who in their prime mostly played versions of themselves, and also, role by role, implicitly represented society's rapid revisions of the Black male archetype. Poitier slapped white men onscreen and fell defiantly in love with their daughters, illustrating how his kind of masculine dignity had to be won in a series of direct clashes with white power. Washington's reign, from the nineties through the turn of the century, was, on some level, a confirmation of the victories of Poitier's generation. Now Black cool could be a personal tool, not just a weapon in a wider racial conflagration. Washington's charisma and omnipresent equipoise were agents of a kind of stylized self-care, allowing his characters to walk a tightrope over so many complexities. Even when he played Malcolm X, the ultimate Black artist of public confrontation, he saved his most affecting acting for the film's more private moments, when it was essential for Malcolm to keep calm.

Brown—whose greatest exploits, unlike those of Poitier and Washington, have been on television rather than on the silver screen—is back on TV at a more muddled juncture in the American racial story. Just as the United States seems to be sliding into a self-fuelled decline in global esteem and symbolic power, the Black man has receded somewhat as a sign of its internal divisions. Black women are more likely to go to college, and they seem to be weathering the contemporary storm of loneliness and atomization with an equanimity that eludes their male counterparts. If last year's Presidential election is any indication, they have better politics, too. And other archetypes are rightly rising: the undocumented worker, for

instance, takes up more space in the national imagination these days than does the righteous Black man negotiating the shocks of the post-civil-rights-era struggle. The imperative for a figure like Brown is to portray a good man in a crumbling world, to maintain a polished, upstanding character against the backdrop of a rusting empire.

So it's interesting to see Brown, now forty-nine, taking on the role of the elder mentor in the new Hulu show "Washington Black," about a precocious Barbadian escaped slave and his risky adventures in remaining free. In the first scene, the young man, whose mordantly resonant name is George Washington Black, or Wash (Ernest Kingsley Junior), is showing a father figure named Medwin, played by Brown, one of his latest inventions, a small prototype for a blimp. Brown has a look of proud, slightly baffled love in his eye. He can't understand the science unfolding in the kid's brain, and implores him to speak "English," but in truth delights in his obvious intelligence.

They're in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in the early nineteenth century. At the time of this conversation, Medwin doesn't know Washington's real name. Everybody in their community of tenuously free Black people calls him Jack Crawford. Soon the reasoning for that bit of concealment becomes clear: a team of bounty hunters has alighted on the town, looking for someone named Washington Black. The show occurs on two time lines. There's an ongoing flashback—alternately heartwarming and bloodcurdling—that portrays the young Wash's life in and escape from Barbados (Eddie Karanja plays the child counterpart to Kingsley Junior), to Virginia, then to farther north. He's brilliant from the beginning—a curious kid, with no family, given to poetic phrasings and musings on nature. Anyone can see how smart he is—anyone, that is, but Erasmus Wilde (Julian Rhind-Tutt), the bigoted Englishman who runs the plantation on which he lives, and who makes cruel sport of slapping Wash's guardian over trifling domestic disturbances. It takes a different kind of white man to notice Wash's gifts; Erasmus's brother Christopher, or Titch (Tom Ellis), an abolitionist inventor, makes Wash his apprentice, and eventually facilitates his escape.

In the story's present tense, Wash is, yes, trying to avoid the bounty hunters, but he still has time and brain space to cultivate a sappy romance with

Tanna Goff (Iola Evans), the daughter of yet another scientist. The Goffs have recently arrived in Halifax from London, and we soon discover that their hasty trip across the Atlantic was a result of a secret: Tanna's mother was Black. Now Tanna is passing as white in colonial society. In London, she'd been too free with her identity. We don't know exactly how, but some Negrophile hint slipped loose, endangering the family. In Halifax, repeating patterns, she's crazy about Jack Crawford even though she's engaged to a wealthy white man.

Brown, as Medwin, proceeds over all this trouble—so many secrets, so much inevitable violence—with a wise gravity. He handles the role of elder statesman much as he's handled other roles throughout his career: heart first, with an emphasis on personal moral rectitude and interpersonal warmth, circumstances be damned. Medwin is an eminence in Black Halifax, welcoming strangers and hiding fugitives, "watchin' out for folk." The show is a soap opera in texture and plotting; its points of highest drama often make you roll your eyes. Tanna, talking in terms that only a contemporary lover of woo-woo self-help could hope to approximate, effuses about "living in [her] own skin." Anachronisms like that are everywhere. It's a festival of tropes: the racially shrouded mixed-race woman straddling her loyalties to the Black and white worlds; the dastardly slave master and his benevolent opposite; the turncoat Black man who sells out his co-racialists; and on and on. Brown is working far above the level of the material—he's one of the show's executive producers—but there's only so much that his sad eyes and occasional tears can do to redeem "Washington Black."

That's a shame, because the vast, cosmopolitan ambit of the show, which is based on a novel of the same name by Esi Edugyan, might have taken off on a much needed new trajectory. By focussing on the transnational character of the slave trade, especially as it was practiced in the West Indies, the show brings the Old and New Worlds into suggestive and potentially revealing proximity. The Regency costuming of the English characters is enough to make audiences think of the refinements of Jane Austen's novels —at least as they have been adapted on TV and in film—and to darken their view of the much sentimentalized landed gentry.

“Washington Black” takes place about a century before the United States announced, and then went on to achieve, its imperial ambitions. The internationalism of its story echoes the unsettled world out of which a boy like Wash might have sprung. Today, as the U.S. wills its own isolated decline, we’re on the cusp of a multipolar world, all the more dangerous because of the spasms of a behemoth on the wane. What kind of Black man does this world need, onscreen or in living color? Maybe just a guy who can think, and feel, and remain human among the ruins. Look closely enough at Sterling K. Brown and you can see him trying, glassy-eyed, to meet the moment. ♦

Vinson Cunningham is a staff writer at The New Yorker. His début novel, “Great Expectations,” came out in March, 2024.

Poems

- **“The Eulogy I Didn’t Give (I)”**
  By Bob Hicok | “My ambition to be done with ambition / suffered a setback at my father’s funeral.”
- **“A Table”**
  By Hua Xi | “Is a table an argument or an understanding?”

Poems

The Eulogy I Didn’t Give (I)

By Bob Hicok

August 4, 2025

My ambition to be done with ambition
suffered a setback at my father’s funeral
when I wanted to say something profound
that he would hear, that a tree could understand,
that the wind would feel, but the only words
I could come up with were a handful of dirt.
The sound of it hitting his coffin,
as if shouting at him, woke me up
and I took my clothes off and walked away,
back into my life as his child,
when all I wanted was to hold his hand.
I am now fathered but fatherless, a being
whose being can half be traced
to a hole in the ground,
where my father’s beard is,
and his bones. His beard will grow
for a while down there and his bones
will never cast a shadow, and I’ll always know
where to go to look at his name
cut in stone. Rain, with patience
and the greed of love
to hold, will slowly erase his name
and everything it touches, it always sounds
like a eulogy to me, the sky
trying to figure out what to say
about loss, and making a mess of it
like the rest of us.

Bob Hicok is the author of poetry collections including "Water Look Away," "Red Rover Red Rover," and "Hold."

Poems

A Table

By Hua Xi

August 4, 2025

I was trying to measure my mother’s sadness with a very long ruler.

She talked at me from one end of a sentence.

A sentence the length of a table.

Everything I say to my mother begins so far away.

In Athens. Under fruiting olives. On Plato’s ideal table.

Just now, I set my glasses down on a thousand-year-old idea.

Is there no table in the world as perfect as the one in our heads?

What about this table in our house, propped up by magazines, splintering and covered with wood stains?

We are sorting pea blossoms there now, a dozen hands suspended in a pillar of sunlight.

My aunt is there, and my mother, my cousin, and a feeling of language begins.

I wonder about the table in the mind and how it is so lonely there.

I wonder what thoughts a table is thinking.

Is a table an argument or an understanding?

When two languages sit down to a table, call it a translation.

When only one comes to the table, a branch cries out in the yard.

Immaculate snows that fall over a table go on falling anecdotally forever.

Imagined thoughts of a table meet under magnolias, across banquets of gauzy timelessness

To ask *How have you been*? *Have you been well*? *Oh, it's been so long . . .*

Long like the length of sitting down.

On the surface is a loaf of flowers.

A slice cut into summer.

Does the table you imagine go on and on?

Someone told me once that an idea can outlast a person.

Things shatter, but I go on staring at their whole.

I place a boulder on the idea, thinking of everything.

It'll be cold soon, maybe for a long time.

Hua Xi is a poet whose work has appeared in The Paris Review, The Nation, and The New Republic, among other publications.

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the August 11, 2025 magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Tuesday, July 29, 2025**
  By Paolo Pasco | A moderately challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, July 29, 2025

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Paolo Pasco

August 2, 2025

Paolo Pasco, a games editor at LinkedIn, won the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in 2024 and 2025. He is the author of "Crossword Puzzles for Kids."