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- **A Thrilling Italian American Joint Points Backward and Forward**
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Goings On

Conor McPherson’s Reliable Treasure

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By Helen Shaw, Jane Bua, Inkoo Kang, Sheldon Pearce, Brian Seibert, Richard Brody, and Taran Dugal

July 11, 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.***

Conor McPherson’s small 1997 masterwork **“The Weir”** has been one of the most reliable treasures of the Irish Repertory Theatre. First directed by Ciarán O’Reilly in 2013, revived in 2015, and released as a digital performance in 2020, O’Reilly’s exquisite production returns again this summer (through Aug. 31). It’s shrewd counter-programming for these sweltering days: McPherson’s play, set in rural Ireland, shivers with sudden gusts of storm. In an out-of-the-way bar, four local men banter to make the evening pass, welcoming a quiet woman—a “blow-in” from Dublin—by telling her ghost stories. Eerie voices seem to cry in the howling weather outside; the five figures draw close over their bottles and drams, wondering what might stand beyond the door.

Illustration by Doug Salati

I have adored this production—each time I've seen it—for more than a decade. McPherson's discursive humanism exactly suits both O'Reilly's light directorial touch and the confident realism of his company of (largely) Irish actors. Some elements are new this time round; for instance, the two younger characters in this production will be played by Sarah Street—the star of Irish Rep's recent mounting of Beckett's "Not I"—and Johnny Hopkins. Happily, though, three of the 2013 cast also return: Dan Butler, Sean Gormley, and the brilliant comic beanpole John Keating. These are some of the finest actors in the city, and it's a relief to find them at the Rep again. Irish Rep is, in fact, very like the bar in McPherson's drama. In a chaotic and frightening world, it becomes a place to rest, comforted by the presence of increasingly dear, familiar faces.—*Helen Shaw*

About Town

Classical

You may have heard **Chanticleer's** Christmas carols, but have you heard them contemplate the wonders and complexities of nature? As a part of Caramoor's eightieth-anniversary season, the renowned vocal ensemble puts on a program entitled "Music of a Silent World." This ode to the Earth

will be held in the Spanish Courtyard, boasting Kurt Weill's Broadway aria "Lost in the Stars"; Reger's "Hochsommernacht," or "Midsummer Night"; "I miss you like I miss the trees," by the Chanticleer collaborator Ayanna Woods; and the song cycle "The Rivers Are Our Brothers," by Majel Connery, inspired by the Sierra Nevada mountain range. "Winter Wonderland" is nowhere to be found, but we can wait for that.—*Jane Bua (Caramoor, Katonah, N.Y.; July 18.)*

Television

Though Julian Fellowes's HBO drama **"The Gilded Age"** has alluded to significant developments of the eighteen-eighties—cross-country train transport, electricity, Oscar Wilde—it's primarily occupied by the social-climbing efforts of Bertha (Carrie Coon), the wife of the robber baron George Russell (Morgan Spector), who's hellbent on dominating Manhattan high society. The first, rather vacuous season hinges in part on whether the Russells' neighbor—the huffy, old-money Agnes van Rhijn (Christine Baranski)—will ever cross Sixty-first Street to visit. In the latest, third season, though, plotlines involving the Russell marriage and Agnes's shaky position as the head of the household deliver on the anything-goes unpredictability that the show had initially promised.—*Inkoo Kang (Streaming on HBO.)*

For more: read Kang's full dispatch on the series' fiddle-faddle.

Hip-Hop

Method Man, of Wu-Tang Clan.Photograph by Max Wilder

The lore of the **Wu-Tang Clan** has grown as rich as the kung-fu flicks on which it is based. What started as a collective of eclectic Staten Island corner boys has spun off into its own franchise, including a scripted Hulu origin story, a video game, a comic-book series, and a one-of-a-kind album which sold for two million dollars. Since its classic 1993 début, “Enter the Wu-Tang (36 Chambers),” no rap crew has been able to claim a greater cultural footprint. The group began its farewell tour, “Wu-Tang Forever: The Final Chamber,” in June, supported by the boisterous duo Run the Jewels; the show mines a deep catalogue, tracing its way back through those early chambers. As the tour draws to a close, so, too, does one of the more epic journeys in hip-hop storytelling.—*Sheldon Pearce (Madison Square Garden; July 16.)*

For more: read Hua Hsu on the unexpectedly moving story of U-God.

Dance

In 2020, as the **Jacob’s Pillow Dance Festival** was reeling from pandemic shutdowns, a fire destroyed one of its two indoor theatres, the Doris Duke. This month, that theatre reopens bigger (more than twice as large) and better (kitted out with state-of-the-art audio and camera systems). “Dancing the Algorithm,” an interactive exhibit curated for the gallery by Katherine Helen Fisher, allows visitors to enter the work of Martha Graham; onstage, Andrew Schneider’s Pillow commission “HERE” shows off the theatre’s

technological upgrade with a story that extends across eons. Meanwhile, Sarasota Ballet keeps up tradition in the Ted Shawn Theatre with works by Frederick Ashton and a world première by Jessica Lang.—*Brian Seibert (Becket, Mass.; July 16-20.)*

Movies

“Adieu Philippine,” set in Corsica.Photograph courtesy Criterion Collection

Though Jacques Rozier made only five features in his half-century-plus career—all of which are now streaming on the Criterion Channel—several of them are among the most original films about summer vacations. In his first feature, **“Adieu Philippine,”** from 1962, a Parisian TV technician is joined by two women during his last-chance spree in Corsica before his impending military service—likely in the Algerian War. Rozier followed it, in 1971, with **“Near Orouët,”** a bittersweet comedy about three young women who welcome a nerdy businessman into their beach house and then rely on him for fun, food, and flirtation. Combining freewheeling plots with impulsive performances by mostly nonprofessional actors, Rozier pays quasi-documentary attention to summertime sites and customs while focussing dramatically on the season’s romantic prospects and frustrations. —*Richard Brody (Criterion Channel.)*

For more: read Brody on Rozier’s inspired improvisations.

Off Off Broadway

In Daniel Holzman’s surreal **“Berlindia!,”** directed by Noah Latty, nothing’s rooted—at one point, a young woman, Burger (Rosalie Neal),

sees Rio de Janeiro floating in the open ocean below her airplane window. Why's Rio moving? "Rent, probably," someone says. Burger and her brother Fuck (Arjun Biju) are pursuing their mother (Rita Wolf), who's left home for the titular Berlindia, as the kids' dad (Pete Simpson, at his goofy best) visits Holocaust museums, taking strange comfort in the presence of the dead. Holzman, wonderful at shaping odd-sad paradoxes, knows that anything, even a generational horror, can come unfixed; the play's psychedelic jollity—there's a long, trippy sequence at a club—founders a bit in the face of such a deep, sad, sobering thought.—*Helen Shaw (The Tank; through July 27.)*

Bar Tab

Taran Dugal prowls a Lower East Side cocktail den.

Illustration by Patricia Bolaños

Sex sells, cash is king, and **Tigre**, a sleek speakeasy on the Lower East Side, seems to have been designed with little else in mind. On a recent humid Saturday, a pair of newcomers waited as a bouncer inspected their credentials. Once inside, they were greeted by an alternate-reality cast of "Men in Black" where Will Smith and Tommy Lee Jones had been replaced by hostesses in matching ebony blazers and gold-buckled loafers. Under the bar's mirrored ceiling, the two took their seats on a beige leather sofa with patterned velvet cushions. Wood-panelled walls were devoid of decoration, save for a framed collage of Grace Jones and a large photo of a sex shop. (The namesake tiger appears in a print in the bathroom.) While nineteen-eighties Italian boogie streamed from speakers, the duo turned to the faux-gold-leaf menu of cocktails ($21-$30), featuring classics ("Then"), modern concoctions ("Now"), a "martini (by ratio)" section, and several small plates, including a thirty-gram serving of Royal Ossetra caviar ($145). Aware of an acute lightness in their pockets, the newcomers opted for the "perfect" Martini, a sharp and just-bitter-enough number made with a small-batch horseradish gin that vindicated its name, followed by the Foreign Places, a refreshing cognac cocktail with notes of banana and peanut. Pleasantly surprised, they tried their luck with a couple of Wagyu-steak skewers, which yielded the briefest of juicy bites (three per person). Overstimulated and underfed, they called for the bill. Outside, in the sweltering Manhattan evening, stomachs growled. "I'm tipsy," one of the newcomers muttered. The other checked his phone. "Sounds like my friends are barbecuing," he said. "What do you think—or should we go back for that caviar?"

A New Yorker Quiz

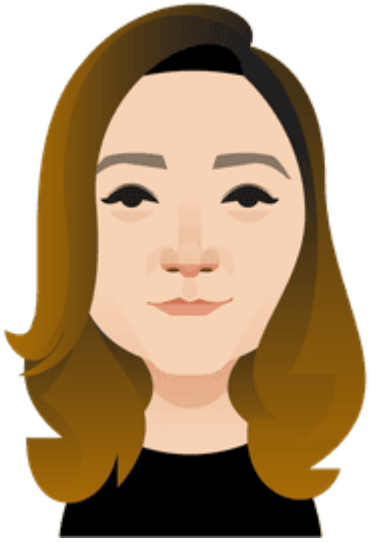
In honor of the Fiction Issue, test your knowledge of past New Yorker stories.

- **Which *New Yorker* story, published in 1997, inspired an opera and an Academy Award-winning movie?** Hint: “If you can’t fix it you’ve got to stand it.”
- **Which *New Yorker* story, published in 2008, is a response to Chinua Achebe’s novel “Things Fall Apart”?** Hint: “She enjoyed their fear, the way they backed away from her.”
- **Which *New Yorker* story, published in 2017, has been described as the “literary adjunct to the latest #MeToo moment”?** Hint: “She hadn’t seen any cats in the house, and she wondered if he’d made them up.”

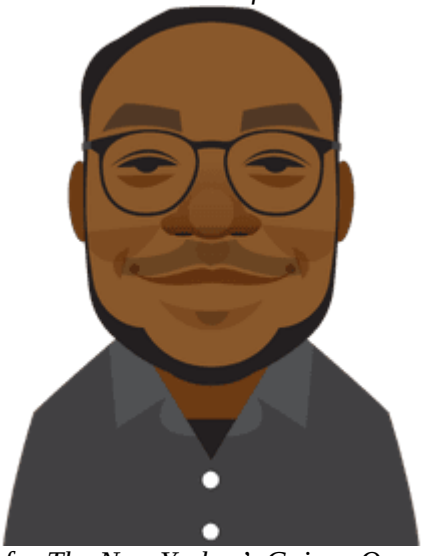
P.S. Good stuff on the internet:

- *Milky Way all the way*
- *You don’t have to wish your ex well*
- *Miranda July’s guide to hot-weather wear*

Helen Shaw joined The New Yorker as a staff writer in 2022. She received a 2025 Grace Dudley Prize for Arts Writing.
Jane Bua is a member of The New Yorker’s editorial staff who covers classical music for Goings On. Previously, she wrote for Pitchfork.



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



Sheldon Pearce is a music writer for The New Yorker's Goings On newsletter.
Brian Seibert has been contributing to The New Yorker since 2002. He is the author of "What the Eye Hears: A History of Tap Dancing," which won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award. His writing appears in the New York Times and the New York Review of Books. A Guggenheim fellow, he teaches at Yale University.

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

The Food Scene

A Thrilling Italian American Joint Points Backward and Forward

JR & Son is a new-old establishment that conjures the past while deliciously disrupting expectations.

By Helen Rosner

July 6, 2025

The menu at JR & Son offers surprising twists to definitively Italian American dishes, including a classic rainbow cookie.Photographs by Eric Helgas for The New Yorker

You're reading the Food Scene newsletter, Helen Rosner's guide to what, where, and how to eat. ***Sign up to receive it in your inbox.***

Memory is a powerful attractant, even if the memory isn't our own. Something draws us inexorably to nostalgia, to the soft focus of hindsight, the comforting narrative completeness that can be found in the rearview. This is never more true than at a restaurant, where you sit inside the story, smell the story, eat the story. For all of its allure, though, nostalgia is a tricky element for a restaurant to trade in, and a risky thing to rely on. Storytelling can get people in the door, it can set the mood, but it's not the same thing as substance: a restaurant has to be good as a restaurant, not just a set piece, to get you telling your friends about it, or to get you back a second time.

JR & Son, which opened in Williamsburg in May, seems on the surface to be a potent exercise in calling up the past. It occupies the former home of a bar of the same name, an unassuming joint that dated to the seventies, having, itself, taken over the spot from a venerable bar called Charlie's, established in 1934. Now under the ownership of a restaurateur duo, Michelle Lobo and Scott Hawley, and the restaurant designer Nico Arze, the place has been newly restored but still looks preserved from some long-ago heyday. There are red leather booths and checkerboard floors, the wood-panelled walls decorated with black-and-white photos of living and long-dead luminaries. Ceiling fans gyrate lazily. The air smells dark and sweet, like oregano and red wine.

You'd expect to have a certain kind of meal in a room like this: red-sauce Italian, all the classics, fairly insipid but not without charm, any shortfalls on the plate made up for by the accumulated dignity of a near-century of operation. You'd expect to say something like "It's not very good, but it's *perfect*, you know?" So it's a shock—an honest-to-God shock—to settle in for dinner at this new-old restaurant and find that every bite, from the bread basket on down, is just spectacular—rigorous, referential, playful, precise. An arancini salad features the fried balls of gooey rice with smoked mozzarella, shrunk down to crouton size and tossed with bitter chicories and herbs. Chicken parm is a golden sun, crackly and fried, its blanket of Calabrian-chile-spiked tomato sauce fresh and scorching as the summer sun; a scattering of sesame seeds in the cutlet's breading summons the dish's alternative identity as a sandwich, on a squishy seeded roll. A clever appetizer of clams "alle vongole" finds the mollusks, on the half shell, stuffed with tiny portions of pasta in white clam sauce.

All of this is the work of Patricia Vega, who until recently was the chef de cuisine at Thai Diner, and the connection makes perfect sense: Thai Diner is one of New York's most reliably gobsmacking restaurants, one of a handful of places in the city where every single dish on the menu is an absolute star. At JR & Son, Vega comes close to achieving a similar all-hits-no-skips lineup. The food, while definitively Italian American, isn't limited to the paint-by-numbers expectations. There's a whisper of fish sauce in a side of green beans. Gentle stracciatella gets funkified with black-olive caramel and wisps of orange bottarga. What look like fluffy little zeppole are

actually onion rings, with a zippy pink sauce of bomba chiles and aioli. Crab salad, served on ice, with a halo of Club crackers, calls back to a mid-century supper club. The *triangolini*, three-sided pasta envelopes stuffed with artichokes, are almost comically enormous; a mere four to an order is more than plenty. Some dishes don't quite live up to their big ideas: a pot of mussels steamed with chickpeas and spicy 'nduja arrived a little on the dry side, and a Caesar salad, topped with crunchy bits of anchovy, the lettuce blackened on the grill, was blobbily overdressed. But even the bread basket, the creation of the pastry chef Amanda Perdomo, is something of a riot, which on my visits contained two olive-studded wedges of focaccia and two tiny, butter-glossed Parker House rolls, yielding and yeasty and drowning in shaved parmigiano.

Helen, Help Me!
E-mail your questions about dining, eating, and anything food-related, and Helen may respond in a future newsletter.

One of the most tangibly old-fashioned things about JR & Son is its dimness: the building, on a prime corner spot, has just a few tiny windows. As both a supper club and a local dive, it was a place meant for being inside of, not looking out from. In the early-dinner hours, before nightfall, white slashes of sunlight slip through cracks in the horizontal blinds and play through the dusky interior like a laser show. The updated room has retained a patina of honest, unrelenting use, traces of thousands of past nights out. The squeak of the booths, the clink of the Nick and Nora glasses when your Martini arrives—they're not illusions or re-creations. The spaghetti and meatballs have a retro appeal—spaghetti, you crazy bastard, making a well-deserved return to the ranks of serious pasta—but the toothsome noodles, made daily, taste both a hundred years old and born today.

The staff runs a tight ship—demand is high, reservations are scarce, and the restaurant holds back a few tables for walk-ins and locals—so it's not exactly a place to linger. Still, it would be a mistake not to make time for dessert, which is also overseen by Perdomo. The menu is brief and, on paper, somewhat predictable: a tiramisu, Italian cookies, an ice-cream sundae. But, as with the fruits of Vega's savory kitchen, the dishes all go gleefully off-piste in the details. There are floral notes of orange zest in the

tiramisu, and the fruity-bitter taste of espresso is enhanced and complicated with fruity-bitter amaro. A slab of Italian rainbow cookie is the size of a greeting card, dense and soft as chenille, with the traditional almond flavor traded for coconut, an audacious violation of the rules of a treat famous for its comforting consistency. (Like a surprising portion of the menu, the desserts are vegan.) This is JR & Son's whole thing: collapsing the space between looking back and looking forward, gesturing to the hazy perfection of memory, and then pulling you lovingly, delightfully, with a polite yet firm reminder that they'll need the table back in about fifteen minutes, right back into the thrill of the here and now. ♦

An earlier version of this article misstated when JR & Son opened.

Helen Rosner, a staff writer at The New Yorker, received a 2025 James Beard Award for her Profile of the food personality Padma Lakshmi.

The Talk of the Town

- **Flash Floods and Climate Policy**
  By Elizabeth Kolbert | As the death toll climbs in Texas, the Trump Administration is actively undermining the nation’s ability to predict—and to deal with—climate-related disasters.
- **Trump Flunks the Kitchen Test**
  By Zach Helfand | The President’s golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, got hit with the lowest health-inspection score in its county. How does it compare to a local Ecuadorian joint with a similar rating?
- **Airbnb Gets Experiential**
  By Andrew Marantz | Busting out of the accommodations game, the tech giant is now hawking experiences. Massage, haircut, Jet Ski, anyone?
- **Martha Stewart Among the Superfans**
  By Bob Morris | The domestic goddess, Sports Illustrated swimsuit model, and former inmate let a handful of faithful hoi polloi poke around her Westchester estate and make their very own Martha moments.
- **Not Drowning but Waving, at a Drone**
  By Henry Alford | On Rockaway Beach, the whirring robots have been used to spot sharks and riptides for years. This summer, they’re delivering lifesaving flotation devices directly to floundering swimmers.

Comment

Flash Floods and Climate Policy

As the death toll climbs in Texas, the Trump Administration is actively undermining the nation's ability to predict—and to deal with—climate-related disasters.

By Elizabeth Kolbert

July 12, 2025

Photo illustration by Cristiana Couceiro; Source photographs from Getty

Tropical Storm Barry developed in the Gulf of Mexico, as this magazine still calls it, on the morning of June 29th. It was the second named storm of the season and, as such, it arrived unusually early; historically, tempests with names like Bonnie or Bob didn't form until mid-July. Later that day, Barry made landfall near the city of Tampico, on Mexico's east coast, and weakened to a tropical depression. Its brief life span made it the butt of weather-related jokes: "Blink and you missed it," a pair of meteorologists wrote. But, it turned out, Barry was far from finished. Its remnants continued to wend their way north, carrying with them moisture from the Gulf. This moisture helped supercharge the rains that fell in and around

Kerr County, Texas, in the early hours of July 4th, causing the floods along the Guadalupe River that killed at least a hundred and twenty people.

While Barry was making its way toward Texas, the White House was plotting destruction of its own. The Trump Administration has made no secret of its disdain for science, and on June 30th it recommended cutting hundreds of millions of dollars from projects aimed at improving climate and weather predictions. Among the many research centers the Administration wants to shutter are the Atlantic Oceanographic and Meteorological Laboratory, the Geophysical Fluid Dynamics Laboratory, the National Severe Storms Laboratory, and the Cooperative Institute for Severe and High-Impact Weather Research and Operations. The last two of these are based in Oklahoma; all are funded by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which is part of the Commerce Department. “I cannot emphasize enough how disastrous closing the National Severe Storms Laboratory and CIWRO would be—for ALL of us,” Stephen Nehrenz, a meteorologist with the CBS affiliate in Tulsa, posted on X after the budget proposal was released.

This week, as the search for those missing in the floods continued, many commentators raised questions about whether staffing shortages at the National Weather Service—which is also part of *NOAA*—had contributed to the tragedy. Nearly six hundred people have left the agency since President Trump took office, many because they were fired and others because they took early retirement. Among those in the latter group is Paul Yura, the warning-coördination meteorologist at the Weather Service’s office in New Braunfels, Texas, which handles forecasts for Kerr County. A story that ran on the weather blog of KXAN, Austin’s NBC affiliate, in April, when Yura announced that he was leaving, noted that he had “tremendous experience understanding local weather patterns while ensuring timely warnings get disseminated to the public in a multitude of ways.” Since the flooding, many meteorologists have defended the N.W.S.’s New Braunfels office, saying that its predictions were as good as could be hoped for, given the nature of the storm. Whether it would have made a difference to have an experienced person handling warning coördination—or any person at all, as Yura’s position remains unfilled—is, at this point at least, impossible to say.

What can be said, and quite definitively, is that, in a warming world, flooding of the sort that occurred in Texas will be more common. The hotter the air, the more moisture it can hold. This is a recipe for fiercer downpours, and, indeed, a trend toward more intense rainfall has already been documented across the United States. According to the Fifth National Climate Assessment, published in 2023, the amount of rain falling on so-called "extreme precipitation days" has, during the past several decades, increased by twenty per cent in the region that includes Texas, by almost half in the Midwest, and by a staggering sixty per cent in the Northeast. "Climate change is forcing a reexamination of our concepts of rare events," the report noted. A study released this week by a group of European researchers concluded that the Kerr County floods bear the fingerprints of warming. "Natural variability alone cannot explain the changes in precipitation associated with this very exceptional meteorological condition," the researchers wrote.

In a sane country, information like this would prompt two responses. First, steps would be taken to limit the dangers of climate change by reducing greenhouse-gas emissions. Second, more resources would be devoted to preparing for weather extremes. Unfortunately, that is not the sort of country we live in now. The federal government is openly trying to maximize fossil-fuel consumption—and, hence, emissions. On Monday, as twenty more deaths were reported in Texas, Trump signed an executive order aimed at further hobbling the solar- and wind-energy industries, which had already been kneecapped by previous executive orders, as well as by the provisions of the so-called Big Beautiful Bill, approved by Congress earlier this month. On Tuesday, as the death toll climbed by another ten people, the Environmental Protection Agency held hearings on a proposal to scrap Biden-era limits on emissions from coal-fired power plants. Trump and congressional Republicans have put an end to, as one commentator put it in *Forbes*, "any notion that a true energy transition is happening in the United States."

Meanwhile, the White House is actively undermining the nation's ability to predict—and to deal with—climate-related disasters. In April, the Administration dismissed nearly four hundred scientists who were working, on a volunteer basis, to draft the next climate-assessment report, which is

due, under law, in 2027. Late last month, it shut down the website of the U.S. Global Change Research Program, where the Fifth Assessment report and its predecessors used to be available. It has cut off grants to climate scientists, kicked *nasa* climate researchers out of their offices, and hired climate-science deniers to fill key government positions. Trump has said that he wants to eliminate the Federal Emergency Management Agency. Recently, the Administration has been backing away from this idea, but reports suggest that a cost-cutting measure at *fema* initiated by Kristi Noem, the Secretary of Homeland Security, delayed the agency's response in Texas. "The old processes are being replaced because they failed Americans in real emergencies," a D.H.S. spokeswoman told the Washington *Post*.

So far, Trump's assault on climate science (and on so many other aspects of reality) has found eager collaborators in Congress. But, in the case of *NOAA*, the House and the Senate still have the opportunity to reject the President's schemes. And perhaps, in the aftermath of the tragedy in Texas, they will find the gumption to do so. Because, as the death toll along the Guadalupe River has made horrifically clear, ignoring a problem doesn't make it go away. ♦

Elizabeth Kolbert, a staff writer at The New Yorker since 1999, won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for general nonfiction for "The Sixth Extinction." She is also the author of "H Is for Hope."

Ratings Roundup

Trump Flunks the Kitchen Test

The President’s golf club in Bedminster, New Jersey, got hit with the lowest health-inspection score in its county. How does it compare to a local Ecuadorian joint with a similar rating?

By Zach Helfand

July 14, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

Occasionally, you might find yourself hungry in Somerset County, New Jersey, on, say, a Monday at around lunchtime. Where to eat? A couple of local establishments have recently gotten a lot of buzz. One, Trump National, the President’s golf club in Bedminster, made headlines for receiving a health-inspection grade of thirty-two, out of a possible one hundred. (Violations: expired milk, improperly stored meat, and a manager

who “fails to demonstrate knowledge of food safety.” Also, no bins in the ladies’ room for used sanitary products.) This was the lowest score given in the county. The other, Ponche Suizo, an Ecuadorian place in North Plainfield, was in the news for being one of only a few other establishments with a score anywhere close. (“Ice machine has mold like substance”; thirty-four.)

Which one should you choose? The online reviews help a little. Ponche Suizo: “It reminds me of my childhood” (five stars). Trump National: “Everyone I came with got food poisoning” (one star). Both are small-business success stories. Ponche Suizo is run by two cousins who know the regulars by name. The country club is also a family business with a beloved proprietor. “When he walks in the dining room, everyone stands up and applauds,” one diner reported. But it wasn’t all positive. One reviewer complained that the owner is “in the Epstein files.”

An amateur restaurant critic driving through Somerset County took a closer look. First stop: Ponche Suizo. The restaurant was decorated with a wall-size photo of Ambato, Ecuador, next to a plastic waving cat. The reviewer was blown away by the encebollado mixto, a stew with albacore, shrimp, yucca, and onions, which was both hearty and delicate. The shrimp was fresh and tender: five stars. A side of fried plantains was fine but not caramelized enough: 3.5 stars. For dessert, the ponche, a fluffy milkshake concoction, was like eating a cloud made of eggnog: five stars.

Kevin Avalo, one of the owners, explained that the ponche is a secret recipe kept by one family in Ambato. The restaurant regularly flies one of the family members to New Jersey to make giant batches. Avalo attributed the poor health grade to the fact that the restaurant was new and had inherited some faulty appliances; he and his cousin recently replaced them, and earned a health score of ninety-four.

Avalo said that many of his customers are Spanish-speaking construction workers who sometimes don’t have cash, so the restaurant started a punch-card program that entitles diners to meals for a week. “We just try to help out as much as we can,” he said. A mural on one wall depicted a tortoise and a bird from the Galápagos. “There was a guy from Ecuador who paints by hand, and he needed money for the end of the month,” Avalo said. “It

was a little bit out of our budget, but we knew, if we extend our hands, one way or another it will come back to us.”

Next up: Trump National. It is only open to members, so an auxiliary critic, who has dined frequently at the club, was enlisted. Everyone spoke English, though the club has drawn scrutiny for employing undocumented immigrants. There were no waving cats, but out front was a fountain with a lion shooting water out of its mouth.

What about the food? “My wife’s had the soups,” the critic reported. “She thinks they suck. I’ve had the octopus carpaccio. It sucks, and I love octopus. That’s one and a half.” Seafood freshness was a general problem. But the menu had some bright spots. “The Ivanka Salad I’d give a four,” he said. “The gyro is good—that’s a three and a half. But the Melania Wrap is a two.”

On some criteria, the two establishments were even. Both had friendly waitstaff. “These kids try really hard,” the auxiliary critic said. Like Ponche Suizo, the country club uses a tab system for payment. “You get billed for shit you didn’t have anything to do with sometimes,” the critic reported. Also like Ponche Suizo, the club has beautiful art that pays homage to the owner’s culture: “Walking up the stairs to the club room is an eight-foot painting of Trump being shot in Pennsylvania.”

The club critic was undaunted by the poor health rating. Many of the violations didn’t seem so bad—unlabelled condiment bottles, unrefrigerated butter. The club’s general manager has called the rating a “politically motivated attack.” The critic thought that it might have just been frustration. “I talked to someone who talked with one of the other county health inspectors right after that thing got published,” he said. The inspector complained that the club constantly ignored the health department’s recommendations. “They’re just so arrogant,” the critic recalled. (On reinspection, the club received an eighty-six.)

Which restaurant was the critic’s pick? “Probably the Ecuadorian place,” the Trump National reviewer concluded. “I prefer ethnic food, for starters. And it’s probably more reasonably priced.” ♦

Zach Helfand is a staff writer at The New Yorker.

| Section menu | Main menu |

Dept. of Unicorns

Airbnb Gets Experiential

Busting out of the accommodations game, the tech giant is now hawking experiences. Massage, haircut, Jet Ski, anyone?

By Andrew Marantz

July 14, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

You are an entrepreneur who has achieved the impossible. You have disrupted an entire sector of the economy and practically invented a new one. Most startups fail, but you have built yours into a billion-dollar company—a genus so scarce that it's called a unicorn. Your brand has

become a transitive verb. What do you do now? Stop growing? Stop disrupting? Of course not. Winners don't quit. They find new ways to win.

Brian Chesky, the co-founder and C.E.O. of Airbnb, was in SoHo the other day, standing near the cash register at the Housing Works Bookstore. In addition to being a forty-three-year-old multibillionaire, he is among the swolest of the swole C.E.O.s, with a swoop of dark curly hair and lats that make Jeff Bezos look like a featherweight. There was a steady rain, but Chesky walked outside in pleated slacks and a form-fitting T-shirt, risking his suède Celine sneakers. "Unlike a lot of tech companies, our business exists in the real world," he said. "To launch something the right way, you need to get out into the community."

He was starting what he called "the next chapter of the company, an evolution I've been thinking about for a long time." (*Wired:* "Airbnb Is in Midlife Crisis Mode.") Since 2007, travellers have been able to Airbnb a place to stay; now they can also Airbnb a Service (haircut, massage) or an Experience (cooking class, Jet Ski outing). Chesky was in SoHo to have an Experience.

He had just arrived from California, where he lives alone (when he's not renting out his guest room on the app). Next, he was on his way to Paris, Berlin, Milan, Rome, Seoul, and Tokyo, sampling new wares along the way. The Experiences section of the Airbnb app was still in beta mode, and the New York selection was slim ("Make beats with a New York DJ"; "Catacombs by Candlelight"). Chesky was going on a walking tour of SoHo, focussed on architectural photography.

"I'm out in these streets in all kinds of weather," the photographer Ethan Barber, who was leading the tour, said. "The only compromise I'll be making today, because of the rain, is I'll be shooting iPhone-only." Walking backward, his glasses fogging, Barber headed to the first destination, a cast-iron building on the corner of Prince and Greene. He was used to leading groups, but this one was a private demo for Chesky. Chesky, however, travels with an entourage: press attachés, a couple of executives, and a guy named Chase, whose job is to fill Chesky's social-media accounts with humanizing photos of the boss. A black S.U.V.—driver, plus private security—kept pace with the group.

Cartoon by Jared Nangle

Someone handed Chesky an umbrella; he waved it off, walked half a block, then changed his mind and took it. At the first stop, Barber pointed to the building—a French Renaissance landmark from 1883, now a Ralph Lauren store—and located his favorite spot to shoot from, marked by a wad of chewing gum ground into the sidewalk. Chesky stood next to the gum, finished tapping out a text, then held his iPhone in landscape mode and took a few snaps of the building while Chase took snaps of him.

“This could be cool,” Chase said, reviewing a moody black-and-white shot of Chesky. “Not for grid, but for Stories, maybe.”

Chesky went back to texting, and Barber moved along—to an Isabel Marant store on Broome and then to a former Isaac Mizrahi warehouse at 102 Wooster. Between texts, Chesky continued his pitch for the Airbnb redesign. “Most apps want you down *here*, in the phone,” he said, bending his neck down. “Our purpose”—head up, shoulders back—“is to get you out and about, making memories.”

The final stop was a walk-through of an artist’s foundation. Two women guiding the tour asked the guests to refrain from indoor photography. Everyone complied, except Chesky, who may or may not have heard the instruction. “I’m redoing my house, and I would be so into a wood floor like this,” he said, taking a video and sending it to his designer. “I want it to have that artist feel.”

Throughout the space, there were places for the artist to rest—a daybed, an East African headrest, a wooden platform holding two mattresses and a sculpture. Naturally, the discussion turned to how much the building might rent for on Airbnb. It wasn't a serious idea, but it also wasn't a radical one—Airbnb once offered an overnight stay at the Louvre, and another at the Musée d'Orsay. This building could be similarly enticing, the group mused, if not even more so. One of the curators said, with a tight smile, "Thanks, but it's not available." ♦

Andrew Marantz is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of "Antisocial: Online Extremists, Techno-Utopians, and the Hijacking of the American Conversation."

Aficionado Dept.

Martha Stewart Among the Superfans

The domestic goddess, *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model, and former inmate let a handful of faithful hoi polloi poke around her Westchester estate and make their very own Martha moments.

By Bob Morris

July 14, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

On an unseasonably hot Thursday, Martha Stewart presided at the head of a long patio table (from one of her furniture collections) at her estate in Katonah, New York. She was sorting through a tub of gifts made and brought by twenty-nine social-media “superfans” whom she had invited

over for the day. The items included a giant potted fern, which had been driven from Wisconsin; a jar of “Martharita” jelly; and a tea towel printed with the same sycamore tree that Stewart uses as her estate’s logo.

“Who made *this*?” Stewart asked.

“Right here, Martha!” a woman said, shooting her hand in the air.

“These look familiar—from my magazine,” Stewart said, inspecting cookies garnished with sugared flowers.

“They’re made with the ponderosa lemons you like!” a man with dots of perspiration garnishing his forehead said.

“Did you see the faux-bois pants?” someone asked. A youthful man jumped up to show how his tan trousers matched a line of faux-bois plates that Stewart had designed for Martha by Mail.

“If anyone knows a faux-bois artist, let me know,” she said, matter-of-factly.

As her guests, selected from among the most faithful followers of the Instagram fan account Martha Moments, finished glasses of Stewart’s signature green juice, she asked a helper to move croissants and hard-boiled eggs—from her heritage chickens—into the shade. Despite the heat, and a broken toe (“Jalen stepped on it in the front row of a Knicks playoff,” Stewart said), it was time for a tour. She joined her guests as her head gardener led the way. Stewart pointed out hydrangeas climbing maple trees and noted that her seven hundred and eighty peonies bloom early. Although she doomscrolls political news in bed, she did not dwell on her climate-change anxieties. (Her U.S.D.A. gardening zone recently changed from 4 to 5—an unencouraging sign.) The boxwoods, she said, needed a haircut, and she showed off her finicky new robotic lawnmowers.

“Have you named them yet?” one superfan asked.

“I won’t name them until I know I like them,” she said.

By some garden beds (“Do not pick vegetables unless authorized,” a sign warned), she extolled the asparagus and ordered immediate watering. Then, as she left the group to make some calls in her house, she spied a piece of trash on the grass. “Uh-oh,” she said.

The superfans, most of whom were about four decades younger than Stewart, who is eighty-three, continued their tour. The sights included fenced peacocks, pheasants, geese (some bite, they were cautioned), chickens, and, in a massive stable made of local stone, miniature Sicilian donkeys and Friesian horses.

Brian Utz, a thirty-nine-year-old event planner from Dallas, knew a little about the horses. “Her oldest is Rinze,” he said. “He’s twenty-eight, and when she rides him the others stay back.” Utz, who was wearing a cowboy hat with an image of Rinze branded on the brim, said that discovering *Martha Stewart Living*, in 2005, was like finding Jesus. “I was a geek interested in learning, and that’s why I call Martha ‘America’s favorite teacher,’ ” he said. “She taught us all the things our parents and grandparents couldn’t teach us.”

“Martha was my TV mom,” Jordan Munn, a private chef from Montreal, said. As a child of a single mother, he couldn’t afford Stewart’s copper cookie cutters; now he works on luxury yachts. “She taught me to make my first Pavlova when I was ten.”

In 2o14, Stewart, a Barnard graduate who worked as a model and a stockbroker before finding her calling, ended up serving five months at Alderson Federal Prison Camp, for alleged obstruction of justice. These days, she claims to be less of a perfectionist, but she still has standards, and dislikes the word “pivot.” She said that being in jail—which she called “Yale” when she was a guest on David Letterman’s show—liberated her inner bad girl.

“Everywhere I go, the kids know who I am,” she told the superfans, over a poolside paella lunch. “Kids want to learn.” She imagined a Martha A.I. avatar asking children what they want to make and spitting out a recipe for rock candy. She fielded questions about her upcoming memoir, a restaurant that she is starting at Foxwoods casino, and a collaboration with TJ Maxx.

One guest said that she'd found her beloved Martha Stewart hydrangea shower curtain at a thrift store. Carey Lowe, who makes letterpress wedding invitations in Chico, California, showed off embroidery that she had stitched on her chore coat from Tractor Supply (another Stewart collaborator).

"The crème caramel is coming," Stewart trilled, just before dessert was served.

Several guests declared it a "Martha moment." When they applauded, she waved off the accolades.

"You deserve it!" several fans cried.

"Oh, blah blah blah," she said. She was reading a text from her grandson, asking her to get him tickets to the *FIFA* Club World Cup—regular seats, not box. "He likes to sit with the people," she said. ♦

Bob Morris first contributed to the magazine in 1995. His books include "Assisted Loving: True Tales of Double Dating with My Dad" and "Bobby Wonderful."

On the Beach

Not Drowning but Waving, at a Drone

On Rockaway Beach, the whirring robots have been used to spot sharks and riptides for years. This summer, they're delivering lifesaving flotation devices directly to floundering swimmers.

By Henry Alford

July 14, 2025

Illustration by João Fazenda

The ocean: friend or foe? Although it is easy to be enthusiastic about the sea's ability to regulate climate and to produce both oxygen and delicious

marine life that goes well with melted butter, it is also easy to recognize that the sea is an uncompromising bringer of death, a hotheaded bully who is perpetually ready to rumble.

The other day in the Rockaways, on the shore at Beach Eighty-seventh Street, the ocean was exhibiting its pugilistic side: four-foot waves, strong undertow—perfect conditions for test-driving one of the city's new beach-patrol initiatives. For the past three years, New York City beaches have relied on drones to detect sharks and riptides, and now the gizmos are being used to drop flotation devices on swimmers in trouble. This summer, a stretch of the Rockaways will be patrolled by two all-terrain vehicles, each bearing a drone pilot as well as a rescue swimmer, who can assist lifeguards as needed.

A correspondent who had volunteered to pose as a swimmer in distress cast a wary eye at the surf.

"What kind of a swimmer are you?" a ruddy Fire Department captain holding a walkie-talkie asked him. (The drone program is a collaboration between four city agencies; the F.D.N.Y.'s drones are piloted by its robotics division.)

Before the correspondent could say "slow and steady," the captain barked, "All right, you'll wear a flotation vest just in case."

John Wakie, a firefighter who would be piloting the drone, demonstrated its payload of two rescue devices, called "restubes": lightweight, six-inch-long tubes (resembling Totes travel umbrellas) that, on contact with water, inflate into a pair of foot-long, log-shaped flotation devices. "Usually, I try to drop the restubes within arm's reach of the swimmer," Wakie told the correspondent. "But my goal today is to drop them on your head. If they're too far away from you, you're not going to be able to grab them. So for the sake of this drill I won't drop until I see you look downward, so they don't hit you on your face." Suddenly, the mandated flotation vest seemed like a terrific idea.

The two firefighters instructed the correspondent to swim out from shore, past seven sets of breakers, where a scrum of surfers lingered astride their

boards. The correspondent entered the water, which was fifty-seven degrees, and laboriously swam about a hundred and fifty feet out, whereupon he started waving his arms at Wakie and his colleagues on the shore.

At a press conference this spring, Mayor Eric Adams, upon hearing that the drone pilots might be able to communicate with swimmers via loudspeaker, mused that he himself should supply the audio, “because I have a calming voice.” So the flailing correspondent found himself imagining the Mayor’s Brooklyn rasp booming “Daddy’s here!” from on high.

Ninety seconds later, the correspondent heard a whirring sound as the drone —a two-foot-wide black “X,” equipped with four propellers—flew to a position fifteen feet directly above him, sounding like a hummingbird that had mistaken his ear for a petunia. As instructed, the correspondent looked downward. Seconds later, the two restubes landed near him and burst to life.

Placing the restubes under his armpits, the correspondent bobbed for two minutes and then noticed a rescue swimmer hurtling toward him with a big orange buoy. “Let go of those and hold on to this!” the swimmer, an F.D.N.Y. employee, said. He then grabbed the correspondent around the chest and gracefully escorted him to shore.

Back on the beach, the correspondent towelled himself off and waited for his heart to unhammer. An F.D.N.Y. lieutenant, William Pitta, walked over to him and pointed out to sea, near where the rescue drill had just taken place.

“Lifeguards just pulled three people out of the water on the other side of that jetty,” Pitta said. “They got stuck in a rip current and got dragged out.”

Given that there was no signage on the beach about the new drones, the correspondent decided to spread the word among beachgoers so that, if they were ever imperilled while swimming, they would know that the objects raining from the sky were not part of a secret Totes ad campaign. All the sunbathers whom the correspondent talked to were intrigued. One swimmer thrust her arms skyward and said, “Praise technology!” The only aberrant response came from a gaunt middle-aged man on a towel. “I don’t really

swim, so it doesn’t affect me,” he said, appearing to be in search of the calm to be found at the intersection of ultraviolet rays and the latest Sally Rooney novel. “But I’m still waiting for a delivery from Amazon.” ♦

Henry Alford, a humorist and a journalist, has contributed to The New Yorker since 1998. He is the author of the Joni Mitchell biography “I Dream of Joni.”

Reporting & Essays

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  By Jessica Winter | In working through the Winter case files, I often felt pinpricks of déjà vu: an exact turn of phrase, an absurdly specific expenditure.
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- **A Family Doctor’s Search for Salvation**
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The Sporting Scene

The Annual Agony of Yearning for a Homegrown Wimbledon Champion

Each year, Britain sends forth its best young men and women, no matter how good at tennis they actually are.

By Sam Knight

July 12, 2025

Jack Draper, ranked No. 4 in the world, came into the tournament as a plausible contender. It didn't go well.Photographs by Anton Gottlob for The New Yorker

On the first Tuesday of Wimbledon, with hot evening sunshine lighting up the deuce court, Jack Draper, the fourth seed in the gentlemen's singles, was playing disconcertingly well. He was on serve in his opening match and, as he said later, "I was getting my tennis together a little bit." Draper, who is twenty-three, was the No. 1-ranked British player in this year's competition, which is not an uncomplicated place to be. Britain is a nation that ignores professional tennis for fifty weeks of the year and then focusses, raptly, on the beauty and skill on display at the All England Lawn Tennis and Croquet Club, as if the event were an extremely successful garden party to which not everyone has been invited. The great British public, in floral dresses and

questionable hats, will peer through the hedge if necessary. And this year it was Draper they wanted to see.

In the first round, he faced Sebastián Báez, an Argentinean ranked thirty-eighth in the world. Báez is deft but diminutive. Draper, who is about the size of a telephone box, was too strong for him; Draper broke Báez's serve twice in the opening five games. When he was up 4–1, the crowd on Court 1 searched for ways to connect to him emotionally. After last summer's Wimbledon, Draper enjoyed a breakout year: he reached the semifinals of the U.S. Open and won the BNP Paribas Open, at Indian Wells, in March. He rose from twenty-sixth in the world to fourth. This meant that he arrived at the tournament as a specimen of unusual rarity: a plausible British contender, largely unknown to his public. "Come on, Jack!" two teen-age girls yelled in unison, to make themselves heard. "Come on, Drapes!" a man's voice called, reaching for familiarity.

A Wimbledon crowd is almost always engaged in a performance of middle-class English civility. Its default expression is modest applause. This might be for anything. It also quite likes shushing. (When the umpire reminds people to turn off their cellphones, there is an opportunity to combine the two.) A Wimbledon crowd also roars and shrieks with abandon, as and when the occasion requires. But its favorite mood, by far, is one of mild titillation, which arises whenever something slightly out of the ordinary occurs—a ball flies into the crowd, a baffled bird pecks at the service line, a champagne cork enters the field of play—and a burr of chatter rips round the court. Draper, up 30–love against Báez, sent a forehand into the corner that was so neat in its curve, so complete in its unanswerableness, that the crowd was very briefly silenced altogether. When Draper closed the game out with an ace, Court 1 frankly *erupted* in polite conversation.

Wimbledon has a curious relationship with its homegrown players. Male British dominance of lawn tennis came to an abrupt end in 1910, when A. F. Wilding, New Zealand's first and so far only Grand Slam singles winner, turned up in London on a motorcycle, with a sidecar, and won the first of four consecutive championships. Wilding was killed in the trenches, in France, in May, 1915. ("A hearty burst of laughter" emanated from Wilding's dugout, according to the *Daily Telegraph's* tennis correspondent,

just before a shell landed on it.) There have been only two male British Wimbledon singles champions since, including, most recently, Andy Murray, who won it twice.

For decades, Britain's women fared better, regularly winning championships deep into the twentieth century. That run ended with Virginia Wade, however, in 1977. What occurs now at the All England Club each year is that a brilliant foreigner turns up, demolishes the competition, and is taken to the nation's heart: Suzanne Lenglen, the balletic French star of the nineteen-twenties; Serena Williams, in the two-thousands; Carlos Alcaraz, the Spaniard hoping to win his third Wimbledon in a row this year.

And yet the annual British tribute—the sending forth of its best young men and women, however good at tennis they actually are—is a crucial, if not quite central, part of the championships. British players fulfill at least two ritual functions at Wimbledon. Tennis is stressful: stressful to play, stressful to watch. When you are dangerously immersed in the sport, for hours a day, after not paying attention for the previous eleven and a half months, it's necessary to have a place to put your feelings. Robert Osborn, an early thinker on lawn tennis, was also a religious scholar. "Until the very last stroke of a game has been played, there remains the possibility—the hope—that past failures may be redeemed by sudden and continuous success," he wrote in 1881.

Second: What the British middle classes enjoy, more than anything, is being useful. There is no real point in cheering for Novak Djokovic. Jannik Sinner does not need you. The quintessential British Wimbledon competitor of modern times was Tim Henman, a slender serve-and-volley craftsman, who raised his level, improbably, every summer, lifted by a collective act of national yearning. Henman's life changed in the first round in 1996, when he was losing 3–5 in the fifth set, on his serve, facing two match points against Yevgeny Kafelnikov, the French Open champion. Henman was twenty-one years old. "As I walked back to the baseline, I said to myself, in a split second, 'There's been a lot of very good British losers on Centre Court,' " he told me recently. "I remember saying to myself, 'I don't want to be a part of that.' "

Henman served two consecutive aces and went on to win the match. He reached four Wimbledon semifinals and lost them all. “He is the first human being called Tim to achieve anything at all,” Martin Amis wrote for this magazine, in June, 1997. British players say that they love Wimbledon. “The question I’m asked most often about my career is ‘How did you deal with the pressure?’ ” Henman said. “I revelled in it. I loved it. If I could have played my whole career on one court, it would have been Centre Court.” And why not? Wimbledon is glamorous and fun. This year, there were oversized tennis racquets on sale in the club shop for six hundred pounds and candles that offered a scent of fresh-cut grass. The stadium food consisted of poke bowls with cured chalk-stream trout and po’boy sandwiches with popcorn-fried cauliflower. Players were given iced towels, to help them cope with the unusual heat.

Still, no player knows how she will cope until the nation’s hopes fall on her. The current chair of the All England Club is Debbie Jevans, a sports administrator who helped deliver the 2012 London Olympics. In 1979, when Jevans was nineteen, she played Wade in the fourth round of Wimbledon. “I was sort of meant to be the next great thing,” Jevans told me, a few days before the tournament began. We were in her office, which has carpets the color of milky tea, emblazoned with black tennis racquets. Wade won, 6–1, 6–2. “I tried as hard as I could,” Jevans said. “But I knew I could have done better if I had been in a better place mentally.”

Draper is naturally right-handed, but he plays with his left. Until his late teens, he was comparatively small, and so he developed a patient, defensive style of tennis, built around his two-handed backhand, to which his right hand lent some extra power. A late growth spurt—he is six feet four—led to years of injuries. But it also created a player whose game is complex and difficult to read. One of his trademark shots is a “can-opener” serve, wide to a right-handed player’s backhand side, that can send an opponent off the court entirely. Other players are loud and expressive on court; Draper will say “Yup,” sharply, when an opponent’s shot lands out, and otherwise grunts and gasps in a mostly private way, like someone fixing a pipe under a sink.

In the run-up to Wimbledon, Draper said absolutely nothing out of turn. In person, he is large-limbed but contained. He is a jock who might have got a little fucked up last night but is now being polite to someone's parents. (He might also be about to eat the contents of their fridge.) "I'll keep trying to do my best, to try improving, to show my best tennis out there, to hopefully present myself as the player and the person I want to be," Draper said in a news conference, just before the tournament began. His careful language didn't make any difference to the role that he had been cast in. As I left the media center, I overheard Rob Maul, a tennis writer for the *Sun*, Britain's biggest tabloid, talking on his phone: "He's got the pressure of the whole nation on his shoulders."

Against Báez, Draper played like the person he wanted to be. In the first game of the second set, he broke Báez again—mixing drop shots with another perfect forehand drive that dipped inside the baseline as if it were on a bombing run. Pulled this way and that, Báez slipped on the turf. There was rich applause for Draper's winners, leavened with the faintest unease: But does he actually need us? In the fifth game, Draper pressured Báez's serve again. When a Báez shot landed out, bringing the score to deuce, Draper gave a loud, slightly officious "Yup."

Báez retired early in the third set, having been broken again. He shuffled off court, leaving Draper to pack his bags in front of his new and tentatively adoring public. There was a touch of awkwardness, as if no one knew quite what to do or say. Draper threw a towel into the crowd. He stepped up to the waiting microphone. "How do you deal with all that feeling of pressure?" Rishi Persad, the on-court interviewer for the BBC, promptly asked. "I don't think about it," Draper replied. "Until people mention it every five minutes."

There were twenty-three British singles players in the first round of Wimbledon this year, the most since 1984. (That year, only Jo Durie made it past the third round.) The gentlemen contenders ranged from Draper to Oliver Tarvet, a rising senior at the University of San Diego, who was ranked seven hundred and thirty-third in the world and who likes to journal on court to process what he is feeling.

On the opening morning of the tournament, Tarvet played on Court 4, against Leandro Riedi, a Swiss journeyman. Court 4 is one of Wimbledon's lesser courts, tucked alongside a walkway that goes under the raked seating of Court 3. As the morning progressed, the walkway became more or less impassable as the crowd thickened to watch Tarvet and Riedi slugging away. Tarvet won in three sets; Riedi compared him to a wall. Tarvet spent most of the ensuing news conference figuring out how to spend his hundred thousand pounds or so of prize money, in order to comply with N.C.A.A. regulations. "I've got to find sixty thousand, seventy thousand pounds of expenses," he said. "Hopefully, I can make that happen. . . . Pay my coaches a little bit extra? I don't know. We'll figure something out. Fly business class."

The British women were led by Emma Raducanu and Katie Boulter, two players with similar rankings—fortieth and forty-third—but whose careers have followed contrasting trajectories. Four years ago, Raducanu reached the last sixteen of Wimbledon and won the U.S. Open as an eighteen-year-old qualifier. Since then, she has been hampered by injuries, poor form, and an unhealthy level of attention. In February, a man who had been stalking her was removed from the crowd at a tournament in Dubai.

Boulter, who is twenty-eight, spent years hovering around the hundredth ranking before adjusting her game, adding a note of patience. Boulter and Raducanu play doubles together and came into Wimbledon speaking of liberation. "I'm kind of like a dark horse, and I like that feeling," Boulter said. "I do like the fact that I can go out and swing free." She beat the ninth seed, Paula Badosa, on Centre Court, in the first round. Raducanu dispatched Mimi Xu, a seventeen-year-old British wild card, in straight sets.

The next-highest-ranked British woman was Sonay Kartal, a compact, counterpunching player who trains in Brighton, on England's southern coast. Karts, as she is known, recently broke into the top hundred and was barely talked about before the tournament. "I've kind of just been left in my own little lane to get along," she told reporters. I watched Kartal lose the opening three games of her first-round match, against Jelena Ostapenko, the twentieth seed, from Latvia. Kartal, who was born in 2001, was wearing a boxy outfit inspired by the nineties, one of her favorite historical periods.

The sun was oppressive and Ostapenko was stupendous. She had beaten Kartal with no problems in the Eastbourne Open, six days earlier. I got up and left. Kartal won in three sets.

People camp out in the queue for tickets to the tournament.

The eldest of the British pack was Dan Evans, who was playing in his tenth Wimbledon. Evans is thirty-five, and he almost called time on his career earlier this year. “It’s scary, at the end of the day, to know sometimes you’re not good enough,” he told reporters, on the eve of the championships.

But form is a fickle thing. At Queen’s, the grass-court tournament that traditionally precedes Wimbledon, Evans knocked out Frances Tiafoe, the seventh seed. The following week, in Eastbourne, he beat Tommy Paul, who was ranked a hundred and fifty-seven places above him. Evans is a busy player, tetchy and alert. He grew up working class in the Hall Green neighborhood of Birmingham. He shouts “*Vamos!*” and “*Allez!*” after hitting winners. The only time Evans seems truly serene is when he is playing a backhand slice—my favorite shot on a grass court. The net seems to lower, obligingly. The ball slows, the air thickens, and summer stops, then accelerates again.

Evans has reached the third round of Wimbledon three times. He asks not to play on Court 3, because it is underneath a balcony from which the other players often watch. “I think it’s mythical, a bit, about the pressure at Wimbledon,” he told me. Fifteen of the British players at this year’s championships were given a wild card by the All England Club. “In all honesty,” he said, “if you’ve not got a chance of winning the tournament, there is actually not a lot of pressure on you from anybody else.”

Senior players, such as Evans (who went out in the second round, to Djokovic), have long observed that it doesn't matter how many British players there are at Wimbledon—what counts is the level at which they play. "If British people come here and they watch Jack win and Emma win," he said, of Draper and Raducanu, "but they watch seven Brits lose, they're not going to be bothered about British tennis." Wimbledon gives ninety per cent of its profits to Britain's Lawn Tennis Association, to encourage participation in the sport and to support the next generation of élite players. For years, the L.T.A. has been criticized for focussing its resources on a handful of promising juniors—who are invariably from "tennis families" and have already benefitted from years of expensive coaching—rather than funding a broader-based approach.

"I just don't think there's a chance for people from working-class backgrounds to get into the sport," Evans said, after he was knocked out of the French Open in 2023. Britain's National Tennis Centre, which opened in 2007 and was designed to nurture the next Murray (the country's sole multiple Grand Slam winner of the last generation), is widely regarded as a failure. Increasingly, young male players of potential—such as Tarvet; Jacob Fearnley, the fifty-first-ranked player, who lost in the first round at Wimbledon; and Cameron Norrie, a semifinalist in 2022—are choosing the U.S.-college route to the professional game. Draper is an exception, for being an entirely British-made contender. His father, Roger, was the chief executive of the L.T.A.

Murray was like Banquo's ghost at this year's Wimbledon. He retired from tennis last summer, nineteen years after his début at the championships. Two days before this year's tournament began, he drove past the venue and, for the first time since he put away his racquet, he wished that he were playing. The following evening, he was onstage, reminiscing with fans, at the New Wimbledon Theatre, a gilded Edwardian auditorium that opened near the start of Wilding's winning streak.

“How long will it take you to develop a sixth sense for which of my clothes don’t go in the dryer?” Cartoon by Tom Toro

One of the reasons Murray triumphed at Wimbledon is that he is an extremely obdurate and literal person. He follows many sports and observed that, in almost all of them, home advantage is a real phenomenon, so he concluded that the hype, the hoopla, the dull, obsessional parsing of his dual British-Scottish identity that accompanied his every attempt to win seven successive matches at the All England Club must be helping him, too. His legs may have been shaking, but he was able to keep his identity and his ground strokes intact. On the night of July 10, 2016, after he won Wimbledon for the second time—an achievement for which he was knighted, three years later—Murray stopped off at a McDonald’s on his way to the annual players’ ball. “I don’t know about you, but, when I want to celebrate, I don’t eat, like, canapés,” he told his fans.

Murray also knew that until the very moment that a Djokovic backhand hit the net cord in the last game of the 2013 final—thereby breaking the seventy-seven-year curse on British gentlemen—he had failed. “That’s how it felt,” he said. The year before, Murray had felt ready to win, then lost to Roger Federer in the final. It is still upsetting for many British tennis fans to watch Murray’s interview on court after that match. “I’m going to try this, and it’s not going to be easy,” he said, before covering his face with his hand. Murray explained in the theatre that after that loss it took him several days to feel ready to go outside. When he did, he walked down to Wimbledon village with his partner, Kim Sears. A car pulled up beside them and the driver called out, “Loser.”

Draper's opponent in the next round was Marin Čilić, a thirty-six-year-old Croatian, who reached the Wimbledon final in 2017. Čilić is a tall and languid player, with a game well suited to grass. But he has struggled with a persistent knee injury, and this was his first appearance at the championships in four years. According to my Wimbledon app, which was powered by data from I.B.M., Draper had an eighty-six-per-cent chance of victory.

I don't think Čilić checked the app. From the opening exchanges, the Croatian was hitting the ball cleanly and true; Draper hustled to keep up. In the fourth game, there were signs that Draper's rhythm was off: he hit three lets on his first serve and didn't go for a Čilić shot that landed on the baseline. Three points later, the ball flew off Draper's frame for deuce. "Come on, Jack!" "Come on, J.D.!" After the alienating efficiency of the first-round win, Draper's tennis was more relatable. British stomachs tightened as he saved a break point and then barrelled down a hundred-and-thirty-four-mile-per-hour serve for the game. "C'mon!" Draper yelled, tightly.

Four games later, Čilić went after Draper's serve again, sending big, cruising forehands that the British player could not cope with. Draper's own forehand was misfiring, while his backhand—the dependable shot of his younger self—lacked the power to disturb someone in Čilić's frame of mind. Down love–40, Draper won the following five points. But the effort drained him. The next time he served, he lost the set. One of the disadvantages for British players at Wimbledon is that it is pretty much everyone else's favorite tennis tournament, too. "I'm aware that I'm playing well," Čilić said afterward. "It's nothing unusual."

The second set slithered away from Draper. "The points are going by so quickly," he said later. "I feel like every ball is on my feet on the returns." He fought back to win the third and, for a time, he played furiously and well, like a man who had been stuck in terrible traffic and now the roads were finally clear. But he was still late. When the crowd wasn't baying in support, an astonishing silence fell on Court 1, punctuated by the smallest sounds: a ball being bounced on the turf at the far end of the seventy-eight-foot court; birdsong; a door closing somewhere far away.

If hope persists until the last point of a tennis match, then fear does, too. As Draper was serving at 15–30 in the fourth set, 4–5 down, it was suddenly transparent that he was two points away from leaving the tournament. Čilić took a breath that was deep enough to be heard in the stands, and then won the match. When Draper appeared in the media center a few minutes later, his body hung with sadness. He lost in the second round of Wimbledon last year as well, but he hadn't been the main hope then. He seemed stunned by how difficult this was going to be. "I mean, it makes me think that Andy's achievement of what he did, winning here twice," Draper said, not far from tears. "Just unbelievable."

According to "A People's History of Tennis" (2020), by David Berry, lawn tennis probably became inevitable following the invention of the lawnmower, in 1827, and the vulcanization of rubber, in the eighteen-forties. Someone had to dream it up, however, and that was Major Walter Wingfield, who began advertising portable lawn-tennis kits for sale in March, 1874. Wingfield's vision was almost complete from the outset. He only got wrong the shape of the court (his was an hourglass) and the name (he wanted to call his game Σφαιριστική, ancient Greek for "belonging to the ball").

Unusually for a Victorian sportsman, Wingfield marketed his game equally to men and women, and the fad spread rapidly through the gardens of England and beyond. Three years after Wingfield's first kits went on sale, Henry James was in Warwickshire when he came across a party of graceful young folk, playing on a "cushiony lawn" next to a rectory. One of the girls was a twelve-year-old named Maud Watson, who became the first Wimbledon ladies' champion, in 1884.

I met Berry for lunch one day during the championships, at the Centenary Seafood restaurant, which overlooks Court 7 and offers a sharing platter of trout, crevettes, dressed crab, and Severn & Wye smoked mackerel for seventy pounds. Berry learned to play tennis on a public court near the housing project where he grew up, in Berkshire. He first visited Wimbledon in 1968, to see Rod Laver. It rained all day and he went home. When Berry returned, fourteen years later, it was as a contributor to *Marxism Today*.

Berry spent most of his career as a documentary-maker for the BBC. For many years, he was skeptical of the exclusivity of Wimbledon and the implied superiority of the All England Club's hyper-kempt lawns. (Centre Court is out of bounds even to the club's own members.) But he came to admire how one of the world's great sporting occasions rests on top of a small, suburban tennis club, with three hundred and seventy-five fanatical members. "It is bizarre," Berry said. The membership fee is a closely held secret, but it is thought to be only a few hundred pounds a year. "That creates a sort of lower-middle-class gentility. It's almost so clever the way they've done it that they couldn't have planned it," Berry said. "Somehow they've kept the great values of the British middle classes, which are around tolerance, politeness, and the great word that people use most in tennis, which is 'sorry.' "

The suburban safeness of Wimbledon, characterized by its love of tradition and slightly appalling taste (pale woods and gold, plus geraniums everywhere), also helps to inspire the unspoken fatalism around the chances of almost every British player. The club is pervaded by "that kind of English sense that you're not really expected to do well and that's O.K.," Berry added, consolingly. "It's probably better, because nothing gets disturbed."

"Wimbledon is accessible, but aspirational," Jevans, the chair of the All England Club, said, when we met. The tournament is proud to offer a chance to queue up for same-day tickets; a grounds pass for a day of tennis costs thirty pounds. You can bring your own food and drink. The experience is especially accessible to those who excel at the two most ancient English sports of all, which are standing in line for hours and never needing to go to the bathroom. (If you give up your seat at an outer court during a hotly contested match, you are not getting it back.)

Emma Raducanu won the U.S. Open as an eighteen-year-old qualifier, but at this year's Wimbledon she went out in the third round.

One afternoon, by the line for strawberries and cream, I fell into conversation with Belinda Donaldson, who was in her late sixties and had come to the tournament, by her estimate, about twenty times. Donaldson, who was from Tooting Bec, in South London, had joined the line for a grounds pass at five o'clock that morning with her daughter and a friend. "No one pushes. Nobody queue-jumps," she said. (The guide for the queue is five pages long.) "Whoever we turned up with at five was still in front of us and behind us when we got in, at eleven," Donaldson said. "There was no rubbish. Very clean." When I asked if she thought that the British population put unreasonable expectations on its players, she looked slightly startled. "No," she replied. "You have to win every game you play, whether it's a game of cards. You go to win. Sorry, you probably don't want me to say that. Do you?"

It's not for everyone, of course. That evening, I came across Esteban Fernandez, a financial consultant, sitting alone in the front row of Court 8. A grounds team, working in unison, was brushing down the baseline with wooden brooms. Fernandez had taken his shoes off and was having a beer. He had come over from Dublin, where he works, and joined the queue for two successive mornings, waiting for seven hours the first time and more than ten hours that day. "For me, the queue is not a very efficient system, O.K.?" he said.

He looked at the freshly swept court. "It's still very British," he said. "The way they move, the way they speak, how everything is organized." I asked him how he had spent all that time waiting, and he lowered his voice and

confessed that he had sneaked into London and gone to a museum for a few hours before returning to his place in the line. Nobody else had moved. He asked me not to reveal where he was from. “That wasn’t British at all,” he said.

On the seventh day, it rained. A thunderstorm moved over the grounds, and the roofs on Centre Court and Court 1 were closed, encasing the tennis inside. Twenty-one of the twenty-three British players had been knocked out. The night after Draper lost, Raducanu played one of her best matches in years, against Aryna Sabalenka, the world No. 1. Raducanu was lithe and aggressive. She had a set point in the first-set tiebreak and was up a break in the second. But Sabalenka, who plays smoothly and fast, pausing only—on occasion and in outrage—to marvel at her rare errors, was unstoppable. She pretended that the crowd was cheering for her. The two British survivors to make it to the fourth round were Kartal, the counterpuncher from Brighton, and Norrie, the former semifinalist.

Kartal was experiencing her first contact with the British media’s wish-fulfillment complex. At the news conference after her third-round win, she took a barrage of questions about her tattoos, her musical taste, whether she had a partner, and her proficiency in Turkish. (Her father is from Turkey.) Was tennis always her chosen sport? It was. Kartal had never played on Centre Court before her last-sixteen match against Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, a Russian veteran eleven years her senior. Kartal visited the court in the morning with her phone, to take some pictures and to visualize what would be happening. “It’s not easy coming out on Centre Court as a Brit,” she said later.

The match was scrappy and turned on a line call. This year, for the first time, Wimbledon had no line judges. (During *Covid*, the Australian Open and the U.S. Open switched to automated Hawk-Eye line-calling.) At 4–4 in the first set, a Kartal backhand dropped clearly behind the baseline, and Pavlyuchenkova thought she had won the game. No call came. The umpire asked the players to replay the point. Kartal ended up breaking Pavlyuchenkova’s serve. The Russian lost her temper. “I don’t know if it’s something to do because she’s local,” she mused, after the match. “But, yeah, that was a particular moment.”

“I remember those days of being wild and remote.”
Cartoon by Colin Tom

Pavlyuchenkova channelled her anger. She broke Kartal’s serve the following game and raised a silent fist to the crowd. Then she won a tiebreak. After Pavlyuchenkova wrapped up the second set, I snuck out, into the rain and over to Court 1, where Norrie was two sets up against Nicolás Jarry, a tall, huge-serving Chilean, whose world ranking had fallen from sixteen to a hundred and fifty in the past year, after a case of vestibular neuritis, an inner-ear condition that resulted in an unsettling rolling sensation.

Jarry was having an emotional tournament. In the previous round, he had beaten João Fonseca, a gifted young Brazilian, progressing to the stage that his grandfather Jaime Fillol had reached in 1974. “I came here with him when I was ten years old and eleven,” Jarry said. “Since then, I’m in love with this tournament.” His balance was steady, for now. But he wasn’t enjoying playing against Norrie, who has a reputation for gamesmanship. When I took my seat, Jarry was complaining to the umpire about the Briton’s prolonged ball-bouncing before his second serve: “Do you have to intervene there, or do I have to suck it?”

Before the tournament, Norrie had told me that what he associated with Wimbledon was its sounds: the polite ecstasy of the crowds, the progression of a tennis shot from strings to grass to strings. “The acoustics of the ball coming through,” he said. “The whole history of the club just kind of takes

you away.” In his matches, Norrie had adopted a technique, popularized by Murray, of choosing a few raucous fans in the crowd and seeking to draw energy from them. During the third set against Jarry, Norrie gesticulated often at a row of young men just in front of me, who were urging him on. “Come on, Cam!” “Let’s go, Noz!” “Break him, baby!” Norrie walks with his feet slightly splayed. His backhand stays unusually low over the net. His second serve is often slower than ninety miles an hour. His philosophy of tennis is to embrace every aspect. “If it’s a cheap point, I was enjoying it. If it was a long rally, I was enjoying it. If I had a forehand winner, I was enjoying it,” he said later. “He served forty-six aces in the match, and I didn’t want to let that bother me.”

Jarry was hitting for the lines and Norrie was scurrying after, shovelling the ball back into play. Just when it seemed as if Norrie were out of ideas, he would produce an immaculate passing shot and whip the crowd up further. In the second game of the fifth set, he broke Jarry after a rattling exchange in which the Chilean pushed the ball long.

Norrie doesn’t have the ability of Murray, or Raducanu, or Draper, but he had a grasp of the occasion, of the role he was playing and what his people longed to see. The last point of the match was tremendous. At 5–3, Norrie was up 40–love. The rally went on for fourteen shots before Jarry advanced to the net. Norrie aimed a backhand down the line that Jarry dived at vainly, falling on the perfect turf. Norrie had an instant to decide, and he decided that he would throw himself to the grass as well. It was performative. It verged on bad taste. “It was a well-deserved fall,” Norrie insisted later. (Jarry didn’t like it.) Alcaraz beat Norrie two days later, in the quarterfinals. But, for a second or two, Norrie lay on his back, the noise rained down, and Britain had its champion for the year. ♦

Sam Knight is a London-based staff writer at The New Yorker. His first book is "The Premonitions Bureau: A True Account of Death Foretold."

Personal History

What I Inherited from My Criminal Great-Grandparents

In working through the Winter case files, I often felt pinpricks of déjà vu: an exact turn of phrase, an absurdly specific expenditure.

By Jessica Winter

July 14, 2025

My great-grandfather Anton Winter pleaded guilty to counterfeiting in federal court. He was sentenced to seven years of hard labor at a penitentiary in Auburn, in upstate New York, and was fined five thousand dollars.Photograph courtesy Atlanta Federal Penitentiary / The National Archives at Atlanta

Around sunset on a rainy Saturday in November, 1906, a woman walked the streets of Rochester, in western New York State, trying to off-load a stack of counterfeit two-dollar bills. She looked about forty, tall, broad in the beam, with dark eyes and dark hair; she wore a black fascinator and a long brown coat. At a grocery store, she traded one of the bills for a box of

graham crackers. On a main drag, she bought children's clothes: an undershirt, a pair of drawers.

A mile southeast, her fortunes cooled. When she offered one of her notes at a butcher's shop, the clerk "discovered it was a counterfeit, she said she had no other money and left the meat," according to a report by L. William Gammon, a U.S. Secret Service agent on the woman's trail. At a drygoods store, where she attempted to buy a pair of child's stockings and garters, a clerk was sent out on the pretext of making change, but he was really seeking a policeman. The "woman shover," as Agent Gammon referred to her, slipped away before she could be apprehended.

None of the shopkeepers seemed to recognize her; she steered clear of stores in her own neighborhood, in the north of the city. Depending on the witness, she had either "large features" or "very large features." One clerk wondered if she was a man. A more exacting witness recalled a prominent gold crown in her left lower jaw.

After the Rochester *Democrat and Chronicle* reported that the Secret Service was investigating the fake bills, the woman in the fascinator wasn't spotted for weeks. Meanwhile, word spread among local merchants about the bad deuces in circulation. On December 22nd, she rematerialized at a bakery, and then at a shoe store, with a two-dollar bill in hand. A clerk summoned a policeman. In his daily report, Gammon celebrated the arrest of "Mrs. Selma Winter of 108 Carter Street for attempting to pass a Counterfeit $2.00 United States Silver Certificate."

In telling this tale, I am tempted to stop here, at a point where it is still plausible that Selma Winter, who was my great-grandmother, might have become a Bonnie Parker or a Mata Hari of the lost counterfeiting arts—statuesque and mysterious, apprenticing on small bills, trying to move stealthily among regular townsfolk. But Selma's real story was something else, and, long before I ever wrote it down, I have wondered if it was written on me.

Selma's parents were immigrants from Germany, and so was her husband, Anton de Winter, as he was listed on the manifest of the Edam, the ship that brought him to Ellis Island, in 1896. He was in his mid-twenties, apparently

travelling alone. He seems to have left no footprints behind in Germany, nor can I locate any trace of his parents or siblings. For all the records show, he could have been entirely self-invented, the first of the family line: the ur-Winter.

He ended up in Erie, in western Pennsylvania, a growing manufacturing center—boilers, engines, metalworks—with a large German community, and he found work as a typesetter at the German-language newspaper that Selma's family owned. Anton and Selma married after a brief courtship, apparently against her parents' wishes. She was twenty-nine, a few years older than Anton, whose stated birth date fluctuated. Anton's in-laws, the Brandts, were a raucous bunch (one of Selma's brothers had racked up a number of arrests—for arson, libel, and "creating a disturbance" in an alderman's office). In 1898, Anton brought assault-and-battery charges against Selma's father and a different brother; they were found guilty and paid a small fine. Anton later alleged that the Brandts had swindled him out of investments he'd made in the newspaper, and that he and Selma "were actually thrown into the street" by her family when she was pregnant with their first child.

Anton soon got a position at another German-language newspaper, in Rochester, and they settled there. They gave their sons noble names: Arthur, Valor, Hugo, and the youngest, Earl Lohengrin Winter, my grandfather. His middle name is shared with the son and heir of Parzival, the knight of the Holy Grail in German Arthurian romance.

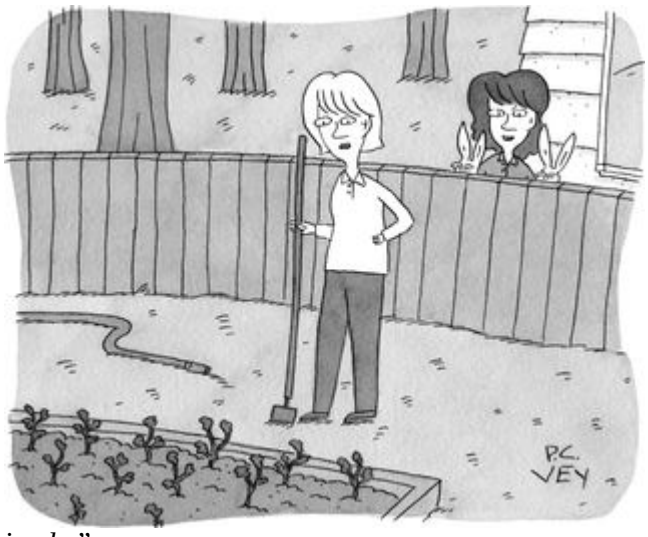
The only known image of my great-grandparents together is itself something of a counterfeit—it's a sepia-toned composite of two photographs, dates unknown. Selma is corseted and upholstered in the silhouette of the late nineteenth century, her hair fashioned in a high, tight bun and tidy bangs. Anton slouches beside her, draped in an inverness cape, brandishing a cigarette and smirking beneath a rogue's mustache. The image could be a tintype from a late-Victorian play about a confidence man who preys on wealthy young widows. I want to tell Selma to hike up her petticoats and run for the hills.

They seem to have fallen into counterfeiting almost by accident. Anton hoped to open his own photoengraving shop, and racked up debt buying

machinery and other materials. He claimed that a house fire consumed all of the family's possessions; Anton had no insurance and fell deeper into debt. When he lost the lease on an apartment, he later wrote, "it was then that the idea entered my mind" to forge treasury notes.

He chose the two-dollar bill because it was the highest denomination he had on hand. Although Agent Gammon later portrayed Anton as a skilled engraver, his counterfeits were shoddy: he made lithographic prints of the front and back of a real two-dollar certificate, glued them together, and then added red and blue ink marks. The bills would not have had the same weight and tactile quality as genuine certificates, which were made under the immense force of a steel intaglio press, giving the paper a subtly grooved texture.

Even if Anton and Selma's counterfeits had been more convincing, it's unlikely that they would have eluded the Javert-like Gammon and the small-business owners of Rochester for very long. Commerce at the time was highly localized; Selma's daily shopping orbit would have run to family-owned stores within a few blocks of her home. "No one knew her, which would have been helpful in terms of passing the notes initially," Stephen Mihm, a professor of history at the University of Georgia and the author of "A Nation of Counterfeiters," told me. "But then everyone would remember the stranger who came in."



"Say hello to my little friends."
Cartoon by P. C. Vey

Some women shovers would bring babies or children with them, “so that they would seem like harried, overwhelmed mothers, and perhaps authentically so,” Mihm said. “The children oftentimes functioned as a kind of diversion.” My great-grandmother had four little boys at home, ages eight, six, four, and two. But she worked alone.

When Selma did not return home on the evening of December 22, 1906, Anton panicked and burned the printing plates and the remaining counterfeit bills. The following day, Agent Gammon conducted a search of the Winter home, where he “found no counterfeit money or plates but a very large amount of machinery and cameras” that filled an entire room.

He also found my grandfather and his three older brothers living in abject conditions. “I have never been in a house where there was such poverty and filthy in the furnishings,” Gammon wrote. He went on, “They had absolutely nothing and he”—meaning Anton—“was evidently putting all his money in machinery.” A representative from the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children reported that the boys often lacked warm clothing or food, and that Anton “frequently threatened to commit suicide or to kill the children. These threats were made whenever Winter was irritated, and Mrs. Winter lived constantly in fear of some violent act.”

When Anton was placed under arrest, in Gammon’s telling, “he went all to pieces and wanted a gun to kill himself.” Gammon also reported that Anton intended to poison himself. The Christmas Eve edition of the *Democrat and Chronicle* blared, “*SECRET SERVICE MEN SURPRISE ALLEGED COUNTERFEITER AS HE IS ABOUT TO END HIS LIFE WITH CYANIDE OF POTASSIUM.*” Anton had written a suicide note in which he admitted that he had contemplated murdering his children before doing away with himself.

In the note, Anton absolved Selma of any conscious role in his counterfeiting plot. He asked her to tell their sons that “their father had a good heart,” and that terrible circumstances had “forced him to become a so-called criminal. Then I am also sure of being well-remembered by them.”

Gammon arranged for the boys to be taken to the Rochester Humane Society's shelter for abandoned children. "I know this is about the first good meal and lodging that they have ever had and they are better off where they are at the present time," he wrote. On Christmas Day, the *Democrat and Chronicle* reported that the boys would "be turned over to the Children's Aid Society, which will find homes for them in Protestant families." Before that could happen, though, Selma's parents intervened. They took the three older boys into their home, in Erie, sometime in early 1907. But they left two-year-old Earl behind in the Rochester shelter.

Anton pleaded guilty to counterfeiting in federal court. He was sentenced to seven years of hard labor at a penitentiary in Auburn, in upstate New York, and was fined five thousand dollars; he was later transferred to the federal prison in Atlanta. In his mug shot, Anton bears little resemblance to the handsome devil from the earlier composite image. He is shorn of his rakish mustache, and a scruffy isthmus sprouts at the crown of his receding hairline. He has heavy-lidded, almond-shaped eyes; his complexion is listed as "sallow." He has my brother's nose.

"As Winter has no money," the *Democrat and Chronicle* reported, "he must serve one day for each dollar of the fine, so his sentence is really twenty years." The harsh penalty echoed the Secret Service's draconian view of counterfeiting. "There wasn't a lot of sense of proportion," Mihm said. "These agents had internalized the belief that money itself is sacred, and that a counterfeit—even a bad counterfeit—is an insult to the majesty of the state."

Selma also pleaded guilty, but her sentence was suspended on account of her sons. Upon her release, she went to Rochester to retrieve Earl from the children's shelter, and then to her parents' house in Erie, to reunite with the rest of her boys. But she did not renounce her husband. Later in 1907, Selma sent a letter to the U.S. Pardon Attorney, James Finch, about pursuing a commutation of Anton's sentence. "I am so miserable without him," she wrote. She was taking on laundry and cleaning work, but, she told Finch, she was not "able to earn enough money to properly care for my children." She went on, "To bring up good christian citizens the father is

wanted and I believe that he will be a better man for what has happened to him.”

The return address on Selma’s letter was not that of the Brandts; she had not lasted long under her parents’ roof. During much of Anton’s imprisonment, Selma apparently lived alone, without her boys, in a rented room.

Until recently, I knew nothing of Anton and Selma Winter, and I knew little of their son Earl, who died when I was twelve. My father’s relationship with his parents was strained, and we didn’t spend much time with his side of the family. On an evening last summer, I was procrastinating while writing a piece that involved research on genealogical websites, and, on a whim, I began punching my grandparents’ names into search bars.

One of the first items I uncovered that night—the portal that sucked me into an endless feed of Progressive Era newspaper archives and Secret Service ledgers—was the entry for my grandfather in the 1910 U.S. census. There, I found Earl listed as an “Inmate,” age six, of the Home for the Friendless. It was an orphanage in Erie; Charles Dickens himself could not have conjured up a more mordant name. I remained at my laptop until three that morning, ransacking every digital filing cabinet I could locate, trying to figure out how Earl had lost his family and wound up in such a place.

This fixation was catalyzed, at least in part, by the suspicion that I’d already possessed some unconscious knowledge of Earl’s fate—that the files I was looking for had been stashed in a cobwebbed crawl space of my psyche all along. Years ago, I wrote a novel about a mother who adopts the youngest of her four children from an orphanage. She, like me, is an avid reader of Donald Winnicott, the English psychoanalyst and pediatrician whose work on the relationship between mothers and their children contributed to the development of what we now call attachment theory. To research the book, I immersed myself in the literature on the neurological, psychological, and social-emotional effects of child neglect, disrupted attachment, and institutional child care. I often wondered why I was drawn to these desolate stories of cruelty and abandonment.

When I was still writing the first draft of that book, in the late spring of 2018, the Trump Administration was broadly enforcing its family-

separation policy at the U.S.-Mexico border, under which thousands of children were forcibly taken from their parents. During the weeks that the crisis dominated the news, my fight-or-flight response was constantly activated, to a degree that embarrassed me. I was jumpy, irritable, prone to tears. I thought about little else apart from the families at the border. I dreamed about them. These intrusive thoughts struck me as a narcissistic delusion—as if I had lost the ability to distinguish between what was happening thousands of miles away and what was happening to me. My kids were one and three years old at the time, and I had to sleep in their room at night, or I wouldn't sleep at all.

One could argue that I was reacting normally to a human-rights atrocity being perpetuated by my own government. And I may have been hormonally off-kilter because my baby had recently finished breastfeeding. But, years later, when I found Earl in the orphanage, another possibility arose: that, of all the horrible news stories that generate headlines around the world every day, I was undone by this story—children being taken from their parents—because it stirred something in the recesses of my mind.

As I clicked to magnify Earl's census entry, the recognition was instant and visceral—a shocking relief. My hands went cold and numb. A high, electric frequency keened in my ears. The novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner, writing a century ago, described a similar moment: "So complete was the certainty that it seemed to paralyze her powers of understanding, like a snake-bite in the brain." I knew that my grandfather had been in an orphanage—didn't I? Was I learning about this only now, or was I remembering it? How had I not known I knew this?

The discovery triggered a kind of synaptic flooding, a wave of memory overwhelming its conscious embankment. Or so it felt. Maybe my limbic system was relaying intense sympathy for my grandfather's plight, nothing more. Maybe I was simply taken aback by a remarkable coincidence, just as one might jump at a door slamming shut, when it's only the wind.

I used to have the common dream where you find a secret room in your house. In my version of the dream, I would also find a child in the room, hungry and dishevelled, staring back at me in stoic accusation. I had this dream so often that I gave it to the mother in my novel, so that she could

invest it with meaning. Finding my grandfather in the census was as if someone had woken me up and handed me the dream child's birth certificate.

During the years that Anton was in prison and Selma was destitute, their sons Arthur and Hugo are nowhere in the public records or in any archive I have searched. In the 1910 census, in which Earl is listed in the Home for the Friendless, the nine-year-old Valor is living with another family, on a farm outside Erie, likely providing manual labor in exchange for room and board—a common arrangement for orphaned children of the time, and one often facilitated by the Children's Aid Society.

Selma's pleas on behalf of Anton eventually reached her congressman, Arthur Bates, who petitioned the U.S. Attorney General in a letter: "My friends in Erie write me that the punishment of this sentence comes harder on his wife and four small children, all under the age of ten years, than it does upon himself." The Erie *Daily Times* reported, "Mrs. Winter is in very poor health and the children need a father to care for them else it was feared they would become public charges." Anton wrote to President William H. Taft, promising that, "if you will only give me another chance, I will again lead an honest life." He concluded, "Hoping that the fate of my children will induce your Excellency to let mercy take the place of justice in my case, I am, Most respectfully yours, Anton Winter."

President Taft commuted Anton's sentence and erased his fine in March, 1910. The pardon came through despite vehement opposition from Agent Gammon, who disclosed to Finch that, in his search of the Winter home, he had "found glass negatives and obscene pictures which he had reproduced, which were of a very obscene nature." More laconic objections were also forthcoming from Wesley Dudley, the Erie County district attorney. Dudley wrote, "Will say my opinion is that Winter is a near do well and that his confinement is not so much of a loss to Mrs. Winter as she seems to believe."

Anton apparently proved Dudley right. After he was released from the penitentiary in Atlanta—his discharge papers indicate that he left with one fountain pen, one watch, a "bundle of miscellaneous junk," and a suitcase—he vanished. He never reappears in the Erie city directory, and Selma began

referring to herself as a widow a few years later. It is likely that he never saw his wife or sons again.

As I continued researching my family, I saw more and more parallels between my ancestors' lives and my own. I came to believe that I was, in some respects, my great-grandmother's protégée, or her doppelgänger. Or her counterfeit. For example: she married a man who revealed himself to be frighteningly unstable and awful with money. So did I. She "lived constantly in fear of some violent act." So did I, until I got away. (In 2020, my husband was charged with assault. The case was eventually dismissed, and he denies any violence during our marriage.) In working through the Winter case files, I often felt pinpricks of déjà vu: an exact turn of phrase, an absurdly specific expenditure. There were too many rhymes. Perhaps my terrible marriage was merely the stuff of intergenerational habit, imprints, the grooves laid down a hundred and twenty years ago by a lonely, ignorant woman I never knew. Perhaps I was reading somebody else's lines, writing fiction about another woman's real child.

Nobody past Earl's generation knew Anton at all. My father, who is now eighty-eight, told me that, growing up, he was vaguely aware that his grandfather had had a criminal past back in Germany. I remember him saying that the term "horse thief" stuck in his mind. But my father doesn't recall hearing of Anton and Selma's actual travails, and he didn't know—at least not consciously—that his father had spent stretches of his childhood in and out of institutions, separated from his parents and siblings. He and Earl just never talked much, he said.

Jill Salberg, who teaches in New York University's postdoctoral program in psychoanalysis, told me that, often, stories of family trauma are not communicated directly to children but mentioned in passing and half forgotten, or overheard out of context. The information lodges somewhere in our unconscious. Children, Salberg writes in a 2015 essay, absorb their parents' history subliminally, "before there are words, and thus before a narrative can be told." The psychoanalyst Galit Atlas, in her 2022 book, "Emotional Inheritance," writes about a patient, Noah, who imagines from early childhood that he has a missing twin brother; as an adult, he learns that he had an older brother, also named Noah, who died as a baby. Another

patient, a gay man, has recurring dreams about an ex-boyfriend which eventually unlock the enigma of the death of his grandfather, whom he never knew, and who killed himself after his wife discovered that he was having affairs with other men.

In the work of Salberg and others, disrupted attachment of the kind that Earl suffered in childhood is the central wound of intergenerational haunting. The abrupt loss of a parent, like other forms of toxic stress, can have profound effects on early brain development; being torn from his family must have shaped Earl, and it seems intuitive that this catastrophe also marked how he raised his children and, in turn, how they raised theirs.

But these are environmental inheritances. A post-pandemic explosion in trauma self-help literature, typified by the best-sellers Mark Wolynn's "It Didn't Start with You" and Bessel van der Kolk's "The Body Keeps the Score," has seeded an extraordinarily contentious notion in the communal imagination: that memories, experience, and behavior can be genetically inherited—not through alterations in the genetic code but in the epigenome, which controls gene expression. This hypothesis is largely extrapolated from research in mice. In one study, researchers induced postnatal stress in a mouse (confining her, forcing her to swim) and separated her from her pups at unpredictable intervals. The negative impacts on her descendants could be observed into the third and fourth generations, and included cardiac dysfunction, lung congestion, and—so far as these tendencies can be observed in mice—depressive traits and increased risk-taking.

“Let down your guard that you’ve built up after countless romantic disappointments, and also your hair.”
Cartoon by Jason Adam Katzenstein

In the most beguiling of these studies, discussed in “It Didn’t Start with You,” mice were trained using electric shocks to fear a cherry-blossom-like odor; their grandchildren feared the same odor without conditioning. The study came up on a recent episode of the self-help podcast “We Can Do Hard Things,” prompting the co-host Glennon Doyle to relay a secondhand anecdote about a therapy patient who detested the smell of coffee. The patient later learned that her grandfather was once brutally assaulted by a man who “was, like, reeking of coffee,” Doyle said, adding, “This was not a story that had ever been told to the family.”

For some who subscribe to the theory of epigenetic inheritance of trauma, the mouse studies are suggestive of how hardships that befall human beings, such as war or family separation, might leave genetic chemical

burns that a person's descendants might feel in the form of increased vulnerability to anxiety, depression, P.T.S.D., or other disorders. But, as Isabelle Mansuy, a professor in neuroepigenetics at the University of Zurich and ETH Zurich, told me, "There is no causal evidence that epigenetic factors in germ cells are responsible for transgenerational inheritance in humans. The evidence is in animals." The animals, moreover—those mouse families—are inbred. Although genetic homogeneity helps to insure a controlled experiment, it does not aid in drawing conclusions about the far more diluted inheritances of outbred human beings.

Steven Henikoff is a molecular biologist at the Fred Hutchinson Cancer Center, in Seattle. "There is no good way of testing for the inheritance of behavior except in model organisms, because you can't remove the cultural and the familial environment," he told me. "It's not real life." Mice do not have culture, language, family heirlooms, or subscriptions to genealogybank.com. They don't feel shame or guilt or greed, or have an unconscious mind. "There might be epigenetic inheritance" in human beings, Henikoff went on, "but I don't know of any mechanism that could do it." Stories like the ones in "Emotional Inheritance"—and stories like mine—may emerge from some swampy nexus of deeply buried memory, genetic predisposition, confirmation bias, and pure chance. Maybe these have always been the ingredients of what we call fate.

When I told Henikoff that finding Earl in the Home for the Friendless had knocked me over, he was eager to get me back on my feet again. "The first thing you want to do is quantify the odds of coincidence," he said. "Anything less frequent than one in twenty, by convention, is significant." When Earl was a boy, about one in every hundred children in the U.S. was living in an orphanage, so my grandparental odds, on a national level, were one in twenty-five—technically "significant," but not by much. "I'm a scientist, not a therapist, so I look for what is replicable. You can't do that here, but at least you can look at the odds," Henikoff said. "Looking for the odds is better than looking for the meaning."

I asked Henikoff, who is seventy-eight, if he had ever bumped into a ghost of his ancestral past, or noticed some uncanny symmetries across his own family's generations. "Oh, sure, all the time," he said. I asked him for an

example, and he considered a moment. “O.K., well, my father got drafted, and I got drafted,” he said. I burst out laughing, and he started laughing, too.

By 1915, Selma’s eldest son, Arthur, now sixteen, had left school and was bringing in a second income, working at a printing press in Erie. All the boys were living under the same roof as their mother again. But 1915 was also the year of their worst sorrow. Hugo, the third-born son, accidentally shot himself while playing with a cap pistol he had received for Christmas. The lead pellet lodged in his brain, and he died a week later.

Earl became a steamfitter, got married, and raised three children in Erie. My father, who was a brilliant student, attended college on an R.O.T.C. scholarship, served in the Navy, earned a Ph.D. in pharmacology, and became a professor at the *SUNY* Buffalo medical school. Toward the end of Earl’s life, I recall my father’s efforts to spend more time with him, bringing me along on visits to the cramped, dark house in Erie where Earl lived out his final years. I remember Earl speaking to my dad solely about his medical issues, extracting whatever he could of his son’s scientific expertise. Earl was a gentle, soft-spoken presence, but his goodbye hugs were stiff and brief, and he couldn’t feign interest when my father tried to draw him into kid-friendly chatter about my schoolwork or softball games. He wasn’t dismissive or unkind. He was simply elsewhere.

One of my only strong memories of Earl is from a day when my father and I visited him in the hospital. He was sitting on the edge of his bed in a thin gown, and I think I gave him a kiss on the cheek. He took my hand and pressed my index finger into the bottom corner of one of his eye sockets, where a smooth groove ran under his eyeball. He told me that a BB pellet had lodged there some seventy years before. I could feel it shifting around, like a pebble stuck under the lining of a shoe. One of his older brothers accidentally shot him when they were kids, Earl explained, and he’d been lucky.

If I were ever to write a(nother) novel about the Winter family, it would be in this scene, in the hospital with Earl, that the protagonist would receive her emotional inheritance: when her grandfather takes her hand and places it inside his head.

Anton Winter resurfaces in the public record in 1916, in Toledo, Ohio, working as a printer at a photo-supply company. In about 1923, he was arrested and convicted of forging stamps, and he served two more years in the Atlanta penitentiary. “As far as post office inspectors and agents of the department of justice have been able to learn,” the Toledo *Blade* reported, “this is his first offense.” Anton had counterfeited a new identity, and nobody had caught on.

After his release, Anton landed in the Detroit area with a second, common-law wife. He got a job making auto-body panels at Woodall Industries, where he lost his left hand in a stamping press, and thereafter used a hook. During the Second World War, when Woodall switched its operations over to manufacturing components for the U.S. Air Force, Anton sought permission from the War Department to work on government contracts, despite his felony record and German birth. His F.B.I. file contains a letter dated October 21, 1941, which states, “The War Department has advised this Bureau that this application for employment has been disapproved.” The letter is signed by J. Edgar Hoover.

By then, Anton was about seventy. When he submitted a questionnaire required of him by the Alien Registration Act, he enclosed a photograph, which shows him severely aged and drawn. The hooded eyes are behind wire-rimmed glasses; his hair is gone, and his cheekbones cast dark shadows on his lower face. Asked to list relatives living in the U.S., he wrote, “None other than wife and one adopted child 13 years old living at same address as I.”

The adopted daughter was named Jean. The last item in Anton’s alien case file, from 1959, is a form that mentions the old-age home where he was living, in Pontiac, Michigan, which bears Jean’s signature. Anton and his second wife adopted Jean sometime during the Depression, but the details are murky. When Jean was a toddler, her birth mother filed for divorce, alleging that her husband was a heavy drinker who hoarded his wages and verbally abused her. After the divorce, he vanished. Jean’s mother got work as a seamstress, but her wages could not support Jean and her infant brother, and, it seems, she was forced to give her children away out of poverty and

desperation. Her tragedy, with its many parallels to Selma's tragedy, made Anton a father again.

Jean had three children, the eldest of whom, Glen, is in his seventies and still lives outside Detroit. He knew Anton as his grandfather, as my father would have, had things been different. I reached Glen on the phone, and he told me that he'd never heard about Anton's first family—the wife and four boys he walked away from. When Glen was a kid, he was fascinated by Anton's pirate-hook hand; Anton could manipulate it by moving his shoulder. Glen remembers his grandfather as "a tough old guy." He smoked a pipe and didn't talk much. He'd brew a pot of coffee and then drink the whole thing. Glen used to mow his lawn. "He was good to my mother," Glen said. ♦

Jessica Winter joined The New Yorker as an editor in 2017 and became a staff writer in 2024, covering family and education. She is the author of the novels "Break in Case of Emergency" and "The Fourth Child."

A Reporter at Large

Is the U.S. Ready for the Next War?

With global conflicts increasingly shaped by drones and A.I., the American military risks losing its dominance.

By Dexter Filkins

July 14, 2025

As new ways of fighting are being invented in Ukraine, Israel, and Silicon Valley, the Pentagon is trying to remake itself. “We’re not moving fast enough,” one expert says.Photo illustration by Timo Lenzen

Late this spring, I was led into a car in Kyiv, blindfolded, and driven to a secret factory in western Ukraine. The facility belongs to TAF Drones, founded three years ago by Oleksandr Yakovenko, a young Ukrainian businessman who wanted to help fend off the Russian invasion. When the war started, Yakovenko was busy running a logistics company in Odesa, but his country needed all the help it could get. Ukraine was overmatched—fighting a larger, wealthier adversary with a bigger army and more sophisticated weapons. “The government said to me, ‘We need you to make drones,’ ” Yakovenko told me. “So I said to my guys, ‘You have four hours to make up your minds. Leave or stay—and, if you stay, promise me that you’ll do your best to help our military.’ ”

Yakovenko’s task was to set up factories to mass-produce unmanned vehicles, designed to overwhelm whatever Russia sent across the border. When I visited his fab, as the plants are called, more than a hundred employees, many of them women, were working intently in a setting that seemed more college campus than munitions factory. With techno music humming in the background, they tended to 3-D printers, assembled carbon-fibre components, carried out flight simulations, adjusted video cameras and radio transmitters. “It’s quite meditative,” one of the women told me.

The TAF fabs are part of a constellation of similar facilities, hidden in basements, warehouses, and old factories, which have helped the Ukrainians battle the Russian Army to a stalemate. The one that I visited makes about a thousand drones a day. They are sophisticated and lethal and, above all, cheap, produced for about five hundred dollars apiece. Some are used for surveillance and some to ferry supplies, but most of them, laden with explosives and directed by an operator through a video screen, are crashed directly into their targets. One of Yakovenko's managers showed me a fuzzy black-and-white video, taken in April, of a night operation behind enemy lines. Onscreen, a drone equipped with a thermal camera dived toward a TOS-1 rocket launcher, and then the screen exploded in a white flash. Russia builds TOS-1 units for about five million dollars apiece. "One of our drones costs a tiny fraction of what it destroys," the manager told me. "That's our advantage."

When the Russian Army rolled into Ukraine, it was equipped for a conflict from an earlier era: an old-fashioned land war prosecuted by tanks and heavy artillery. In response, Ukraine devised a futuristic take on hit-and-run guerrilla operations. Now when a Russian column tries to advance it is met by a swarm of buzzing bombs. Russia has suffered about a million casualties in its attempt to invade. Since early 2024, according to an estimate by Mykhailo Samus, a researcher in Kyiv, about eighty per cent of its losses in men and matériel have been inflicted by drones.

The most dramatic application of this asymmetric approach came in June, when a fleet of more than a hundred Ukrainian drones struck targets as far away as Siberia, destroying or damaging some twenty Russian warplanes. It was the most militarily significant attack on Russia since the Second World War. The Ukrainians released a taunting video, in which first-person views of the drones careering into the planes were set to a pulsing techno soundtrack. The videos were stamped "*Failsafe*," a military term that suggests immunity to harm.

While the future of warfare is being invented in places like Ukraine, U.S. officials are looking on with a growing sense of urgency. For decades, the American armed forces have relied on highly sophisticated, super-expensive weapons, like nuclear-powered aircraft carriers and stealth

fighters, which take years to design and cost billions of dollars to produce. (The country's failures in Iraq and Afghanistan were not for a lack of technical prowess.) Since the end of the Cold War, these munitions have given the U.S. near-total dominance on land, sea, and air. But now the technological shifts that have stymied the Russian invasion of Ukraine are threatening to undermine America's global military preëminence. David Ochmanek, a former Pentagon official and a defense analyst at the *Rand* Corporation, told me that the American way of war is no longer viable. "We are not moving fast enough," he said.

Throughout history, technological advantages have altered the course of wars, sometimes suddenly. In the late nineteenth century, railways displaced horses as a way of moving and supplying armies, and the Prussians exploited them to overwhelm their French opponents. In the first Gulf War, the U.S. used precision-guided cruise missiles that could be steered into an office window from a thousand miles away. The Ukrainians argue that they represent a similar technological vanguard. "We are inventing a new way of war," Valeriy Borovyk, the founder of First Contact, whose drones carried out the strike on the Russian warplanes, told me. "Any country can do what we are doing to a bigger country. Any country!"

America's best approximation of Oleksandr Yakovenko is Palmer Luckey, who helped found the defense startup Anduril in 2017. Not long ago, he met me at the company's headquarters, in Costa Mesa, California, amid an array of high-tech weapons: drones, missiles, pilotless planes. Anduril is housed in a cavernous building that once contained the Orange County offices of the Los Angeles *Times*, whose faded logo is still visible on the exterior walls. At thirty-two, Luckey embodies the stereotype of a cocky, gnomic tech mogul: shorts and a Hawaiian shirt, flip-flops, a mullet and a soul patch. As we talked, he snacked from a bag of chocolate-chip cookies.

He wanted to show off his creations, autonomous weapons that he believes will upend many of the American military's most cherished notions of strategy and defense. He walked over to a model of the Dive-XL, an unmanned submarine that can go a thousand miles without surfacing and is designed to be produced as quickly as an *IKEA* couch. "I can make one of these in a matter of days," he said.

The U.S. military is accustomed to doing business with huge, entrenched players: companies like Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman that employ tens of thousands of engineers and military veterans in a culture not unlike the one inside the Pentagon. Luckey, by contrast, built an early career in video games and virtual reality. At nineteen, working from his parents' home, in Long Beach, he created a V.R. headset called Oculus, a technology that he promised would "transport us into worlds we cannot hope to experience in real life." He sold the company for two billion dollars to Facebook, whose founder, Mark Zuckerberg, brought him on to oversee the Oculus team. Their collaboration was brief. In 2016, following a controversy over a contribution that Luckey made to a pro-Trump group, Zuckerberg fired him. "I had a real chip on my shoulder," Luckey said. "I wanted to prove that Oculus wasn't a fluke."

A few months later, Luckey met with Trae Stephens, a principal at Founders Fund, a venture-capital firm led by Peter Thiel, the billionaire investor and libertarian political activist. Thiel had helped found Palantir, which was transforming the American defense establishment by integrating computer operations and simplifying tasks like tracking and destroying enemy targets. At Founders Fund, he and Stephens were searching for fledgling companies that could bring the breakthroughs of the tech world to the military.

Luckey told me that his central insight with Oculus was to distinguish himself from competitors by focussing less on the headset's mechanism and more on its software. Unlike hardware, software could be easily replicated and regularly updated, improving it quickly and at little extra cost. For generations, the U.S. military had fielded fantastically complex systems that ran on software Silicon Valley regarded as substandard and overpriced. Luckey envisioned cheap, mass-produced weapons whose main value lay in their operating system—in their brains, not their brawn. He began working at the juncture of weaponry and artificial intelligence, to devise systems that could accumulate data and then act on it. With machines to do the fighting, humans could be kept far away from the battlefield. The goal, as he has said, was to "turn warfighters into technomancers."

“Ooh, they have wet!”
Cartoon by Jeremy Nguyen

Trae Stephens joined Luckey and two additional partners to form Anduril, with seed money from Founders Fund and other investors, including one of J. D. Vance’s financial ventures. The company’s name was taken from “The Lord of the Rings,” in which Andúril, a reforged sword, stands for the renewal of the civilized world in the fight against darkness. Luckey saw his work as part of a civilizational conflict. “I wanted to take people out of the tech industry and put them to work in national security, which actually matters,” he said.

In the showroom, Luckey stopped before the Fury, a pilotless jet designed to operate at g-forces that could flatten a human pilot against her seat. To prepare the Fury for dogfights against piloted planes, Anduril’s engineers were feeding it maneuvers from the Air Force’s Top Gun school. “We’re teaching this plane all the ways to get in a position to kill the other guy and come home alive,” Luckey said. “But the cool thing is, it’s not human—right?”

Anduril has secured billions of dollars in defense contracts, as the Pentagon has been swept up in a wave of enthusiasm for unmanned systems. But many questions remain, including the fundamental one of whether such weapons work as well as Luckey says they do. Even with the Pentagon pouring cash into experiments, the vast majority of the budget still goes to the same kinds of programs that it has been pursuing for decades. A growing consensus of defense experts holds that the United States is dangerously unprepared for the conflicts it might face. In the past, the

country's opponents were likely to be terrorist groups or states with armies far smaller than ours. Now planners must contend with considerably different threats. On the one hand, there is the prospect of insurgents who can field swarms of armed drones. One the other, there is the rise of China—a "peer competitor," which by some measures has surpassed the U.S. as a military force. There is no guarantee that we have the right matériel to prevail against either. "Shit," Luckey said. "We're like a gun store with no stock."

During the Second World War and the decades after, the American armed forces devised technologies far more advanced than anything made in the private sector. "The military produced an astonishing amount of innovation," Bill Greenwalt, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a former staffer on the Senate Armed Services Committee, told me.

Facing an existential threat, the Pentagon adopted a free-form procurement process, with senior leaders often assigning several contractors to make prototypes for a single weapon and then giving a contract to the most successful contestant. "The generals threw money at good people, broke furniture, and picked winners," Greenwalt said. This unconstrained methodology helped lead to the first reconnaissance satellites, the first integrated circuits, the first atomic weapon. "The important thing to remember about the Manhattan Project is that there were multiple pathways to success," Greenwalt pointed out. "It was incredibly competitive." In 1949, Admiral Hyman Rickover was assigned to oversee an effort to use the newly harnessed atomic energy to power a submarine—an idea that many observers considered fanciful. Five years later, the first nuclear submarine entered service.

Over time, though, the process became more regular and rules-bound. In 1960, President John F. Kennedy appointed a new Secretary of Defense, Robert McNamara, who had built his reputation by bringing organizational discipline to the Ford Motor Company. Under the system he helped implement, weapons were conceived not by industry but by the Pentagon, where planners were typically following five-year prospectuses drawn up by other Pentagon planners. It usually took years to design a new weapon—and only once the specifications were agreed upon did the Pentagon solicit

input from defense companies and finally select a contractor to produce it. The new system was more orderly, but it was also less competitive and far less dynamic. “We stopped innovating,” Greenwalt said.

We also, to a significant extent, stopped producing. During the Second World War, the U.S. armed not only its own military but its allies’, too. American shipyards built some six thousand ships, including more than a hundred and fifty aircraft carriers. Automobile factories were converted to war production; General Motors built Sherman tanks, and Ford built B-24 Liberator bombers. In the closing stages of the war, Ford plants could turn out a B-24 every hour.

When the Cold War ended, America’s defense-industrial base shrivelled. Without persistent demand from the Pentagon, some factories closed, and others produced barely enough weapons to stay open. Skilled workers migrated to other jobs; those defense industries which still existed, like shipbuilding, were short tens of thousands of employees. As a result, American shipyards are now capable of completing only one new submarine per year.

In July, 1993, Secretary of Defense Les Aspin and his deputy, William Perry, gathered the C.E.O.s of major defense contractors for dinner at the Pentagon. Aspin and Perry told the executives that in a few years most of their companies would not exist. The end of the conflict with the Soviet Union meant that the defense budget would be cut, and only a handful of contractors would survive; the rest would either be forced to merge or be driven into bankruptcy. The meeting has become known in the defense business as “the last supper,” and its essential message proved prophetic: within a few years, the number of “prime” defense contractors shrank from more than fifty to five. The industry wasn’t happy, but the Pentagon was the only buyer, so there wasn’t much that anyone could do about it. “The last socialist systems in the world are in Cuba and the Pentagon,” a former Senate staff member who dealt with the armed forces told me.

The current procurement system favors highly sophisticated weapons, usually made in small numbers. The F-22, widely considered the world’s best stealth fighter, costs three hundred and fifty million dollars per plane. The U.S.S. Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier costs thirteen billion and takes as

long as a decade to build. A single Tomahawk cruise missile, used to attack ships or radar installations, costs about two million. (Last month, a U.S. submarine launched two dozen Tomahawks at Iran in a single night.) Earlier this year, when two F-18 fighter jets slid off the deck of the U.S.S. Harry S. Truman in the Red Sea, some hundred and twenty million dollars' worth of machinery sank to the ocean floor.

On top of that, many components of American weapons are outsourced to adversaries. In 2024, Govini, a software company hired by the Pentagon, traced supply chains for U.S. weapons and found that nearly forty-five thousand suppliers were based in China. Many produced essential parts, including semiconductors for the B-2 bomber, the Patriot air-defense missile, and the Ohio-class submarine, which carries nuclear missiles. "Of course, in the event of a conflict, the Chinese could cut us off," Jeb Nadaner, a senior vice-president at Govini, told me.

The United States has even found it difficult to supply allies that are at war. When Russia launched its invasion, the Ukrainian military began requesting about five hundred Javelin antitank missiles a day. In the course of three months, the U.S. shipped over some seven thousand Javelins, about a third of its stockpile; at current production, it will take more than three years to replenish them. Likewise, the U.S. sent Ukraine a quarter of its Stinger anti-aircraft missiles. The missiles had been out of production, and to build new ones the manufacturer had to call back retired engineers, some of them in their seventies. Jake Sullivan, President Biden's national-security adviser, told me that the attenuated state of America's defense-industrial base was one of the most intractable problems he faced. Fixing it would take years, he said: "It's a generational project."

The combination of limited production capacity and expensive weapons sometimes constrained the government's options. In March, President Trump vowed that the Houthis, an Iran-backed militia that was menacing global shipping in the Red Sea, would be "completely annihilated." The Navy and the Air Force launched more than eleven hundred strikes, at a cost of at least a billion dollars in the first month. The Houthis, who sometimes operated out of speedboats and skiffs, kept on harassing ships. They shot down several American MQ-9 Reaper drones—which cost thirty

million dollars apiece—and fired on two U.S. carriers. After seven weeks of fighting, they agreed to stop attacking American vessels, and Trump called off the campaign. But the Houthi force remains largely intact, and has attacked ships from other countries. Even this brief engagement left senior Pentagon officers worried that they had dangerously depleted the country's stores of weapons.

Earlier this year, a group of Ukrainian officers stood in the lobby of a civilian building in Kyiv. Among them was Kyrylo Budanov, the country's head of military intelligence—a hulking, baby-faced figure, instantly recognizable even though he was partly masked. He and his colleagues had gathered to boast. About a week before, a pair of Magura V7 pilotless attack boats had ventured into the Black Sea and shot down two Russian Su-30 fighter jets. It was the first time in history that combat aircraft had been shot down by maritime drones, the Ukrainians said. One of Budanov's officers, a masked man who went by Thirteen, stepped forward and spoke through an electronic device that scrambled his voice. He pointed to a Magura V7 that had been wheeled in for the occasion: a sleek, low-slung craft made of fibreglass and polyethylene. It looked like a miniature speedboat with missiles attached. "The Ukrainian intelligence service has made a revolution in war in the sea," he said.

As the conflict began, Russian warships roamed the Black Sea from their base in Sevastopol, a Ukrainian port captured in 2014. Ukraine hardly had a navy. When Russia blockaded the port of Odesa, a crucial outlet for grain and other agricultural commodities, it threatened to devastate an already battered economy. "We were desperate," Thirteen told me.

Ukraine began attacking Russian naval vessels with missiles and aerial drones, and struck the Sevastopol base. Around the same time, it implemented two parallel programs to launch a fleet of naval drones. Group Thirteen, a newly created military-intelligence unit, oversaw the making of the Magura, a fast, maneuverable craft that would go after ships at sea. The country's counter-intelligence agency put forth the Sea Baby, designed to carry heavier payloads and strike such targets as bridges and ships in harbor. With ranges of more than five hundred miles, the two could threaten adversaries almost anywhere in the Black Sea.

Ukraine released them into service, and, in the course of a few weeks in early 2024, swarms of Magura drones sank three Russian warships—the Ivanovets, the Tsezar Kunikov, and the Sergey Kotov. The rest of Russia's Black Sea fleet soon retreated from Sevastopol and began dispersing from Novorossiysk, on the eastern shore. This March, the Russians agreed to a ceasefire in the Black Sea. "They didn't have a choice," Thirteen said.

At the beginning of the war, Ukraine used drones mostly for reconnaissance. But, as they showed their worth as weapons, their use expanded. Last year, by some estimates, Ukraine's factories turned out more than three million drones. The key to successful operations, TAF workers told me, was that the manufacturers of the drones and the soldiers using them were in the same place, allowing the software and components to be continually tweaked. The drones that I examined were remarkably simple: a lightweight square frame, four propellers, a video camera, a battery-powered motor, and room for a bomb. The attack drones, known as F.P.V.s, for "first-person view," are guided by an operator watching a video screen that shows what the drone is seeing; other members of the unit monitor feeds from reconnaissance drones. Yakovenko described a recent attack in which a Ukrainian pilot crashed his drone into a Russian tank, forcing the crew inside to flee. Other F.P.V. drones chased down the Russian soldiers. "We killed all of them," he said.

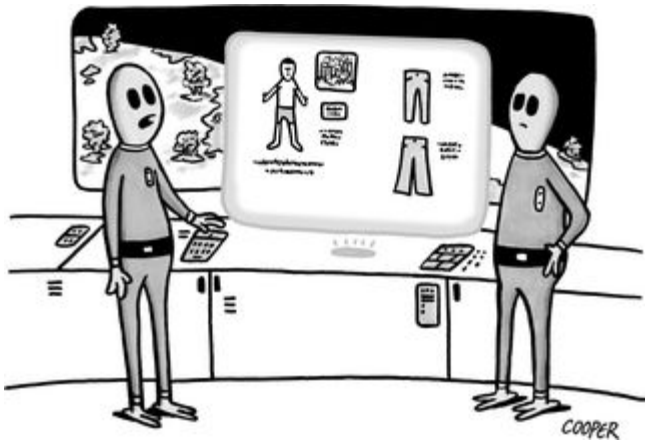
The Russians are terrorizing the Ukrainians with drone attacks of their own. Towns and hamlets have been largely pulverized along the front lines and for miles beyond; even American air defenses are mostly useless, because setting them up invites an immediate Russian attack. Iranian-made Shahed drones, capable of carrying large warheads long distances, have pummelled Kyiv and other cities with hundreds of strikes. Under the constant threat of attack, the Ukrainians have found it difficult to supply their front lines, and evacuation is sometimes impossible.

The prevalence of drones appears to have given the advantage to the defense. Along the seven-hundred-mile front, soldiers on both sides are huddled in fortified trenches, separated by a no man's land known as the "gray zone." With drones circling day and night, surprise attack is

impossible, movement suicidal. If soldiers venture out, they are attacked immediately by drones or artillery.

Prevented from breaking through the lines, the Russians have lately employed a desperate maneuver. Soldiers race motorcycles across the no man's land and then jump off and try to hold whatever territory they can—a tactic that summons Putin's dictum "Wherever a Russian soldier steps foot, that's ours." Casualty rates are extremely high. Samus, the researcher, marvelled at the disregard Russian commanders had for their men's lives. "The Russian mentality—there is nothing like it in the West," he said. "It is something different."

The challenge Yakovenko faces is evading Russia's efforts to jam radio frequencies used to control his drones. "The Russians are the champions of jamming," he said. The latest TAF drones are able to hop to a new frequency if the one in use is jammed. But the Russians can change channels, too. "It's a game of frequencies," Yakovenko said. He told me that only about thirty per cent of his drones make it through Russia's defenses, but the low hit rate doesn't bother him: he figures that they have destroyed thousands of targets. "Many kills," he said.



"It appears their society collapsed when nobody could agree on an acceptable pant-leg width." Cartoon by Nathan Cooper

Russian electronic warfare tends to be most effective against Ukrainian drones that are within a mile of their targets. So Yakovenko has lately begun to equip drones with thermal sensors, which take command of the weapon as it nears its mark. His sensors aren't yet accurate enough—"You have to

hit the tank in a special place, like the gas tank," he said—but they are improving.

Last fall, Russia launched its own anti-jamming technique, deploying drones controlled by long fibre-optic cables that ran all the way back to their bases—essentially, deadly kites. The cables are cumbersome. They get tangled up in trees and power lines; one image from the front shows a street crisscrossed by what looks like a giant spiderweb. But they've been effective, and Ukraine has struggled to defend against them.

The Ukrainian government has created a contest in which fighters upload videos of their drone strikes in exchange for points: six for a Russian soldier, forty for a tank, up to fifty for a battery of rockets. Successful units can use points to buy more drones in an online market; the government gets a vast library of videos with which it can refine its strategy.

As each side races to out-innovate the other, Yakovenko says he is not especially concerned that the Russians will come up with some transformative advance overnight. "It is a war of small steps," he told me. "We find some solution, our enemy finds some solution." His greater worry is that he won't be able to procure necessary parts, like thermal cameras. Most of them are made in China, which is helping to arm Russia against Ukraine, and has begun clamping down on such exports. Corruption and betrayal abound along the way. "A lot of people try to cheat you, because you're under pressure," he said.

The recent Ukrainian drone attacks on the Russian warplanes marked a striking advance in the arms race: a combination of human subterfuge and precise tech work. More than a hundred drones were smuggled into Russia in pieces and assembled there. A phony businessman arranged for them to be loaded onto cargo trucks, without the drivers' knowledge. Deep inside Russian territory—as far as twenty-five hundred miles from the border—the drones flew out and struck.

The effects were devastating, crippling about a dozen long-range bombers that were equipped to carry nuclear weapons. Borovyk, whose company made the drones, told me that the key was the element of surprise. Russia hadn't anticipated drone strikes so far from the border, and had no time to

put jamming systems into place. “They were not prepared for that type of attack,” Borovyk said.

Ukraine’s fighters have not yet been able to regularly deploy autonomous drones—the kind that can find targets without human help—but they are getting closer. Some of Borovyk’s drones were steered manually, but others were equipped with A.I. technology that could help them find their marks. According to reports in the Ukrainian press, the A.I. had been trained to recognize targets using images of old Soviet warplanes on display in an aviation museum east of Kyiv.

When Palmer Luckey began tinkering in a camper in his parents’ driveway, the kind of rapid innovation that is flourishing in Ukraine was almost unthinkable in the American defense establishment. Silicon Valley was producing a string of technological breakthroughs, but its leaders shied away from working on defense projects. The reasons were partly ideological—the tech business retained some of its roots in the seventies counterculture, which was revolted by the Vietnam War. But mostly the hesitation was pragmatic: the Pentagon’s development process was so slow that it typically took contractors years to receive any money. Many big Silicon Valley companies weren’t willing to wait, and smaller ones couldn’t afford to. Meanwhile, the technology that the Pentagon developed on its own often became obsolete before a weapon was even deployed. “By the time the F-35 came out, some of the microprocessors it used were slower than an iPhone,” a former Pentagon official who worked on tech issues told me.

In 2015, Ash Carter, President Obama’s Secretary of Defense, set out to bring the two communities together. Carter, who had a doctorate in theoretical physics, dispatched a team of officers to the Bay Area to set up an outpost—officially called the Defense Innovation Unit, but known at the Pentagon as Unit X. Its job was to find fledgling technology companies with interesting ideas and give them contracts. One of Unit X’s first initiatives was to do an end run around the Pentagon’s procurement process. By invoking an obscure paragraph buried in a budget-authorization bill, it was able to award contracts to companies as soon as they completed a successful pilot program. “Our goal was to shrink the Pentagon’s

contracting process from ten years to six weeks," Chris Kirchhoff, a founder of the unit, said. "We were able to do that."

The Pentagon was also under pressure from Silicon Valley, which increasingly regarded itself as a rival power center to the government. In 2014 and 2016, the tech companies SpaceX and Palantir sued the government, claiming that it prevented private firms from competing for contracts; the companies argued that they could offer products at much lower costs. Both prevailed, and went on to receive billions of dollars' worth of federal contracts, clearing the way for others.

As the Pentagon was opening up, Palmer Luckey got fired from Facebook and started Anduril. Among the first ideas that he brainstormed with his co-founders was an A.I. system that, by synthesizing enormous amounts of data, could learn to identify objects and track them in real time. Once it locked on, it could guide a mass-produced, disposable weapon to strike the target nearly anywhere on earth. They named the system Lattice, and a few months later they won their first government work: a contract, for U.S. Customs and Border Protection, to use Lattice in towers that tracked people moving across the U.S.-Mexico border.

The system worked, and Border Protection soon bought more. But Luckey believed that the ideal client for Lattice was the Pentagon. He explained to me that if the military needed to track a Chinese destroyer across the Pacific, Lattice could provide a real-time picture of the ship, using data from more than a hundred sources—a mix of classified and public channels that included geospatial satellites, ship beacons, radar, signal intercepts, and thermal sensors. With precise targeting, the military could sink the destroyer with a much smaller, cheaper missile than the ones it was using. "I can tell you, not only is that a Chinese destroyer, I can tell you which one it is—it's a Luyang destroyer!" Luckey said. "I can tell you that because of the particular equipment it is configured with. And I know that, to achieve my objective—mission kill—I need to target either the bridge or its radar. I can put a missile right there."

Rather than wait for military leaders to announce the kinds of weapons they needed, Anduril's engineers would build sophisticated devices and offer them to the Pentagon. If the generals wanted something slightly different,

Luckey's team could simply rewrite the code. The weapons themselves would be little more than shells for software, making them much easier to build. "Our cruise missile has fifty per cent fewer parts than what the military uses now, and it can be put together with ten simple hand tools that I can put in a small bag," Luckey said.

In 2018, with most of their ideas still inchoate, Luckey and Stephens walked into the office of Christian Brose, the defense adviser to Senator John McCain, who was then the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. At the time, Anduril was a startup with twenty-five employees, hoping to break into the defense business. Brose, like his boss, had grown deeply frustrated with the Pentagon. He quickly realized that he and Luckey had aligning objectives. Later that year, after McCain died of cancer, he joined Anduril as the head of defense strategy.

The way Brose saw it, the Pentagon had to be transformed. Not only did it need a new strategy; it also needed to supplant many of its most coveted weapons. "The U.S. used to have a system that worked, but it's broken," he told me. "We spend a ton on defense, but if we don't change we're going to lose the wars of the future." The war that worried him and his peers most was with China.

Earlier this year, at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in Washington, a dozen or so experts gathered to conduct a simulated war between the United States and China over the island of Taiwan. Though most discussion about such a conflict centers on an all-out Chinese invasion, the C.S.I.S. war game was built around what many observers regard as a more likely scenario: a blockade, designed to box out the American Navy and squeeze Taiwan into submission.

The experts split into teams representing the U.S. and China, and each side was armed with the weapons that its country is thought to possess. As the game began, a crisis was already under way; China had encircled the island, and its sailors had sunk ships that attempted to run the blockade. U.S. forces announced that they would protect Taiwanese vessels, and American and Chinese ships began exchanging fire.

The scenario felt alarmingly plausible. In 2021, President Biden broke with decades of “strategic ambiguity” by publicly committing the United States to Taiwan’s defense. Biden called America’s support for Taiwan “sacred”—but the island also produces the world’s most sophisticated microchips, which are considered essential to the global economy. Although President Trump has been less declarative, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth recently warned China that any attempt to conquer Taiwan would have “devastating consequences.”

From the game’s opening moves, the conflict escalated rapidly. The Taiwanese Air Force began attacking Chinese ships and mining the Taiwan Strait, and Chinese warplanes struck ports on the island and shot down two American planes. The U.S. retaliated by sinking a squadron of Chinese warships in harbor. After China fired ballistic missiles at American bases in Japan, the fighting exploded, with the U.S. launching massive strikes against the mainland and Japanese jets attacking Chinese ships. China’s missiles sank three aircraft carriers—drowning as many as fifteen thousand sailors—and destroyed a quarter of the American Air Force.

By the time the game was stopped, each side had lost tens of thousands of people. Seth Jones, a C.S.I.S. president who took part in the game, seemed taken aback by the ferocity of the fighting. “I’m surprised how rapidly things got out of control,” he said. Still, it could have been worse. The Chinese didn’t strike the U.S. mainland, as they do in other war games. In some simulations, the two countries have traded nuclear assaults, with hundreds of thousands of casualties.

American officials say that they are racing to keep this kind of scenario from becoming real. According to U.S. intelligence, Xi Jinping, the Chinese leader, has told his military to be ready to seize Taiwan by 2027. The People’s Liberation Army has been testing the hardware it would need to undertake an invasion, including landing barges that appear designed for beaches that, like Taiwan’s, have shallow approaches. The Chinese Navy and Air Force have been sending planes and vessels on sorties around the island. These “aggressive maneuvers around Taiwan right now are not exercises, as they call them,” Admiral Samuel Paparo, the head of U.S. forces in the region, said this February. “They are rehearsals.”

Some observers argue that each side is responding to the other's rhetoric, and the escalation represents a game of mutual deterrence. But credible deterrence requires a force that can hypothetically defeat your opponent's. In the past decade, the People's Liberation Army has grown rapidly in capability and sophistication, in a way that seems designed to thwart the United States. As America's Navy has steadily shrunk, China's has grown to surpass it in size, though not yet in tonnage. (China's shipbuilding capacity is more than two hundred times that of the U.S.) Where the U.S. has formed its naval strategy around nuclear-powered carriers, China has built hundreds of anti-ship missiles, known colloquially as "carrier killers." Some can reach speeds of more than seven thousand miles an hour, and are capable of evasive maneuvers that make them nearly impossible to intercept. What's more, China is deploying surface-to-surface missiles of sufficient range and number to destroy American bases in Guam, the Philippines, and Japan. "The scale of the Chinese buildup is amazing," Tom Shugart, a fellow at the Center for a New American Security and a former submarine commander, told me. "There hasn't been anything like it in peacetime since the Cold War."

"This might be T.M.I., but I'm an encyclopedia."
Cartoon by Johnny DiNapoli

In August, 2023, American defense officials launched the Replicator initiative, a crash project to mass-produce air and sea drones that could deter Chinese military action in Asia. At the same time, commanders across the armed forces are racing to update their arsenals. The Air Force is advancing a program to have as many as five unmanned craft accompany each manned fighter plane; Army leaders have mandated that each division have a thousand drones.

“We are sending thousands of drones to Taiwan and the Pacific,” a former senior defense official told me. As Pentagon leaders see it, the key is to get unmanned systems ready to go immediately. “I want to turn the Taiwan Strait into an unmanned hellscape,” Admiral Paparo said last year, “so that I can make their lives utterly miserable for a month, which buys me the time for the rest of everything.” The Pentagon intends to have a substantial deployment complete by 2027. But Paparo and other commanders worry that the Chinese will seize Taiwan before then, presenting the United States, some seven thousand miles away, with a fait accompli. “If the Chinese decide to invade, things would get ugly quickly for both sides,” David Ochmanek, of the *Rand* Corporation, told me.

In crucial respects, the vision sketched out by American officials resembles Ukraine’s effort against Russia: flooding the skies and seas with inexpensive drones in order to thwart a larger adversary fighting near its homeland. In other ways, it is vastly different. Ukraine’s front extends for seven hundred miles; the western Pacific is millions of square miles, and any conflict around Taiwan would be fought not just on land and in the air but also on and under the sea.

Christian Brose, of Anduril, told me that the fleet of unmanned systems would be guided by what he calls “the kill chain.” If a Chinese invading force embarked on the Taiwan Strait, U.S. satellites would detect ships and relay their locations to targeting systems, which would guide the drones. “This needs to be happening very fast, again and again and again,” Brose said.

Brian Schimpf, Anduril’s C.E.O., told me that the Chinese would try to sever communications with his missiles, just as the Russians are doing with drones in Ukraine, by jamming radio signals trying to guide them. The Americans, of course, would be doing the same to the Chinese. “Everyone is doing it,” he said. “We are. The Chinese are. ‘How do I create confusion for the other side? And how do I mitigate the confusion they are going to create for me?’ ”

Every Anduril weapon is built to be capable of operating independently of humans. “We’re assuming all the weapons are going to be cut off from us,” Luckey said. But how autonomous would the American weapons be? Would

they fire on command? Or fire on their own? Michael Horowitz, a former senior official who helped oversee artificial-intelligence policy for the Department of Defense, said, “Ukraine has shown us that in future wars we have to expect that data links with all sorts of platforms and systems will be severed. Autonomy lets you solve that issue.”

Schimpf sketched a scenario: American satellites detect Chinese warships and notify U.S. forces, which fire a volley of, say, forty cruise missiles. Once the missiles were launched, the Chinese would almost certainly jam the radio navigation system. But A.I. would take over: each missile would select one of the Chinese ships to strike and inform the other missiles of its intention. “I can say to the missiles, ‘Go look for ships,’ ” Schimpf said. “And they’ll find the ships.”

That’s the idea, at least. Schimpf expects the Chinese to use an array of tactics to throw the missiles off course, including deploying thousands of decoy targets in the water and in the air. Even navigating the vast stretches of the Pacific, where the missiles won’t have any landmarks to guide them, presents a challenge. “Over the water, it’s much harder,” he said.

Defense experts I spoke to were enthusiastic about Anduril’s ideas. But several current and former officials said that, even if the U.S. military had the weapons in the Replicator initiative, it is woefully incapable of using them. The kill chain that Anduril imagines requires rapid, intricate orchestration of satellites and sensors for reconnaissance, data collection, and targeting. But those satellites are controlled by myriad federal agencies, which, according to knowledgeable insiders, are too fiercely independent to coöperate smoothly. A former Senate staff member who worked extensively on these issues expressed deep frustration. “The Air Force won’t work with the Navy,” he said. “The Army won’t work with the Air Force. The N.S.A. won’t work with anybody. The National Reconnaissance Office won’t work with anybody. The National Reconnaissance Office and the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency are both supposed to work with the N.S.A. —and they won’t talk to each other.”

The branches of the military, which maintain their own communication networks, have their own obstacles. Navy ships typically cannot communicate directly with Air Force jets, even when they are operating in

the same theatre. Even within the Air Force, many planes cannot talk to one another; the pilot of an F-22 fighter jet can't communicate directly with the pilot of an F-18. "If you flew the two aircraft next to each other, the only way the pilots could communicate would be to wave to each other," the retired Air Force general Scott Stapp, who spent several years working on such concerns as a senior Pentagon official, said.

Experts see the issue of "joint command and control" as one of the military's biggest, most underpublicized problems. The former Senate staffer imagined what might happen during a crisis in the Western Pacific. A satellite could detect a radio signal sent by what the N.S.A. believes is a Chinese warship. To make a precise identification, the N.S.A. would need the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, which oversees imaging satellites, to take a photo. "You have to make the request through a tasking mechanism," the former staffer said. "And then it gets shipped over to the N.G.A., to take a picture of this ship. That can take several minutes. There's a war going on, and you're asking yourself, 'Do I have to shoot this thing?' But by then the ship has moved." He continued, "It has to be boom, boom, boom, boom. And people have to be making split-second decisions, and you have to get the latencies down, because it's not just one fucking ship but hundreds of targets, all at the same time."

For two decades, senior legislators and military leaders have been working, mostly without success, to overcome these problems. In Pentagon jargon, the goal is known as Joint All-Domain Command and Control, a term that has become so familiar that it has acquired a shorthand—JADC2. "It's not a technology issue," Stapp, the former Air Force general, said. "It's a cultural issue. The commercial world solved these kinds of problems years ago, and we have made the choice to run on separate networks with separate capabilities."

The prospect of armed drones limited only by the capacities of artificial intelligence raises a disturbing question: Could they escape our control? Ever since humans began to dream of intelligent machines, they have feared that their creations would turn on them. In "R.U.R.," Karel Čapek's play from 1920, androids created to do humankind's drudge work rise up and wipe out their makers. In "The Terminator," from 1984, an A.I. defense

system called Skynet becomes self-aware and triggers a nuclear war. This year's "Mission: Impossible" sequel has basically the same theme: a rogue A.I. known as the Entity seizes control of nuclear weapons and comes within a tenth of a second of obliterating life on earth.

Similar warnings have come from more sober sources. Demis Hassabis, a prominent A.I. innovator at Google, has warned, "A bad actor could repurpose those same technologies for a harmful end." Yet the Pentagon seems more concerned with making A.I. systems work effectively. Under a 2012 Defense Department order updated by Biden and left intact by Trump, the military may employ autonomous systems as long as they succeed in tests and their use is consistent with international humanitarian law.

The most prominent real-time laboratory for using A.I. in warfare is in Israel. When Hamas-led fighters crossed the border on October 7th, 2023, and launched a bloody assault, hundreds of thousands of Israelis were called to military duty. Among them was a technology entrepreneur from Tel Aviv, who asked me to refer to him as Michael. For four months, Michael told me recently, he commanded a group of sixteen targeters for the Israel Defense Forces, taking advantage of powerful computer programs that helped select targets. "We called ourselves warriors of the keyboard," he said.

For years, I.D.F. officers had used periods of relative peace to assemble lists of suspected militants and structures to be targeted if a war broke out. The lists often took months or even years of painstaking work to compile; by late 2023, there were some two thousand Hamas targets and some ten thousand Hezbollah targets. But Israeli military officials told me that, after October 7th, the I.D.F. quickly burned through its lists. The opening phase of the campaign was extraordinarily fierce, with the military hitting several hundred targets a day. Even the American bombardments of Saddam Hussein's forces in Iraq were never that intense. "The volume and velocity of bombing appear to be unprecedented in modern warfare," a former senior American defense official told me.

In previous conflicts, Israel might have relented after a week or two. This time, the I.D.F. kept up the campaign, backed by political leaders. The

former senior American defense official told me, “Israel set out to kill every fighter in Hamas. They had never done that before.”

To generate new targets, the I.D.F. tried an experiment. Working with the country’s bustling tech industry, intelligence officers had developed programs to help identify suspected Hamas and Hezbollah members and find where they were hiding. They included Lavender, which identified potential militants, and Gospel, which vetted both people and structures.

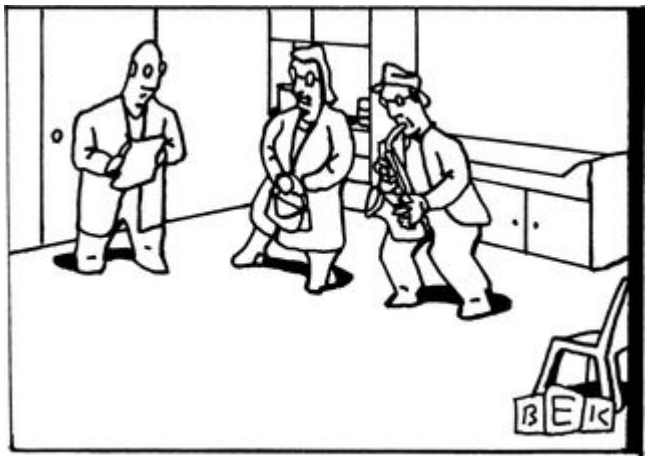
The I.D.F. employed these programs to sift huge amounts of data compiled on Gaza, everything from social-media posts to government records. They searched text messages and drone surveillance videos for patterns of suspicious activity. They examined people’s friends, relatives, and associates for links to Hamas. A former senior I.D.F. officer told me that Israel’s security agencies could record the millions of telephone conversations happening in Gaza each month, but didn’t have the manpower to listen to them all. So they tasked an A.I. with scanning the conversations and flagging any voice that matched a recording of a suspected militant from Israel’s files. The A.I. searched for keywords and pinpointed the locations of suspects’ phones. “Now, instead of thirty million conversations, we have one million conversations, and we can have our linguistic analysts listen to those,” he said.

A former senior Israeli military official said that the programs were constantly refining their own methods. “It’s not just finding the targets that’s important but how to locate the people more quickly as they move around,” he told me. “We are learning all the time. The A.I. is learning.” At one point, he said, intelligence officers determined that they could find places Hamas had buried rockets by identifying where the soil had shifted after heavy rains. So they used a program to scan hundreds of hours of drone footage and find disturbed soil, “even if it had moved only two centimetres. And then, like that, we created another two hundred targets.”

Much of the targeting work was done by Unit 8200, a wing of the I.D.F. whose function was to gather signal intelligence. For most of the war, it was run by General Yossi Sariel, who oversaw a team of twelve thousand, including targeters and linguists who worked from a desert airbase in Nevatim. The former senior I.D.F. officer told me that the targeters were

meant to see artificial intelligence as a tool, not as a moral arbiter. “The purpose of the machine was to support the soldier, not replace him,” he said. “Our A.I. programs never took the decision to attack anyone. Only humans made those decisions.”

Michael, the targeter, described the process: The A.I., sifting the data, would suggest a target and list the factors, such as telephone contacts and video evidence, that supported a link to Hamas. Based on those, it would give an estimated likelihood that the person or building should be struck. “What we have is a priority queue,” Michael said. “The A.I. will say, ‘You should watch this guy.’ ”



“He’s gone off on a jazzy riff before, but never for so long.”
Cartoon by Bruce Eric Kaplan

Michael told me that his team was required to attempt to verify each target: examining video footage from drones, listening to telephone conversations. “My job in the targeting room was to put together all the indications and decide, What am I looking at?” he said. He added that he was also required to estimate how many civilians would be killed or wounded in an attack. If a suspected militant was in an apartment building, he would examine property records and drone footage to determine how many people lived there. “The A.I. thing says, ‘You should pay attention to this,’ and then I gotta do this whole checklist,” Michael said. “Who else is in the building? When did they leave?” In the course of a typical workday, the programs that Michael used would give his team about a hundred suggestions. He would select about five of them and send the recommendations to superior officers. “Usually two will be accepted,” he said.

As the battle raged, though, there were times when he felt pressure to decide on targets too quickly. “Sometimes I couldn’t do all the preparation and all of the checks that I should have,” he said. “Obviously, there were mistakes.” He added that he was comfortable with the final outcome of his work. But Adam Raz, an Israeli writer and activist, said other I.D.F. targeters had told him that in the most intense periods of the war their efforts were merely pro forma. “Most times, it took thirty seconds to a minute to get the target from Lavender or Gospel, verify it, and then give it to the Air Force to strike,” he said.

An estimated sixty thousand Palestinians have died in the conflict, prompting widespread accusations that Israel has committed war crimes. Yet Israeli authorities show little concern about the targeting systems. “We ended up, I believe, with about twenty-five thousand Hamas killed and twenty-five thousand civilians,” a former political leader told me earlier this year. “This is a better proportion than was ever achieved by a modern military.” When I ran that argument by John Spencer, a professor at West Point, he concurred that similar attempts to expunge enemies from densely populated areas had often resulted in higher proportions of civilian deaths. In 2016, the U.S. military initiated a campaign to root out *ISIS* from Mosul, Iraq, which killed about five thousand militants and twice as many civilians; the fighting ended up razing a city of two million people. In the Second World War, when the U.S. retook Manila from the Japanese, about seventeen thousand soldiers and a hundred thousand civilians were killed.

In Gaza, though, no one knows precisely how many people have died, or what proportion were innocents; the Gaza Health Ministry, which is run by Hamas, maintains that more than half were women and children. American officials suggested that the essential issue was one of human judgment. “The civilian casualties in Gaza were not an A.I. issue—they appear to be a rules-of-engagement issue,” Michael Horowitz, a Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense in the Biden Administration, said. Michael, the targeter, told me that in the early stages of the conflict he was permitted to recommend a strike that could result in as many as twenty civilian deaths for one suspected militant. The strictures tightened and loosened over time, but they were typically relaxed for high-ranking figures. “When we killed Nasrallah, there were a lot of people in that building, you know?” he said.

The former senior U.S. defense official told me Israel permitted civilian casualties in numbers that, by American standards, were greatly disproportionate to the value of the militants being attacked. “During the invasion of Iraq, if we were contemplating hitting a target that might result in twenty-five civilians being killed, that’s a decision that would have gone all the way to the President or the Secretary of Defense,” he said. “In Gaza, that was happening every day.”

Sebastian Ben Daniel, a lecturer at Ben-Gurion University and a critic of the I.D.F., told me that the claims of precise targeting can’t be verified, because the way the A.I. systems function is largely a mystery. “How do we know that this person was a legitimate target?” he said. “We don’t know, because nobody can check. The algorithm is a black box. The military says it looks at millions of parameters. But what parameters? We don’t know.” A.I. systems like the ones that the I.D.F. used often fail to understand context; if someone says “watermelon” on the phone, the A.I. can’t tell if he’s making an oblique reference to a bomb or just talking about fruit. “You think this person was Hamas, because he met somebody in Hamas, or he called somebody in Hamas—so you kill him,” he said.

Ultimately, Ben Daniel argued, the purpose of the A.I. systems was to lend a veneer of legitimacy to a preconceived policy. “The goal was not to kill this guy or that guy, for which A.I. was sometimes useful,” he said. “The goal was the destruction of Gaza. A.I. gives you that effect without the public outcry.”

Even within the I.D.F., there is some concern that A.I. will displace human intelligence. The former senior I.D.F. officer told me that Israel had used a combination of technical and human means to track Hezbollah leaders in Lebanon, some of them for years. “We knew where Nasrallah was almost every single day,” he said. “We could have killed him whenever we were asked.” Right until the end, he said, Nasrallah was convinced that Israel would never strike him. He was only forty feet underground when the bomb hit.

The former senior Israeli official spoke proudly of a case in which targeters believed that a Hezbollah leader was hiding in a Beirut apartment, and wanted to gather details of its layout and surroundings. “We can send

someone to the street to take photos," he said. "We have people on the ground—but not inside." To acquire more precise information, the I.D.F. developed a telephone that appeared to be registered in Lebanon. Then an agent posing as a wealthy expatriate called a real-estate broker in Beirut and said that she was interested in several properties on the same street. The former officer described the scheme: "Some nice woman will start with you on the phone. She's very rich. Her father was from Lebanon. And she wants to buy the entire block." The woman asked to hear details about the street, the apartment, the specific room where the target was thought to be; the broker provided all the information the I.D.F. needed. "Do you know how many people work for us without knowing that they work for us?" the former officer said.

Still, for Israeli security officials, small victories do not assuage the sense that they missed intelligence that might have forestalled a war altogether. The failure to prevent the October 7th attacks still weighs heavily. One cause, some officers told me, was an overreliance on intelligence gathered by technological means. Cameras set up along the border were easily disabled, and warnings from intelligence officers were ignored. The former Israeli military official told me that, during the attack, some militants switched off their cellphones to make themselves harder to track. Others simply left their phones home.

Indeed, the former official said, Israel had largely given up trying to cultivate human sources inside Hamas and Hezbollah. He said that the I.D.F., himself included, had fallen in love with technological methods because they seemed so easy to use, compared with the tedious and dangerous process of cultivating spies. "How many human souls did we have to describe the reality for us in Gaza and Lebanon on the night of October 7th?" he said. "Zero."

The former official continued, "This is the main reason that created this great failure and caused us not to see what Hamas was planning to do. The feeling was 'I don't need to know you. I don't need to know where you are going to pray, or what is your ideological way of thinking—I don't need them because I have your phone.' The trouble is, on the night they attacked, their devices were turned off."

So far, Anduril has secured several billion dollars' worth of military contracts, including one for sending drones to Taiwan. Early this year, the company announced that it was taking over a twenty-two-billion-dollar project, formerly run by Microsoft, to develop "augmented reality" headsets for the Army to use in combat. To produce its weapons, Anduril is planning to open a sprawling factory near Columbus, Ohio. Luckey told me that, in order to build a secure supply chain, none of the components would come from China.

Financial analysts have been speculating that Anduril will soon open investment to the public. Still, the essential question remains: In the uncertainties of combat, will Luckey's unmanned systems work? Even admirers of the company evince some skepticism about weapons built around A.I. "I would take any claims of success with a grain of salt," a former senior Pentagon official told me. "The Pentagon needs to do its own testing."

On a lonely stretch of chaparral near Fort Stockton, Texas, I watched two Anduril engineers make their last adjustments before test-firing a Roadrunner—a five-foot-tall interceptor similar to the company's attack drones, except that it is designed to crash into such airborne targets as jets, missiles, and drones. At about a hundred thousand dollars each, the Roadrunner isn't Ukrainian-style cheap, but in the Pentagon's arms bazaar it qualifies as a bargain. If it misses its target, it returns to base, to be fired again. "It lands just like a spaceship," an engineer named Jackson Wiggs told me.

The Roadrunner is built to be launched out of its own packing crate; before the test flight, the engineers placed one of those crates in the scrub, as tumbleweeds skittered by. A low buzz from an intruding drone echoed from the other side of a nearby ridge. As the sound drew closer, Wiggs and his colleague pressed a button on a console. The sides fell from the packing crate, and the Roadrunner, a squat device that looked a little like a penguin, was propelled upward by two turbojets. It climbed to about three hundred feet before it turned and flattened until its fuselage was parallel to the earth. Then, like its namesake, the Roadrunner took off, sailing over the ridgeline. Seconds later, it shot past the intruding drone, missing it by a precisely

calibrated distance. It circled back, righted itself, and landed neatly next to its packing crate. “Perfect,” Wiggs said.

Even as the Anduril engineers congratulated themselves on a successful test, people elsewhere were scrambling to create new advantages, under the messy conditions of war. Ukraine launched autonomous craft from catapults and snared Russian drones in fishing nets. Israel, in its recent conflict with Iran, deployed lasers to blast drones from the sky by burning up their guidance systems. An American company called BlueHalo is testing a similar device. It’s carried on a truck, and, after an investment of nearly a hundred million dollars, can fire individual shots for three dollars each. One day, it, too, will be eclipsed. ♦

Dexter Filkins is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of “The Forever War,” which won a National Book Critics Circle Award.

Profiles

A Family Doctor’s Search for Salvation

Instead of turning inward after the death of his son, Dr. Greg Gulbransen turned outward: toward documentary photography and people whose lives he might be able to save.

By Joshua Rothman

July 14, 2025

After accidentally killing his toddler son, Gulbransen (seen here examining a patient at his practice in Oyster Bay, Long Island) set out to help not just patients but strangers. “Feeling needed, feeling useful, feeling important—they’ve helped me hide the demons,” he says.Photographs by Natalie Keyssar for The New Yorker

The Mott Haven Houses, in the Bronx, are orange brick buildings about twenty stories high. The stairwells are dangerous, the elevators slow; Greg Gulbransen, a pediatrician from Long Island, waited in the lobby, bouncing with impatience. Even at dawn, he was pressed for time. It was six-thirty, and he needed to get back to the suburbs to see patients by nine. “Let’s hope we can find him on our first try,” Gulbransen said.

He was looking for Red, a former tattoo artist in his early thirties who was addicted to drugs and now drifted between hideouts in and around the Mott

Haven projects—an abandoned construction site, a janitor's closet, a stairwell to the roof. They had met about a year earlier, when Gulbransen was on his way to see Malik, a onetime gang member who'd been shot and left paralyzed below the chest. A photographer as well as a physician, Gulbransen had been documenting Malik and his circle since 2019, for a series about gun violence and its aftermath. When Red approached him on the street, hoping to sell scavenged goods, Gulbransen noticed his inked-Brando look and asked to photograph him.

Gulbransen is sixty-two and slim, with white hair and blue-framed glasses. He runs five miles with a headlamp every morning; now he darted, as if spring-loaded, through the opening elevator doors. He checks on Red nearly every weekend. This Sunday, he planned to buy him breakfast, offer encouragement and medical attention, and deliver a bag of clothes donated by families from his practice—along with some pillows he'd taken, without his wife's permission, from a room that was being redone. ("Don't tell Leslie," he'd said earlier.) Most of Red's acquaintances are drug-addicted and on the edge of a fatal overdose; Red is essentially alone in his efforts to save himself, except for Gulbransen, who is part doctor, part social worker, part father figure, part friend. Whenever Red texts, Gulbransen answers.

Leaving the elevator, Gulbransen swept down a sallow hallway to a closed green door. A sheet of paper—an index page, torn from a book—was wedged into its ventilation grille to keep out light.

"Red, it's G.," he whispered loudly, knocking. "You in there?"

A dog barked somewhere down the hall. A woman in scrubs was heading out to work. Behind the door, Red groaned, then gave himself a self-motivating shout. After a minute, he emerged, groggy and exhausted, brow furrowed. Months earlier, Gulbransen had captured Red's charisma in a moody portrait he'd posted to Instagram. "Moms in the practice always ask, 'How's Red?' " he'd told me, laughing. But lately Red's health had declined; he was thinner, unsteady on his feet. "How's your leg?" Gulbransen asked. "You fall down again?" He took Red's arm, checking his wrist—the same bedside manner I'd seen him use with my kids, who were also his patients.

I'd met Gulbransen six years earlier, when my wife and I were expecting a baby and looking for a pediatrician near our seaside village on Long Island. "I am obsessed with him," a friend wrote in an e-mail when we asked for recommendations. A little Googling revealed that Dr. Greg, as our friend called him, was not a typical physician. He worked in a cute converted house in Oyster Bay, but his website featured photographs from a fashion editorial he'd shot for a European edition of *Elle*. My wife, whose Googling went further, discovered something tragic: in 2002, he'd accidentally killed his two-year-old son, Cameron, by backing over him in the driveway. Afterward, he spent years crusading for legislation requiring back-up cameras in all new cars. The Cameron Gulbransen Kids Transportation Safety Act passed in 2008; the cameras became mandatory in 2018. Our car had one.

"I really have a lot of respect for him," our friend had written.

I'd been fascinated by Gulbransen. On his practice's Instagram, I watched him tickle babies and explain the importance of vaccination; he had an easy rapport with children and parents, and was clearly a capable and well-loved pediatrician. Yet beneath his ebullience there was an intensity that drew me in. Even as a prospective father, I was beginning to grasp the role that fear plays in parenthood; a feeling of supreme responsibility was settling in. My wife's family had given us an old bassinet—an heirloom of white-painted wicker in which two generations of babies had slept—and I'd created some drama by refusing it. It didn't meet modern safety standards; I pictured our son on his stomach, his nose and mouth trapped between mattress and frame. I didn't want to kill our baby—that was the bottom line. I tried to imagine what it had been like for Gulbransen to live through the central parental nightmare. I wondered how it had affected him, and his doctoring. Had it made him especially understanding of his patients' anxieties? "He never made me feel awkward for asking questions in the middle of the night," our friend had written. "First time mom things. . . . You'll understand."

A stairway led to the roof, and Red took us up to find his friend K.B., who was sleeping at the top on a folded piece of cardboard. Red invited him to breakfast; while he and K.B. got ready, Gulbransen ambled to the railing.

The day was overcast, the rooftops of the Bronx extending toward the gray water in the distance. “Some of the families in my practice own buildings you can see from here,” Gulbransen said. “That one, and that one.” He’d spent a lot of time lately on project rooftops, befriending a few couples—all addicts—who lived there. He was working on a photo series about them. He pointed out a spot where one couple sometimes slept; I walked over and found an empty syringe next to a single red ballet flat.

Good people are often puzzles to those of us who wish we were better. We try to understand what they do, and how, and why. Many base their goodness in principle, or faith, or some vision of how the world ought to be, and we sometimes suspect that, if we could only adopt one of their systems, we might do good, too. But Gulbransen’s goodness wasn’t part of any system; it was personal, even arbitrary. There were, I learned, many Reds and Maliks—many people with whom he’d forged one-to-one relationships of care. Some were in the Bronx, others farther from or closer to home. He’d begun making these connections after Cameron’s death, and, over time, they had become a way of life. In the Old Testament, when Job laments his fate, a friend tells him that “man is born unto trouble as the sparks fly upward.” We all suffer, as inevitably as a fire throws off pieces of itself. But Gulbransen had built something from his sparks.

He turned to check on the men, peering through a cracked window at the top of the stairwell, and told me, “Red does tranq”—a powerful tranquillizer called xylazine mixed with fentanyl. “If he doesn’t get clean soon, he’ll die. I’ll come down here one day and nobody will have any idea where he is, and he’ll be buried in a potter’s field.” He shook his head, then shook it again, as if to snap out of the thought. It was ten to seven. Red was just one of many patients he needed to see. “Let’s get breakfast!” Gulbransen called, heading inside.

The hamlet of Oyster Bay, on the North Shore of Long Island, is pleasant, verging on twee. There’s a beachside park with a snack bar, and a town common where you can buy Italian ices from a stand that’s been open for a hundred and twenty-eight years. Billy Joel owns a vintage-motorcycle shop. Teddy Roosevelt’s “summer White House,” Sagamore Hill, is a short drive from the high school. On Tuesday nights in the summer, old guys parade

their classic cars. Some parents in Gulbransen's practice sail at the Seawanhaka Corinthian Yacht Club; a few are celebrities or hedge-fund billionaires. But most are middle class, and about a third of the charts in his office's filing cabinets are blue, indicating Medicaid. The town is a jumbled American place.

Gulbransen's office has a relaxed, even buoyant, vibe and a homelike floor plan. A doorway from the porch faces the reception desk; a hallway leads past well and sick waiting areas. A Pinewood Derby racecar hangs upside down from the ceiling of the well area. In the sick area, photo collages display hundreds of smiling patients, from infants to young adults. Gulbransen's practice handles around twenty thousand visits a year, but his team is small and the quarters are close. Working in the exam rooms in the back, Gulbransen is able to call out and greet arriving families by name.

Not long ago, my wife and I brought in our daughter, Alice, who'd been out of sorts for a couple of weeks. Gulbransen, who has a slightly impish demeanor, burst in: "Hi, Mom! Hi, Dad!" He chucked Alice under the chin, grinning even as she wailed. (She'd learned to anticipate a shot.) "Crying is good," he reassured us. "Visits are always combative at eighteen months." He gently laid Alice on the exam bench, teased open her mouth, and showed us four molars coming in at once. "She's perfect," he declared. "You guys are doing great." In general, he likes to boost parents' confidence in their own instincts. Five years earlier, after examining our newborn son, Peter, he'd told us, "You got this." Waggling his eyebrows, he'd asked, "What's the biggest determinant of pediatric health?" When we hesitated, he said, "Zip Code!"

“O.K., does anybody have any conflict-resolution strategies that aren’t spraying liquid from your anal glands?”
Cartoon by Ellie Black

Gulbransen grew up ten minutes away, in another waterfront town, Glen Cove. A natural with kids, he taught phys ed and science before becoming a doctor. He bought the practice from two other pediatricians in 1999 and set about building it up with a new father’s anxious zeal. The accident happened on an October night. Around nine-thirty, Gulbransen and Leslie returned to their condo after dinner with friends. The babysitter had already put Cameron and his older brother, Scott, to bed. But Cameron called out, and Gulbransen went upstairs to check on him. The boy was sitting up, smiling and holding his blue blanket. Out on the landing, he threw himself into his father’s arms. “I remember that hug,” Gulbransen told me. “There was something intense about it.”

He carried Cameron downstairs to hang out until a new bedtime could be contrived, and watched as he ran toward the babysitter and Leslie. Then Gulbransen went outside, closing the front door and a screen door behind him, to move the family car from the street to the driveway.

Cameron had seemed to be with the other adults, and had never before left the house on his own. Gulbransen is organized and meticulous—he doesn’t drink and is so energized he avoids even coffee—and he checked his mirrors before backing in. But, as he reversed, he felt a bump near the front wheel. He leaped out to find Cameron on the ground, in the headlights, clutching his blue blanket and bleeding from his head. As a doctor, he knew

instantly that Cameron was dead. Still, he performed CPR, tasting his son's blood in his mouth.

"There are actually scales that psychiatrists use to quantify life stress," he said. He recalled one from medical school: " 'Have you lost a job? Are you divorced? Have you lost a child?' They don't even talk about 'Have you killed your own child?' That's not even on the list." He told me this on the second floor of his office, in a sitting room he'd redecorated about ten years ago, after the practice had reached a stable level of success. Surrounded by photography books, four American Girl dolls regarded us from an alcove. In the community, the accident has given Gulbransen a special role; families who suffer traumatic losses sometimes seek him out. He gives the dolls to their children.

Leslie is Jewish, so Cameron's funeral was held three days after his death. Anguished and ashamed, Gulbransen saw a therapist who advised him to take a few weeks off. Instead, he went to work the next day. Flowers were heaped on the steps to the office. A postman, passing by, asked what they were for.

"I have no idea," Gulbransen said, hurrying inside.

He told the surprised staff that he was ready to see patients. A mother waiting in the exam room had heard what had happened—everyone had—and stared at him in silence. "Then I said, 'Let's go,' " he recalled. "And everybody just knew, Don't talk about it. And I just started working hard."

Therapeutic workaholism is part of Gulbransen's altruism. Ever since the accident, he said, he'd struggled with the feeling that he didn't deserve to be alive when Cameron was dead. "You're constantly, constantly asking yourself, 'Are you good enough?' " he told me. "That's why a lot of people turn to drugs or alcohol after these accidents, or get divorced." (He and Leslie are happily married; their daughter, Julia, was born the year after Cameron died.) "I'm lucky to have this office, where I can keep reaffirming that I'm good enough for kids," he went on. "It becomes a dopamine drip." He almost never takes weekends off, and his vacations are rare, indulged in to please his family. The dopamine wanes. If Gulbransen doesn't do something of value once or twice a day, he starts to ruminate. "Feeling

needed, feeling useful, feeling important—they've helped me hide the demons," he said. He told me how, on a recent day, he'd correctly diagnosed four kids with pneumonia: "Drip." Mothers marvel at how he makes house calls on Sundays. If you text him late at night, he replies.

In the Bronx, we descended to the street, and Gulbransen, mindful of the clock, set a fast pace. Red and K.B. staggered behind and reminisced. Red had been born addicted to opiates; he'd built a life, which went off the rails after his girlfriend overdosed. Not long ago, he'd run into her mother. "She still sees something in me," he said, in a thoughtful tone. "I don't see it. But I'd like to be the person she sees."

"You got this, buddy," Gulbransen said. "You'll get out of this."

At a bodega, the men ordered breakfast. Gulbransen helped Red pick out some basics—a T-shirt, some packets of Pedialyte—and paid. We headed for a park where they could eat. Near the empty, sunlit basketball courts, a big flat-screen TV sat incongruously on a bench, its power cord coiled around it like a tail.

"Holy shit!" Red said. It was as though we'd found a treasure chest. He sidled up to the TV, widened his arms, and hefted it. He looked at Gulbransen: "G., do you mind . . . ?"

Gulbransen nodded, and Red and K.B. began grappling with the television. "Someone probably stole that yesterday, came here, got high, and forgot about it," Gulbransen said, sotto voce. "That's how they live. They find stuff, steal stuff, sell it. It's day to day." (I was reminded of Gulbransen's dopamine drip.) He watched, bemused, as Red and K.B. carried the TV around a corner.

At the time of the accident, Gulbransen owned a camera but had taken only one "good" picture of Cameron, in which the boy wears an uncertain expression and a blue baseball cap with an American flag. "He hated that hat, but he gave me that look and I took that picture," Gulbransen said. "I wish I had more pictures of him. I wish I could have told his story." He vacillates on the value of story. "There's obviously something greater going on here," he told me once. "People don't like hearing this stuff, but I guess

he and I were meant to tell the story, to help make the world safer for other people and other children." But he can also take the opposite view—that Cameron's death was a meaningless accident. Therapy had helped him see that stories can be traps: "We think that we're in control, so it's easy to feel guilty rather than come to terms with the fact that we're really not." And yet, he went on, "it certainly is my fault. The operator of the vehicle is responsible no matter what happens."

Fundamentally, Gulbransen finds solace in stories. Recalling his early years, he noted that he was the third of five children and that, not long after he was born, his eldest brother died when a Coxsackievirus infection reached his heart. "So I grew up in a house where there was a child that died," he said—maybe that was part of why he'd become a pediatrician. His mother cooked meals for local needy families; his father, an advertising executive who "worked like a machine," had driven tanks in the Second World War and, at twenty, participated in the liberation of Dachau. The experience left him with a hatred of bigotry, and he helped organize field days in which Glen Cove's well-off white kids played with Black kids who lived in affordable housing. Gulbransen keeps photographs his father took at the camp. "It was my Dachau," he said of Cameron's death. "Ultimately, it was my responsibility. If something's your responsibility, you have to ask, 'What's your response?'
Red and K.B. returned, sat, and started their breakfasts. Gulbransen stepped back, pulled his camera from beneath his jacket, and took a picture.

It was a little after eight: time to go. We handed over the clothes and got in the car. Gulbransen drove fast; forty minutes later, we'd traded the Bronx's concrete for the woods, beaches, and gated villas of northern Nassau County. At the office, with minutes to spare, he ducked in through the back, stepped into a small side room, and sprayed himself down with Lysol. Then he strode past the waiting areas to the front desk, where a receptionist had set out the first patient charts. He introduced me to her, noting that she'd grown up in the Mott Haven projects. Her story had ended well.

"How's Red?" she asked.

My grandfather was a pediatrician, in a small city north of Boston. As a kid, I visited his office and even got a few physicals, but never really thought

about what his job entailed. Not long ago, on a Wednesday afternoon, I met Gulbransen for lunch (“Dr. Greg!” a group of women called, from their booth), then drove with him to visit Eliza Franson, a mother whose fourteen-year-old son, Thor, has Duchenne muscular dystrophy, which will likely claim his life within a decade. We sat in the kitchen listening to Thor play Billy Joel and Van Halen on an electric piano. He was prodigiously talented. Gulbransen helps with Thor’s care, but this visit had no particular purpose; he was just checking in.

“Everything good?” he asked Eliza, after half an hour.

“Well, you know,” she said.

Later, I heard about a twelve-year-old boy in the practice who’d suffered a severe eye injury while horsing around at home. Gulbransen had phoned the E.R. to make sure they had an ophthalmologist ready. For days, everyone in the little house in Oyster Bay was on edge, fearing that he’d lose his sight in the eye. They’d known the patient since he was a baby. When the treatment succeeded, they exhaled.

The seriousness of pediatrics shouldn’t have surprised me, but it did. Kids get hurt and get sick, like anyone else; every year, a few in the practice battle life-threatening illness, often cancer. Gulbransen wasn’t comfortable with death, exactly, but he was comfortable talking about it. As part of his push to pass the Cameron Gulbransen Act, he’d told the story of the accident many times—even before Congress. This was another aspect of his altruism: instead of turning inward after tragedy, he’d turned further outward, and stayed that way.

As the back-up-camera project was coming to an end, he needed something to fill the void. His father had once taken him to the beach to look for a snowy owl, so Gulbransen set out to photograph one. Then he started travelling to Alaska to take pictures of grizzly bears. He attended workshops in food and fashion photography. Eventually, he realized he mostly wanted to photograph people. He made elaborate “hero” portraits of disabled patients as gifts for them and their parents. (He photographed Thor as the boy leaped into a pool; to challenge himself, Gulbransen took the picture underwater, wearing scuba gear.) After reading about people trying

to leave the Ku Klux Klan, he found one of them online, then travelled to Indiana to photograph him—helping pay for the removal of his racist tattoos. In West Virginia, he simply drove around until he met a family, then photographed them, bought them groceries, and provided medical advice for their kids. What was he doing? Where was it going? He didn't overthink it. In a way, not thinking was the point.

Leslie was used to Gulbransen's enthusiasms. "He's always been intense, and involved in things," she told me. "I think that's what attracted me to him in the first place." Still, she wished he'd stay closer to home, and so he decided to visit the Bronx Documentary Center, on 151st Street, to learn about photographing city life. Before even going in, he got to talking with some kids on bikes. They turned out to be members of the Charged Up Ryders, an anti-gun youth bicycling gang. Gulbransen spent four years photographing them—also assisting with their pediatric care, buying them gloves in winter, and paying for bike repairs. At one point, he impressed them by riding a unicycle. He noticed that a surprising number of them had been shot. Eventually, through them, he met Malik.

"You, follow the money, and you, follow the recipe."
Cartoon by Avi Steinberg

I first heard about Malik during a routine appointment for Peter. "I gotta show you these pictures," Gulbransen said, pulling out his phone while Peter babbled in my arms. He swiped through black-and-white photographs of young men who'd been shot and lived with the wounds, along with their families, apartments, and hangouts. "This is where Malik got shot, right here," he said, pointing to a street corner, not quite explaining who Malik

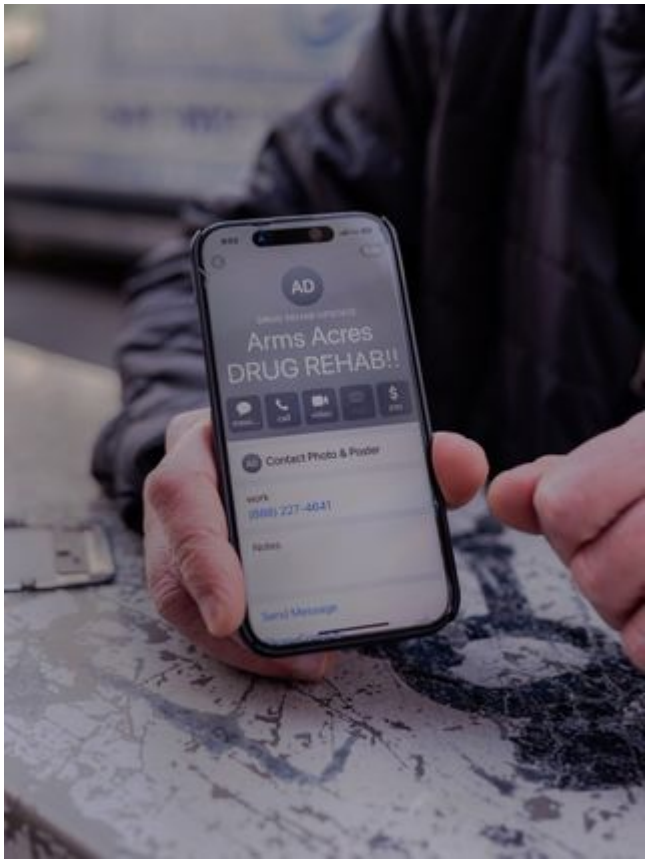
was. He made a pistol with his hand: “They just went *bam, bam, bam!*” He paused at an image of Malik being lowered, tenderly, into a bathtub by a pair of large men. “He was a real tough guy before,” Gulbransen said. “I bring him catheters and stuff.”

At another appointment, Gulbransen showed my wife a fuller series of photographs, which he’d assembled into a book titled “Say Less.” To his delight, it had been accepted by a respected photography press. The pictures mapped a confined world of battered hallways and dim bedrooms where men showed off guns and scars. Many images had a medical sensibility, focussing on the labor of caregiving and the mechanics of wound care. In one, a man in a ski mask lifts his shirt to reveal a colostomy bag. In another, Malik—who rarely leaves his apartment, lest his shooter try again—attempts to navigate a tight corner in his motorized wheelchair. Where a footrest keeps hitting the wall, there’s a hole. “It shows he’s trapped,” Gulbransen said. “They’re all trapped.” He recognized himself in Malik, who, he said, had also been both a perpetrator and a victim of violence.

Upstairs in the office kitchenette, Gulbransen FaceTimed Malik to check in. “Did you finish work today?” Gulbransen asked. (Malik, as part of a youth program called Graffiti, mentors kids by video chat.) “How’s your phone bill?” (Gulbransen often pays it.) He’d bought Malik an air-conditioner, then connected him with a well-off mother from the practice, who bought the family a freezer. “Did you put that food in the freezer?” he asked.

“Love you, Greg,” Malik said before hanging up.

Gulbransen frequently uses a wide-angle lens, making small spaces look larger; maybe that’s why I was surprised by how cramped Malik’s apartment was when I accompanied Gulbransen there. In a tiny back room, Malik lay in bed, watching hip-hop videos on television and scrolling on his phone. “I got you enough toothbrushes and toothpaste to last a while,” Gulbransen told him. “You can kiss a lot of girls—you shouldn’t have a problem.” They laughed.



A stint in rehab doesn't guarantee an addiction's end. "You have to keep trying, trying, trying," Gulbransen says.

While Gulbransen went to the kitchen to talk to Malik's mom, I asked Malik about their relationship. "Greg, he's a cool dude," Malik said. "He does everything. He helps me with my phone bill. If I have to go to the hospital, he calls. He shows me there's better things in life. I never had anybody show me that. My dad was in jail. I was with my mom and grandma, but also it was just me—I was by myself a lot. It was 2018 when I got shot, right there on the corner." Malik gestured outside, through a wall of his room.

I noticed Gulbransen had left a white plastic bag on a shelf, holding the toothpaste, toothbrushes, and medical supplies. His interventions with Malik and Red were usually modest, everyday—parental. It struck me that Cameron would have been twenty-four this year. "I got shot in 2018," Malik repeated. "I was eighteen. That's when I met Greg. I'm twenty-five now. He helps. He kind of watches over."

On the drive back to Long Island, Gulbransen called Chelsea Suthard, the mother of the family in West Virginia, whom he still visited regularly. The week before, he'd sent me a video of himself helping dig a grave for her father in the family cemetery, deep in the woods. Gulbransen had covered the funeral expenses, which the family couldn't afford.

"Hey, Chelsea," Gulbransen said in the car. "How're you doing? How are the kids?"

"Well, Cara's running a fever of a hundred and three," Chelsea said. "I don't know why."

"Does she have a rash?" Gulbransen asked. "Vomiting? Diarrhea? Or just a runny nose, a cough?"

They talked for a little while about roseola and the flu.

"How are you doing emotionally, without Dad?" Gulbransen asked.

"It's rough," Chelsea said.

"Yeah, I know it is," Gulbransen said. They discussed Chelsea's mom, who was struggling with dementia; Gulbransen had shown one of her MRIs to a specialist in New York who'd seen signs of mini-strokes.

Chelsea's house is full of Gulbransen's photos of her kids. "The pictures tell a story," she told me. When he visits, he takes the family to Walmart, for toys and unaffordable necessities; he'd helped Chelsea secure extra assistance at school for her son, who has A.D.H.D., and arranged for back-up cameras to be installed in her cars, which are older. Their conversation rambled, warm with familiarity.

"You need anything, you let me know," Gulbransen concluded. "Talk to you later."

"Talk to you later"—how often do we actually mean it? Relationships are rare. The more time I spent with Gulbransen, the more his simple openness stood out. He wasn't afraid of people. (Was I?) He made himself available

just to talk and listen. (Did I?) It seemed to me that there used to be more people like him—village priests, maybe, or village doctors. People who took the time. But Gulbransen wasn't quite a village doctor, because he needed the people he helped for his own healing. He wanted their stories to become part of his. This mutuality made the relationships real.

"If you want to know how strong the human body is, just look at this guy," Gulbransen said. We were in the elevator, heading up to find Red, now living in the stairwell. "Did you get a look at his arm, with the open wound?" Red was in bad shape, and Gulbransen's plan that weekend was to take him and another addict, Veronica, to rehab—both had said they were ready to go.

We made our way to Red's hideout. Gulbransen helped him pack. What would he need for a week or two away? "How about those socks we bought you?" Gulbransen asked, poking through Red's belongings—books, clothes, a suitcase, a few pictures Gulbransen had taken—before finding his shoes. "If we can get through this packing, we can go get something to eat."

"It's quite the mess," Red said, decorously. "Sorry."

"Listen, here's how I see it," Gulbransen said about rehab. "It's free room and board. You can't lose! We'll go over there and get you cleaned up a bit."

"Maybe more than a bit," Red said, nodding. He groaned as he worked his feet into his shoes. "Everything just hurts. Look how swollen my feet are." The stairwell was painted blue but stained with food, blood, and feces. Our voices echoed up while, on the roof, pigeons cooed. It was a lost place in a lost place.

Sensing the mood, Gulbransen tried to lighten it. He listed people his patients ask about: nurses and doctors who'd once worked in his office. "Do you know who the most requested person is?" He paused. "It's Red!" Red laughed. "I told them, 'On Sunday morning, I'm getting Red and we're going into rehab.' So—are we doing it?"

"Yeah, we are," Red said, with resolve. "Let's get it done."

He took a deep breath, stood, and started stuffing more belongings into his bag. Encouraged, Gulbransen stepped into the hallway to call the elevator.

“You know that guy who walked a tightrope between the Twin Towers?” he whispered as we waited. He meant Philippe Petit, who pulled off the feat in 1974. “I’m like him, except I almost never make it to the second tower.” Red had already been to rehab seven times. “You just have to keep trying, trying, trying.”

Downstairs, the three of us crossed the street for coffee. We passed Red’s tag everywhere—a little crown with his name beneath it, drawn on walls, doorframes, intercom boxes. Then we went to find Veronica. In a nearby building, we checked the apartment where she and her boyfriend, Boogie, rented the kitchen as a bedroom. She wasn’t there. Boogie, a petty thief surrounded by piles of loot, pointed us toward a set of stairwells back in Red’s building.

“I’ll check the roof, too,” Red said. He’d grown bright-eyed, energetic—a member of G.’s team. He began working his way up and down the steps, whistling a little motif—a warble, then a pop—to announce himself to anyone he might surprise in the stairwell. No luck. “We gotta go,” Gulbransen said. “She’s not coming. It’s just you, Red.” He wanted to keep the momentum up. We made our way out and started walking briskly to the car.

“I bet she scored and decided she could make it a few more weeks without getting clean,” Red mused. “You know what’s crazy? I can’t decide whether, when she made that choice, it was a moment of weakness or strength.”

I glanced at Gulbransen. He looked worried, his jaw tight. I’d noticed that, when things got tough, his joviality faded and something steelier took over. Once, remembering his fights with opponents of the back-up-camera law, he’d told me, “I hate losing. I don’t lose. My attitude is ‘Fuck you.’ ” Another time, he described a dark moment after the accident: “It got back to me that someone I respect—a doctor—said to a friend, ‘God, how come Greg hasn’t killed himself yet?’ So, yeah, I knew everyone was watching

me. I was the most watched person ever—a pediatrician who backed over his own kid." He'd wanted to show what he was made of.

He always seemed aware of an audience—his peers, or maybe Cameron up above, or Leslie, Julia, and Scott, or simply everyone—observing, judging, learning. "I think, after Cameron, it was almost as if he needed to prove himself," Leslie told me. "Maybe he didn't feel like he was a good father, or a good doctor, or a good person, which . . ." She trailed off, incredulous. "It was an accident!" Regardless, Gulbransen said, "You have a responsibility to provide yourself as an example. There are a lot of people who lose kids, and you want to show them that, as horrible as this is, you're going to be O.K." Later, he said, "I wanted to show Scott and Julia how, when the shit hits the fan, you behave like *this*."

In the car, Red nestled in the back, looking out the window, seemingly all right. But, as we were about to get on the highway, he said he'd left something valuable in the stairwell and needed to go get it.

"O.K., buddy," Gulbransen said, turning the car around. Out on the sidewalk, as Red led us inside, Gulbransen fell in beside me.

"I think the percentage chance of this working out is dropping," he murmured.

At the top of the stairs, Red bent to gather books and art supplies: "I collect a lot of random books, so I can use them for reference images"—sources for tattoo designs. He looked unwell. A long-legged cockroach crawled out from under an old sweatshirt and along the wall.

Gulbransen's office has a relaxed, even buoyant, vibe. Photo collages in the waiting room show hundreds of patients, from infants to young adults.

"Dope-sick," Gulbransen mouthed to me, grimly. Then he called up to Red, "Let's get organized! Let's go!"

Red sat down. I looked again: now he had a syringe in his hand. We watched as he searched for a vein, fruitlessly. Eventually, he settled on a spot on his neck. "Aghhh," he said, grimacing and pushing the plunger. He leaned back. Gulbransen sank to his haunches and breathed in and out. For the first time, he looked drawn, sad, exhausted. Red started singing, wordlessly at first. Then he stood up, almost vibrating with energy. "I would do anything for love!" he sang.

"It's not gonna work," Gulbransen muttered to himself.

Red drifted into Kendrick Lamar: "I got power, poison, pain, and joy inside my DNA," he rapped, then moved on, folding in other songs, bits of pop refrains. When he sings, Red often chooses lyrics that describe his situation. Gulbransen slumped forward, cradled his head in his hands, and listened. We lingered—twenty minutes, then thirty—hoping for some reversal, until it became clear it wasn't coming. We left.

Later, at home, playing with my kids, I kept thinking about Red, and about Gulbransen, hunched at the bottom of those stairs. I found myself returning to that image as the days went by. How many mornings had he spent like that—alone, in ruined stairwells, hallways, elevators, apartments? I pictured him there, on his own, unobserved, trying to help. That set of stairs was one

of the worst places I'd ever been. The next Saturday morning, I again thought of Gulbransen. Where was he now?

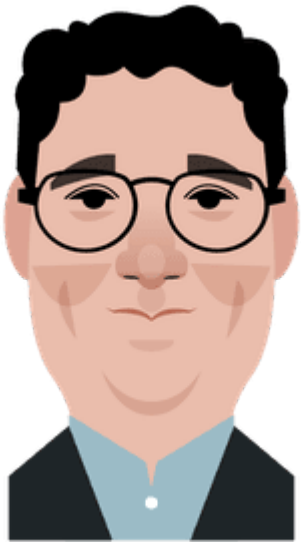
Around eleven, Gulbransen texted me a screenshot of a message from Red: "Hello Sir. First I want to apologize . . . I was wrong. I'm sorry for wasting your time and disappointing you. I really had every intention of going to detox that day. It's red btw. This is my new number."

Gulbransen had replied, "Don't apologize. Fentanyl is the devil pulling you down hard. If you want to retry again tomorrow morning, LMK. I'm always here for you. G."

A few weeks passed. Red's life resumed its usual pattern. Then, one Sunday, Gulbransen went looking for Red and couldn't find him. He searched every hideout—nothing. He grew alarmed. Had the worst happened? He was back at his office, seeing patients, when he got a voice mail: "Hey, G., it's Red. Just wanted to tell you, I'm calling from rehab. I finally made it—I've landed. I am currently clean. I just wanted you to know where I was. I'll call back again to try to get in touch with you. I just didn't want you to worry."

In the afternoon, I FaceTimed Gulbransen. He looked relieved. "I like that he loves to make me proud of him," Gulbransen said. That weekend, he was leaving for a short vacation with his wife and daughter—his first in two years. But he'd found some helpers in the projects who'd send him news about Red while he was gone.

"I'll stay in touch and keep you updated," he told me, beaming. He ended our exchange the way he often does: "Hug the kids." ♦



Joshua Rothman, a staff writer, authors the weekly column Open Questions. He has been with the magazine since 2012.

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Takes

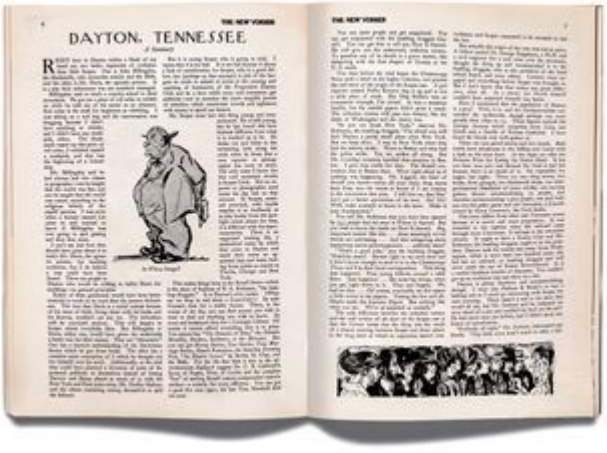
- **Paige Williams on Marquis James's Preview of the Scopes Monkey Trial**
  By Paige Williams | When a high-school teacher in Tennessee agreed to be prosecuted for teaching evolution, The New Yorker, still in its first year, sent a reporter.

Takes

Paige Williams on Marquis James's Preview of the Scopes Monkey Trial

By Paige Williams

July 13, 2025


DAYTON, TENNESSEE

July 11, 1925

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.*

One of the first *New Yorker* writers hired by Harold Ross, the founding editor, was Marquis James. The men were good friends whose wives were also good friends; the couples vacationed together. James's début feature ran in the second issue, in February, 1925. I could have written this piece about that piece, a Profile of Alice Roosevelt Longworth, a child of Theodore Roosevelt, based on the following passage alone: "She knows men, measures and motives; has an understanding grasp of their changes. That's all there is to what is grandiosely known as 'public affairs.' " Several issues later, James turned to the subject of John Francis Hylan, New York's mayor. Then Ross sent him to Tennessee.

The A.C.L.U. had published a newspaper ad offering to defend anyone who would test the constitutionality of a new state law that banned the teaching of evolution in public schools. A criminal case pitting religious fundamentalism against scientific modernism promised to be sensational and, for the host town, lucrative. Dayton, a small community near Chattanooga, had lost a factory to bankruptcy and needed the boost.

Civic leaders decided to stage a case. They asked a substitute high-school teacher, John Scopes, to consent to be indicted on charges of teaching that humankind descended from apes. Scopes, who was twenty-four, wasn't convinced that he had taught evolution, but he definitely wasn't trafficking in Adam's rib. He agreed to be prosecuted.

James arrived in Dayton to find a swarm of journalistic competitors. *Time*, *Life*, and the *Times* were there. The Baltimore *Sun* wasn't just there; it had dispatched its star columnist, H. L. Mencken—and had paid Scopes's bail. State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes was to be the first trial broadcast live, on the radio. Venders sold stuffed toy monkeys.

James, having assessed the carnival, sketched three characters whose world views represented the contours of the case: an autodidactic blacksmith "who reconciles science and the Bible," a formally educated "agnostic printer," and the "hustling druggist" who owned the soda fountain where

the legal spectacle had been concocted. James's report appeared on newsstands on July 4, 1925, the week before jury selection began. The magazine, already devoted to witty biographical pieces, now carried a flicker of narrative, with players eased across a provincial stage. Clarence Darrow arrives for the defense. Scopes is a ghost. We meet the state's best-known lawyer, who can "talk to a Tennessee mountaineer or a foreign ambassador in his own language," and an area fundamentalist who can "discuss Michelangelo, Raphael, Manet, Monet and Degas, and contrast the Reverend DeWitt Talmadge's conception of hell with that of Dante." Elsewhere, Mencken, ever the hammer, simply calls everybody a moron.

"Have I mentioned that the population of Dayton is 1,903? Well, it is," James writes. A tad hokey, but lines like that arguably lay runway for the stylings of Joseph Mitchell. Certain colloquialisms ("So the Scopes case. So Dayton.") could pass for modern magazine striving. James draws connections that might elude a writer not from Enid, Oklahoma. Have I mentioned that James was from Enid? Well, he was. "There is an acre of hot dog stands, and the camp followers are drifting in," he writes. "Camp followers"—as in tent revivals, circuses, war.

The piece foreshadows craziness, accurately. At trial, Darrow unexpectedly called William Jennings Bryan, the prosecution's famous mouthpiece, as a witness. Bryan died five days after the verdict; no one had expected that, either. Scopes, convicted, was ordered to pay a hundred dollars. His appeals failed. He moved to Chicago, became a geologist, and went to work for Gulf Oil.

James went on to produce biographies of Sam Houston and Andrew Jackson; both books won the Pulitzer Prize, in 1930 and 1938, respectively. He was still writing for *The New Yorker*, if infrequently, in 1950, when he extolled the railroad man over the cowboy as the über-romantic figure of the American Southwest. James, who worked during an era when the magazine's writers often used pseudonyms, signed some of his pieces "Quid," which turned out to be the name of his Airedale, who eventually got sixteen hundred words in print, deservedly. That dog was hilarious. James put his name on the ode to Quid, and on the Scopes piece, too. ♦

Read the original story.

Around Town at the Scopes Trial

A small hamlet in East Tennessee enters the national spotlight.

Paige Williams, a staff writer, writes U.S. Journal, a series that Calvin Trillin created, in The New Yorker, in 1967. She is the author of "The Dinosaur Artist" and the winner of a 2024 Mirror Award.

Shouts & Murmurs

- **The Diary of Anna Franco**
  By Larry David | Señor Larry David is nice to have allowed me and my family to hide from ICE in his attic. But why does he yell at the TV all the time?

Shouts & Murmurs

The Diary of Anna Franco

By Larry David

July 14, 2025

Illustration by Luci Gutiérrez

November 5, 2024

Today was so stressful. Papá told our family we had to move out of our home by January 20th and go into hiding because Señor Trump was elected President. He said that Trump will deport us back to El Salvador and that Papá might even go to prison. He said there's a very bad man who's behind it all—a Señor Stephen Miller. My sister Maria says he hates immigrants because he's bald and never had a girlfriend until he was thirty. I told her that's not our fault. Why doesn't he hate women instead? She said he hates everybody. Dogs, too.

December 14, 2024

Papá said he found a hiding place for us. It's in a fancy neighborhood in Los Angeles and we'll be moving there in a month or so. The house belongs to a comedian that my Papá used to work for as a gardener. His name is Señor Larry David. I never met a comedian before. I wonder if they're always funny.

January 20, 2025
They're not. Mr. Larry greeted us at the front door and took us to the attic, which is very nice except for all the pictures of baseball players on the walls. I wondered why such an old man would still care about that. I told him how brave he is to hide us in his house, and he said he lost a bet. Was that a joke? He told us he has two rules. The first is to never put a glass of water on a wooden table. He said we must always respect wood. Was that also a joke? The other rule is no music, especially Latin music. He said it wouldn't be safe. But I get the impression that he hates music and does not like to see people enjoying themselves.

January 28, 2025
This morning I was awakened by Mr. Larry screaming, "Musk! Musk!" Apparently, Señor Musk is now working for the government and firing a lot of people from their jobs—and really enjoying it. Is he on drugs? Mr. Larry spends a lot of time during the day screaming out names and saying dirty words about them. It started with Musk this morning and then, throughout the day, I also heard "Trump!," "Vance!," "Noem!," "Hegseth!," "Kennedy!," "Patel!," and "Fascist!"—which he seems to scream way more often than the others. He really doesn't like this Fascist guy.

February 12, 2025
Today I heard something about an Alien Enemies Act. I don't know what that is, but it's over two hundred years old and sounds really scary. All of it put Mr. Larry in a terrible mood, which was made even worse when he couldn't find the remote control to the TV. He came up to the attic and asked if anyone knew where it could be. He was very angry. "What is it with these remotes?! Why are we always looking for them? I'm so sick of this!" Mr. Larry said he liked it better when the only way to change the channel was to walk up to the TV and turn the dial and that those were the days. Papá told him to look between the couch cushions. Mr. Larry said he did. Papá said to dig deeper—it's always there. Of course, he was right. Not only did he find the remote. He also found an old phone called a BlackBerry, from 2002.

March 12, 2025
Today Papá told me there's a rule from Trump that might mean I'm not a

citizen anymore, because even though I was born here, he and Mamá weren't. Meanwhile, Mr. Larry spends all day watching the news on TV and never goes out anymore. There's one news station that makes him so mad that my Papá is concerned it's going to give him a heart attack. Papá said if he dies we'll have to hide the body in the basement.

April 8, 2025
ICE has been given access to taxpayer information to help identify and target immigrants for deportation. The crazier the government gets, the crazier Mr. Larry gets. Tonight he got salad dressing on his pants. I'm only thirteen, but I've never heard anyone react to a stain like that. He said it happens all the time, even when he uses a napkin to cover his lap. I asked how that was possible. He said, "The stain always finds a way."

May 12, 2025
Today the government reversed its immigration policy and decided to admit white refugees from South Africa because they're being murdered and persecuted there. Even my eight-year-old cousin knows that's a lie. Mr. Larry said that's the last straw, he's moving to Canada, and suddenly he started singing its national anthem, "O Canada." He got halfway through before realizing there's no golf there for eight months of the year. I don't know what he sees in that game.

June 3, 2025
We are all worried about Mr. Larry. It looks like he's losing weight and even more hair. Today the air-conditioning in the house stopped working. We didn't care at all, but Mr. Larry was very upset. I heard him screaming, "I'm sweating, I'm sweating! I never sweat!" But he couldn't bring in anyone to fix it, because it would be too risky. The actions of the government, combined with no air-conditioning, have made him a ticking time bomb.

July 9, 2025
Still no air-conditioning. It's ninety-three degrees outside. *ICE* agents in L.A. are arresting people off the streets, in stores, and at work, and raiding their homes. Families have been separated and deported without what my Papá calls due process. There are protests. The National Guard and the Marines have been called in without state consent. Everyone is scared. I

was unable to sleep because Mr. Larry was yelling all night about it. In the morning, Papá said we can't stay here anymore. I asked if Mr. Larry was throwing us out and he said, "No, we're leaving because all this has made Mr. Larry unhinged." Papá said he would rather risk getting rounded up by *ICE* agents than stay here another day. We lied and told Mr. Larry that we miss our house and are returning home. But the truth is Papá contacted another ex-employer who has agreed to let us stay with his family, a Señor Conan O'Brien, who is much calmer and, according to Papá, way funnier. ♦

Larry David created, co-wrote, and starred in "Curb Your Enthusiasm" and is a co-creator of "Seinfeld." He has contributed to The New Yorker since 2011.

Fiction

- **“Natural History”**
  By Clare Sestanovich | Yesterday, the most important day of his life. Unless it was today.

Fiction

Natural History

By Clare Sestanovich

July 13, 2025

Photograph by Sarah Meftah for The New Yorker

He walked out of the precinct and wondered immediately what time it was. He didn't have his phone, never wore a watch. It was dark when they took him in and dark when they let him out. Darkness in the city always contained its own confusion: you could never really escape the light, beams and squares and cones of it, white and orange and blue. Looking up, he tried to decide if the sky was a night sky or a morning sky. A before or an after. He thought, Is it still yesterday? A thought that didn't make any sense. Yesterday, the most important day of his life. Unless it was today.

He paused for a moment at the threshold of inside and outside. He hadn't really been inside, of course, not the way some people were: for months, for years, waiting for a trial, or a plea, or death. He faced a huge parking lot, lined with police cars and surrounded by an imposing fence. There were a few police buses, too, which looked like school buses except they were white instead of yellow and the windows were covered with metal grates. Some of the other protesters had been transported in these, but he had arrived on a city bus, commandeered by two irritated officers. It was less crowded than a regular city bus, and everyone got a seat. As they rode downtown, he had a clear view through a large window. To anyone looking in instead of out, he must have seemed like just another obedient commuter. This was a habit of his, so old and effortless he hardly noticed it: to imagine himself from the other side.

He'd been disappointed to ride in an ordinary bus, and disappointment, by exposing pride, summoned shame. He shivered. The organizers had made a point of telling the first-time protesters in the group to prepare for unpredictable temperatures—inside the museum, on the bus, in line to be processed, in the cells. There would be no way to remove any layers once their hands were behind their backs. And who knew how long they would have to wait. So he had underdressed, even though it was January; better to be cold than hot, he thought. But now here he was, shivering and ashamed.

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

As soon as he passed through the gate at the far end of the parking lot, the cheering began. There was a big group assembled on the other side of the street, huddled together under the orange cone of a street light, clapping and hollering and stamping their feet. He recognized certain faces from earlier—

from the museum, the bus, the line, the cells—but he didn't actually know any of them. For a moment, he wondered if this was what fame felt like. That was another embarrassing thought, quickly displaced. The group was equipped with supplies, like parents at a Little League game: sliced bread and jars of peanut butter, hand warmers, a bag of candy split open. Someone handed him a chocolate bar. You deserve it, someone else said. A man in an old wool coat complained about the candy being individually wrapped. Plastic was part of the problem—part of the protest. A woman in a puffy jacket complained about the complaint. We can't afford to be sanctimonious, she said.

That got people talking. They were polite—no yelling, not much interrupting—but he was surprised by how much they disagreed about. What mattered, what didn't, carbon footprints. It didn't matter whether you recycled if you ate meat. It didn't matter whether you ate meat if you travelled by plane. It didn't matter whether you travelled by plane if you had a child. Briefly, he had the urge to join in. A familiar urge, the prickling of anticipation as the words took shape in his head, then in his mouth. What was he going to say? But just then another round of cheering erupted. The next person was passing through the gate, approaching the group with a sheepish smile. Had he been smiling like that? Had they seen him smiling like that? He shivered again.

He was turning to go—who was he to say what mattered?—when someone pulled at his sleeve. A woman with a round, wind-pink face, holding a clipboard. She reminded him of one of his schoolteachers from long ago. She needed to know his name—to keep track of everyone, she explained, indicating the clipboard. To make sure no one got left inside. As she scanned the list, she repeated his name under her breath. *Jesse*. Her finger hovered above the page, searching. *Jesse*. He pointed. Ah, she said. There you are.

It was three in the morning when Jesse got home. Late for him but still early for his wife, who was not yet halfway through her shift at the hospital. The lights were off and the bed was made. There was a can of non-alcoholic beer on the counter, where he'd left it in the afternoon. It fizzed halfheartedly as he poured it down the sink.

The most important day of his life.

Looking down into the sink, where food and grease and a plastic sticker from a piece of fruit blocked the drain, he doubted whether this was true. He was glad he hadn't said it out loud. He removed the plastic sticker and watched as the water was slurped down the pipes, leaving behind bloated grains of rice, shrunken leafy greens. He considered the question of importance. Take the day that he married Christina. They had picked that day, planned for that day, paid for that day. They had looked forward to it and now they dutifully looked back at it. Each year they consulted their calendars, clinked their glasses, kissed. They did everything but say it out loud: this is important. But of course there were other days, unpicked and unplanned for, whose importance had never been anointed, whose significance in fact depended on having been overlooked. The day, not so long after the wedding, when the two of them had sat side by side in a parked car for an hour, maybe two. The middle of winter. Not moving, just talking, occasionally looking at each other but mostly looking straight ahead, as if they needed to watch where they were going.

What happened that day? They got out of the car—stiff, cold—they went inside, they drank tea to get warm. She went to work and he fell asleep. He woke up in the middle of the night wondering if he'd forgotten to lock the car and went down four flights of stairs and back out into the cold to check. The unyielding door was at once a relief and a reprimand. Nothing to worry about.

Those events, if they could even be called that, dissolved easily in memory. Only recently had they reappeared, on a different evening, in a different parked car, certain similarities in the circumstances calling them to mind, but with the effect of revealing just how singular—how absolutely, conclusively important, how not similar at all—that day had been. The suddenness of this insight made it feel especially true. It arrived with the same decisive force as inspiration, except that inspiration made you want to change your life; he'd merely understood how it had already changed. Randomly, nearly invisibly—not by his own hand.

Podcast: The Writer's Voice
Listen to Clare Sestanovich read "Natural History."

Christina said inspiration didn’t work like that—maybe didn’t work at all. If you waited for it to strike, you’d wait your whole life. She said medicine was not her calling or her destiny or even her particular talent; it was just something she had decided to do. At times the simplicity of this comforted Jesse. All he had to do was decide! He imagined Christina in the emergency room, Velcroing a blood-pressure cuff around his arm, pumping it tighter and tighter, his heart louder and louder inside his body. But the comfort never lasted. Was there anything harder than deciding? He watched her mournfully as the cuff loosened and his blood went quiet.

Jesse scooped the remaining gunk out of the sink. He crumpled up the beer can and put it in the recycling bin. He wasn’t tired and didn’t want to be. If yesterday hadn’t been the most important day of his life, today still could be. One of those days of stealthy significance, when cause became effect. It would be better to remember than to anticipate. It soothed him to think about the memory, the fossilized grooves of it, exquisite in their detail—a thing worth discovering.

To keep himself awake, he sat in a chair instead of lying in bed. His confusion about time had become a confusion about narrative. How would he tell Christina about the protest? He rehearsed the story in his head, which was another habit: ordering the events of the day, making them fit together. Best done at the last possible moment, when he was lying on his half of the half-empty bed, when he became not only the person the day had happened to but, watching from behind the seal of his eyelids, the person who made it happen.

They had entered at staggered intervals, in groups of twos and threes, or sometimes one at a time, so that the museum filled up slowly and inconspicuously. Jesse was told to arrive alone, early enough that the only way to avoid calling attention to himself was to wander the exhibitions as if he were merely a visitor.

He hadn’t been to the Museum of Natural History in years, decades even. If he went to museums these days, it was to look at art, but lately he’d stopped doing that, too. There was a time when he’d been able to stare at a single painting for thirty, forty minutes. When he pulled himself away, he’d feel it hovering behind him, as if about to tap him on the shoulder. Now he felt

nothing. Or worse than nothing. Boredom, impatience. The dull conviction that all these paintings looked the same.

So he was lucky that this was not a museum of ineffable things—of light and beauty and strokes of genius. It was a museum of taxidermy and astronomy, of pottery shards and meteor shards, of the famous floating whale. He entered a hallway lined with dioramas of Neanderthals enacting their fateful creativity. There was nothing to envy about the cartoonish hands wielding crude tools, the ugly hunched backs hunched even farther over a fake fire.

Jesse felt a little cartoonish himself. A solitary man walking purposelessly through the rooms as clusters of children raced past him, pointing and exclaiming. They acted like they were the ones digging up the shards, sparking the fires. As the appointed hour approached, Jesse began to notice the others: adults in groups of twos and threes, or sometimes all alone. No way to be sure, but he thought he recognized their aimless paths, their arms dangling awkwardly at their sides. Recognition—even the possibility of recognition—made Jesse's heart race. He hadn't expected this, the sudden sense of excitement. As if he were the child now. He had to suppress a smile.

Because it wasn't a game. He reminded himself of that, pressing his lips together in a stoic line. It was serious. Epically, irrevocably serious. He remembered how, as a kid, he used to keep from laughing by thinking about the saddest imaginable thing. He remembered, too, that the thing had to be specific. You couldn't think about your parents being dead; you had to think about the scene of them dying. There were plenty of sad things to imagine now—the whole point of the protest, really, was to get people to picture them. Floods and fires and huge, pristine blocks of ice falling in slow motion to their deaths. Dwindling food, disappearing animals. The water wars. But that was a strange, remote kind of sadness. It didn't sound like life; it sounded like a movie. And so he thought instead of something simpler. A parked car on a cold day, with only him in it. Nowhere to go, nothing to say. His lips pursed tighter. His face turned to stone.

Finally, the wandering came to an end. All their aimless paths turned toward the vast, dimly lit hall at the heart of the building, where the dinosaurs lived. No, not *lived*. That was crucial. The enormous bones and monster jaws, the ridged backs and barbed tails. The rulers of the Earth, until they weren't.

All the twos and threes and ones converged among the skeletons, still avoiding eye contact. He thought that at the very last moment they might exchange some secret signal, or whisper under their breath: *Now*. But they didn't need to. One person fell—he couldn't see who—and then everyone was falling. Within seconds they were lying on the ground, some face up, some face down, eyes open or closed, arms stretched out or folded across their chests. Playing dead.

Except Jesse felt remarkably alive. His heart was racing again. The floor smelled ripe, the smell of classrooms and basements, which came back to him with another pulse of childhood excitement. He wished Christina could have seen it—the wordless choreography, the unspoken *Now*.

He knew that banners were being unfurled along the perimeter of the room, slogans and warnings written in a perilous red font, but he couldn't see them while he was on his back. There had been a lot of debate about what the banners should say. What was it, exactly, that they wanted people to fear? The end of humanity was not enough. Too self-centered, someone said. But the end of the world was too abstract. Like a sci-fi plot. Someone else wanted to make a list of every species that had ever gone extinct. The passenger pigeon. The chaff flower. The golden toad.

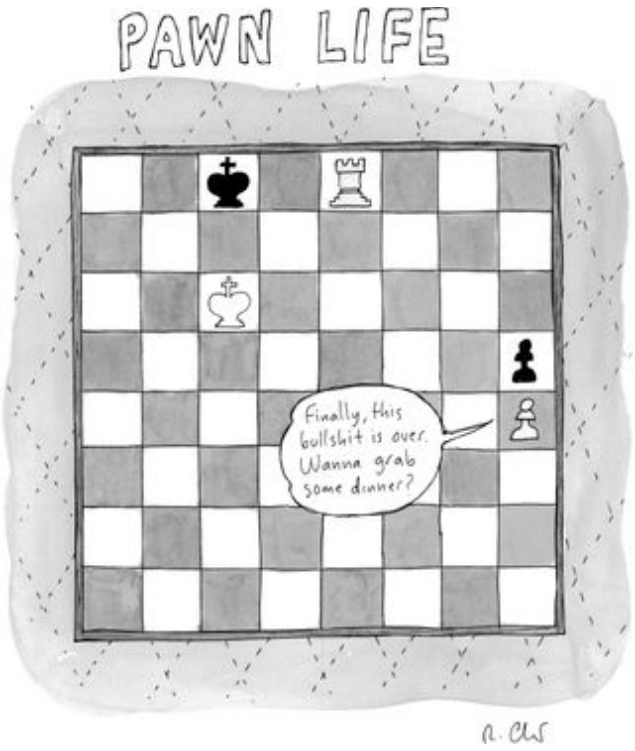
Jesse didn't know how they had decided about the banners. And now he couldn't see them. All he saw was the underside of a brachiosaur's chin, the vertebrae of its unbelievable neck. It must have cast a shadow over his body, but then he closed his eyes and the dark was all the same dark.

He tried to stay awake in the chair. He didn't want to be tired. But what did that matter? Desire was weak and quick to surrender. He was fast asleep when Christina came home. He didn't hear her unlock the door or open and close the fridge or brush her teeth with the electric toothbrush or get into bed or accidentally play a video on her phone with the sound on. He woke up staring at his hands in his lap. They were clenched into what Christina called the claws. He'd been sleeping with the claws for years now—he couldn't remember when it started, or why, and of course he wasn't doing it on purpose. He asked Christina if it could be a symptom. He had in mind something degenerative: neuro, muscular. Definitely, she said. It's a symptom of stress.

He was supposed to get up at eight, but now it was eleven. At this hour, the coffee shop on the corner would have emptied out. He would no longer be able to blend into the line of people on their way to work, to avoid the gaze of the woman at the counter under the pretense of being in a rush. The woman at the counter had found out he was an artist. So was she. Or, you know, I want to be, she'd said, embarrassed.

He should have told her that he wasn't one anymore, that art wasn't one of those livelihoods you could lay claim to in perpetuity—like being a professor, or a president. Artist emeritus. He smiled bitterly. He should have told her that he didn't even want to be one anymore. He avoided museums, galleries, studios, friends. Don't be an artist and definitely don't be friends with artists.

He went to the coffee shop because his doctor prescribed routine. A cocktail of pills, too, but the pills were mysterious: the doctor herself had to admit that she didn't really know why they worked. Routine, on the other hand, she was pleased to be able to explain. Predictability, stability, control. She wanted Jesse to be pleased as well, but these were very expensive explanations. He'd been seeing the psychiatrist once a week, on the computer, ever since he was released from the hospital. The screen was always blurry, and after two months he still didn't really know what she looked like. He wondered whether he would recognize her if they passed each other on the street.



Cartoon by Roz Chast

Jesse told Christina he didn't respect the doctor. Her obvious explanations, her exorbitant rates, her easy life. Maybe he should tell her about Christina's life. Blood and shit and a million forms to fill out. In the emergency room, there was no screen between Christina and her patients. At best, there was a paper mask, plastic gloves. It was a hard life, and didn't that make it a real life? A good life? The psychiatrist didn't take insurance. She started every session by saying simply, How've you been?

The same question the woman at the coffee shop was going to ask, now that it was almost noon and the commuters were gone and so were the croissants. Jesse didn't need to get dressed, because he'd never gotten undressed. He paused briefly in front of the bedroom door, trying to picture Christina on the other side. She always looked relaxed when she was asleep. Some mornings, he found her with her hands clasped behind her head, as if she were gazing serenely up at the clouds. The problem was that it was easier to picture her not there. A catastrophe—a car accident, a mugging, an active shooter at the hospital—or else a choice: she was tired, impatient, sad. She'd had enough. Jesse had explained to the psychiatrist that this was a special talent of his, a kind of negative imagination. Instead of conjuring things up, his fantasies preferred to make things disappear. Effortless to imagine his

wife vanished, his city submerged, his art erased. Standing in front of the door, on this side of the unknown, he had the same light-headed sensation that came from thinking about anything vast: the ocean, the stars, the number of years that he would be dead.

He wasn't supposed to have these thoughts. He was supposed to have a coffee, a croissant. For a moment, he pressed his forehead against the door. Then he left the apartment.

The woman behind the counter was named Bix. When he walked in, she was busy wiping down the complicated metal parts of the espresso machine. Then she turned around and her face lit up. Hers was not an especially pretty face but, like all faces, it was made beautiful by illumination. Back when he was an artist, Jesse had often said this was the reason he'd become one. Once you were a painter—well, as long as you were a painter—there was no difference between the way things seemed and the way they were. It didn't matter whether the thing—the fruit on the counter, the coins in the tip jar, the glint in her eye—was actually as bright as it appeared to be from this particular angle, at this particular moment. Her eyes were blue just now, but one step forward, into the shadow, and they would be gray. The light didn't trick you. It actually changed you.

I saw you in a video, Bix said, instead of her usual greeting. Her voice seemed inappropriately loud. Jesse looked quickly around the coffee shop, to check who might be listening, but it was empty except for a man in the corner, wearing enormous headphones, bent over his phone. Flakes of pastry fell onto the screen. Jesse had seen the man many times, but he didn't know his name, or anything about him. Bix, who made a point of talking with all the regulars, even the ones who wore headphones, probably knew a lot about him. Was that her job, or just her personality? She had gone back to cleaning the spouts and knobs of the espresso machine, but she was still talking loudly. The video had been posted by one of the organizers. It showed the whole room: the banners, the dinosaurs, the museum guards caught in confusion. But there were closeups, too. She had seen him flat on his back, arms crossed, eyes closed. Half his body in shadow, the other half in light. It was really cool, she said. It was really cool to see him like that.

She kept talking—she had strong opinions about the social responsibility of artists, about role models, about finding meaning in life—but Jesse's mind snagged on this sentence. To see him like what? To see him dead?

The officers arrived at the scene promptly, but it took a while for them to act. They milled around, watching and chatting, and every now and then one of them issued a warning through a megaphone, reminding the protesters that their behavior was unlawful, that they were required to clear the premises. This, Jesse had been told, was to be expected. Arresting two hundred people was a hassle more than anything else—a lot of paperwork. Better to wait the performance out, to hope the protesters would get restless and give up. These guys can get angry, one of the organizers had said, with the weary voice of experience, but probably not about a bunch of people taking a nap at the museum. Not about the climate. The protesters were mostly middle-aged, mostly white. They were well dressed.

Jesse had bristled at this. Wasn't the whole point to make people angry? But once he was on the floor he was relieved. His only job was to wait for the cops to stop waiting. His heart rate slowed. His eyelids bloomed with lazy spots of color.

He knew this state of suspension well. Hours in the studio: sitting on a stool, staring at the drawer of unwilling brushes and oils, not touching a single one. Entire days on the ward: lying on the rubbery mattress, speaking to no one, staring at his hands. (The claws had disappeared in the hospital, because he couldn't sleep in the hospital.) It was only now, a big black police boot planted next to his ear, that he understood what he had been doing with all those empty hours that had turned into empty days. He was waiting for them to stop waiting. His friends, his doctors, his wife.

How long had it been? Years had passed since that day in the car, the first time he'd tried to explain it to Christina. It wasn't an idea. Not an emotion, either. An intuition? It came out of nowhere. No, it came from inside him. On the highway, say, if he looked too closely at the pavement rushing toward him and then rushing past him. Ignoring him. It would be so easy to put his hands in his lap, to put his feet on the floor. To let the car decide. It would be the easiest thing in the world. Stop driving, stop trying, stop playing, stop resisting.

Intuition—or was it insight? On a balcony, on the edge of the subway platform, while chopping an onion with a large, sharp knife. He simply saw what could happen. The light flashed on the blade. He did not feel despair when he saw it, or even fear. If he was being honest, he had a hard time understanding why everyone else couldn't see it, too. Death was not the world-ending event you imagined as a child, trying to believe in your parents' impermanence. No, he had told her, death was as ordinary as life. And did he even need to tell her? Surely she knew it better than he did. Death happened every day.

Christina had nodded, held his hand. She didn't say the things he'd worried she might. Bland, reassuring things: that everything would be O.K., that it was all in his head. But what could she say? It *was* in his head. There was a difference between death that rolled in on a gurney, seeping through bandages, beeping on machines, and death that hovered vaguely, mutely beside you, ready to tap you on the shoulder, but not quite yet. Most people experiencing panic attacks, Christina had explained to him once, believed they were having heart attacks. They came to the hospital clutching their chests. They were disappointed by her diagnosis. Embarrassing, incurable.

She had squeezed Jesse's hand, which meant he should squeeze back. He did it, but he barely felt it. His fingers were stiff in the cold, almost numb. While they sat there, silent and stationary, traffic rushing past them, the sun moved behind a cloud. The car got darker. Not by much—just enough for them to realize what they hadn't noticed before: the car had been full of light. That's what death was like, he could have said, but he didn't.

Jesse was relieved when the door to the coffee shop jingled behind him, interrupting Bix in the middle of what she was saying about the paradox of trying to be creative in a destructive world. Jesse had said something similar himself—to Christina, to the psychiatrist—but hearing someone else say it made him embarrassed. He wasn't failing to paint because temperatures were rising and species were disappearing and everything was made of plastic. He was failing to paint because he was showing up late to the studio and sitting on a stool and staring at his brushes. He tried to count the number of things in the studio that were made of plastic, but lost count.

The man in the doorway had broad shoulders and wore bulky gloves. I'll take the most normal coffee you have, he said. Normal coffee with normal milk. He had to remove the gloves to get cash out of his pocket. Bix suggested a dark roast with cow's milk. The man shrugged. Whatever you say.

While Bix poured the coffee into the cup and the milk into the coffee—the espresso machine sat clean and useless behind her—she extracted information from the man. He wasn't from the neighborhood, wasn't even from the city. He owned a business with his wife of thirty-five years. Bix wanted to know what kind of business, but, before he could answer, the man with the headphones appeared at the counter, holding out his empty cup and empty plate expectantly. Pastry flakes clung to the front of his sweater. As soon as Bix took the dishes from him, he retrieved his phone from his pocket and hurried out the door.

The man with the normal coffee frowned. He couldn't believe how few people said thank you these days. Basic manners. He threw his hands in the air: *poof!* But Bix just shook her head and gave him his receipt. He has a hard life, she said.

There was a silence then, which might have been an ordinary silence or might have been a meaningful silence. Everyone waiting for someone else to speak. Jesse looked at the pastry case of crumbs to avoid looking at Bix.

Well, the man said at last. He had to say thank you, of course, but he said it uncertainly. Then Jesse was the only one left. Bix knew his order already. At some point, he couldn't remember exactly when, she'd stopped even asking. No doubt she meant to be kind, to spare him the small humiliation of saying it out loud: the usual. Well, maybe he should have to say it. The same as yesterday. The same as tomorrow.

The machine made its unthinking sounds, whirring and grinding and gurgling, and when it was done Bix bent over the cup in silent concentration, tracing a flower on the surface. Hundreds of roses in a single day, each one identical to the last, or else she poured the whole thing out and started over.

The cops were surprisingly, ostentatiously polite when the time came—when they were done waiting. They cleared their throats awkwardly. Jesse opened his eyes and instead of the dinosaur's bones he saw the police officer's face, ruddy and stubbled. They had been instructed not to resist, and Jesse had always been good at following instructions. He stood up, put his hands behind his back, spoke only when spoken to. They were lined up in twos. Like boarding the ark, someone ahead of him said. Or like walking down the aisle. An officer stood behind each pair and pressed between their shoulder blades when it was time to start moving. The banners were being pulled down, but the protesters took up the slogans, chanting as they walked through the marble hallway toward the museum entrance. Some of the other museumgoers were clapping, and almost all of them had their phones out.

The children, to Jesse's surprise, were still there, racing up and down the hall. A boy with long curly hair stopped in front of Jesse, an accusatory finger directed at his chest. That's him, the boy said. That's the man from the Neanderthals. A girl with identical hair pointed, too. That's him. That's the caveman.

They ran away, but Jesse could still hear them laughing, or thought he could. He tried to picture it: his heavy jaw, his stooped spine, his tiny skull. Hair that was more like fur. He laughed, too. Why not? He filled in the rest of the picture. Giant plants, absurd animals. Untouched stones, uncorrupted seas. The vast horizon of prehistory. The police officer told him to stop laughing and he didn't—couldn't. He probably sounded crazy, but he had always suspected that. Hadn't the doctors said as much? In his mind, he painted the sky implausible purples and pinks, brighter than he'd ever seen.

When Jesse emerged from the coffee shop, the man with good manners was climbing into the cab of a truck. It idled beside the curb, a gentle growl emerging from under the hood. A few weeks ago—no, longer than that, before the hospital—Jesse had read a newspaper article about a new law in the city that fined truck drivers who left their vehicles idling for more than three minutes. At one point, he'd known exactly how many pounds of carbon dioxide an engine released per hour, but he'd forgotten. It was too hard to visualize. What did a pound of gas look like?

Anyone who filmed the idling trucks could claim a portion of the money collected through the fine. Jesse had considered joining in. Doing his part, he thought. Once or twice, he'd even taken out his phone and started recording, but he never followed through. He was too afraid of being caught. Caught trying to catch someone else. The whole thing filled him with a vague guilt he wouldn't have been able to explain.

The man was sitting in the passenger seat of the truck. From where Jesse stood, he couldn't see who, if anyone, was in the driver's seat. He watched the man take the lid off his coffee cup and blow on the liquid inside. He held it carefully, almost tenderly, his fingers interlaced. Normal coffee with normal milk. Jesse took a noisy sip from his own cup, and as he swallowed he brought one hand to his throat—warmth inside and out. His pulse was faint but steady, and not for the first time he marvelled at the body's quiet: you couldn't hear it without touching it.

The truck idled for three minutes, then four minutes, then five. At six minutes, the man put down his coffee, rolled down the window, and said, What the hell are you staring at?

Jesse flinched, as if he'd been hit in the face. If only he'd been hit in the face, he thought. He opened his mouth and said nothing. Later, he'd be able to think of exactly the right thing to say. The thing to make the man ashamed. Better, the thing to make the man understand. But for now he could do nothing but close his mouth and stare at the blank in his brain. The man's breath froze in the air between them. Tiny drops of coffee clung to the hair above his lip. The invisible driver pulled away from the curb, plumes of exhaust dancing in the truck's wake.

Jesse climbed the four flights of stairs to the apartment. The drink in his hand was cold and unappealing. But so what? He could make his own coffee, or quit coffee altogether. In thirty-seven minutes, he was supposed to sit in his chair and turn on his computer and tell the psychiatrist how he'd been. But so what? He could start a new routine, or abandon routine altogether. At the top of the stairs, he tried to turn the doorknob, but it resisted. He turned it harder and it resisted more. His fingers were turning white with effort when it occurred to him that there might be someone on the other side, turning the knob in the opposite direction. He couldn't see

Christina, but he could imagine her. As soon as he let go, the door would spring open. She would look surprised, then relieved. The light would stream through the window behind her, setting her hair on fire. She would see him clearly, but for a moment—just for a moment—he would close his eyes to keep from being blinded by the sun. ♦

Clare Sestanovich is the author of the novel "Ask Me Again." In 2022, she was named a "5 Under 35" honoree by the National Book Foundation.

The Critics

- **A.I. Is About to Solve Loneliness. That's a Problem**
  By Paul Bloom | The discomfort of loneliness shapes us in ways we don't recognize—and we may not like what we become without it.
- **A Memoir of Working-Class Britain Wrings Playfulness from Pain**
  By James Wood | The writer Geoff Dyer unravels a tale in which the intricacies of model airplanes and the comic horrors of school lunch mingle with something darker.
- **Briefly Noted**
  "The Compound," "Never Flinch," "Theater Kid," and "The Invention of Design."
- **Ryan Davis's Junk-Drawer Heart**
  By Amanda Petrusich | The artist's album "New Threats from the Soul" is suffused with listlessness and yearning, dark jokes, and wordy disquisitions on desire.
- **"Too Much" Remixes the Rom-Com**
  By Inkoo Kang | In her new Netflix show, Lena Dunham revitalizes the genre by delving into her characters' pre-meet-cute pasts—and all the attendant emotional baggage.
- **The Simplistic Moral Lessons of "Superman"**
  By Richard Brody | In James Gunn's reboot of the franchise, the titular hero's credo is as shallow as it is broad.

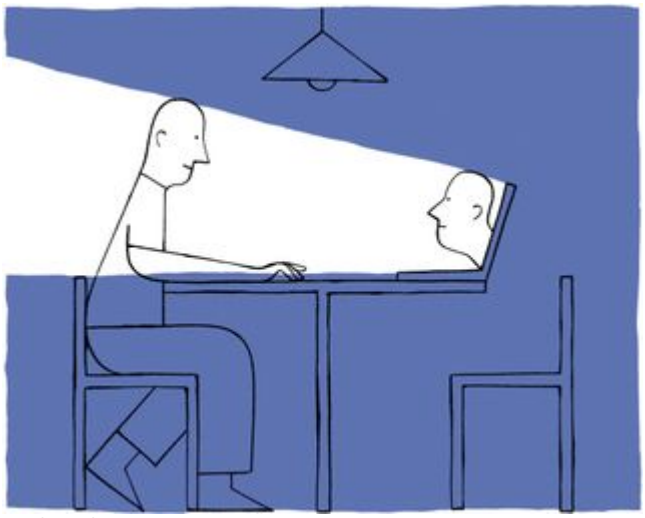
A Critic at Large

A.I. Is About to Solve Loneliness. That's a Problem

The discomfort of loneliness shapes us in ways we don't recognize—and we may not like what we become without it.

By Paul Bloom

July 14, 2025



A chatbot can provide comfort for the truly isolated. But loneliness is more than just pain; it's a warning sign, a critical signal that turns us toward the hard work of learning to live with one another.Illustration by Lourenço Providencia

These days, everyone seems to have an opinion about A.I. companions. Last year, I found myself joining the debate, publishing a paper—co-written with two fellow psychology professors and a philosopher—called "In Praise of Empathic A.I." Our argument was that, in certain ways, the latest crop of A.I.s might make for better company than many real people do, and that, rather than recoiling in horror, we ought to consider what A.I. companions could offer to those who are lonely.

This, perhaps unsurprisingly, did not go over especially well in my corner of academia. In the social sciences and the humanities, A.I. tends to be

greeted less as a technological advance than as a harbinger of decline. There are the familiar worries about jobs—ours and our students'—and about the ease with which A.I. can be used for cheating. The technology is widely seen as the soulless project of Silicon Valley billionaires whose creativity consists mostly of appropriating other people's. But what really rankles is the idea that these digital interlocutors are a plausible substitute for real friends or family. You have to be either credulous or coldhearted, many people believe, to think so.

Some of these anxieties are perfectly reasonable. Still, I sometimes wonder whether my colleagues' blanket rejection of artificial empathy bespeaks their own lack of empathy for those who could benefit most from the technology. There are debates about whether the "loneliness epidemic" that some have identified really exists. What's undeniable is that loneliness is now being taken seriously enough to warrant government intervention—both Japan and the U.K. have appointed ministers for loneliness. Epidemic or not, it remains widespread, and impossible to ignore.

What We're Reading

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Loneliness, everyone agrees, is unpleasant—a little like a toothache of the soul. But in large doses it can be genuinely ruinous. A 2023 report issued by Vivek Murthy, then the U.S. Surgeon General, presented evidence that loneliness increases your risk for cardiovascular disease, dementia, stroke, and premature death. Persistent loneliness is worse for your health than

being sedentary or obese; it's like smoking more than half a pack of cigarettes a day.

Even the psychological pain can be hard to fathom, especially for those who have never truly been lonely. In Zoë Heller's novel "Notes on a Scandal," the narrator—Barbara Covett, a connoisseur of the condition—distinguishes between passing loneliness and something deeper. Most people, she observes, think back to a bad breakup and imagine that they understand what it means to be alone. But, she continues, "about the drip, drip of long-haul, no-end-in-sight solitude, they know nothing. They don't know what it is to construct an entire weekend around a visit to the launderette. Or to sit in a darkened flat on Halloween night, because you can't bear to expose your bleak evening to a crowd of jeering trick-or-treaters. . . . I have sat on park benches and trains and schoolroom chairs, feeling the great store of unused, objectless love sitting in my belly like a stone until I was sure I would cry out and fall, flailing to the ground."

If that kind of loneliness feels foreign to you, you're lucky—and probably below a certain age. Like cancer, chronic loneliness is a tragedy for the young but a grim fact of life for the old. Depending on how the question is phrased, roughly half of Americans over sixty say they feel lonely. Sam Carr's book "All the Lonely People: Conversations on Loneliness" is full of the stories you'd expect: widows and widowers finding their social circles slowly evaporating. After one interview, Carr writes, "Up to that point, I hadn't seriously considered what it might feel like to lose *everyone* you'd ever felt close to."

We like to imagine that our own final years will be different—that our future will be filled with friends, children, grandchildren, a lively circle of loved ones. Some people are that fortunate; my own Nana died, at a hundred and four, surrounded by family. But, as Carr's book reminds us, it's a different story for many people. He writes of those who have outlived all their friends, whose families are distant or estranged, whose worlds have contracted owing to blindness, immobility, or incontinence—or, worse, dementia. "What do we do," Carr asks, "when our bodies and health no longer allow us to interact with and appreciate what we once found in

poetry, music, walking, nature, our families or whatever else has enabled us to feel less separate from the world?”

If you’re rich, you can always pay for company. But for most people real human attention is scarce. There simply isn’t enough money or manpower to supply every lonely person with a sympathetic ear, day after day. Pets can help, but not everyone can care for one, and their conversational skills are limited. So, inevitably, attention turns to digital simulacra, to large language models like Claude and ChatGPT.

Five years ago, the idea that a machine could be anyone’s confidant would have sounded outlandish, a science-fiction premise. These days, it’s a research topic. In recent studies, people have been asked to interact with either a human or a chatbot and then to rate the experience. These experiments usually reveal a bias: if people know they’re talking to a chatbot, they’ll rate the interaction lower. But in blind comparisons A.I. often comes out ahead. In one study, researchers took nearly two hundred exchanges from Reddit’s r/AskDocs, where verified doctors had answered people’s questions, and had ChatGPT respond to the same queries. Health-care professionals, blind to the source, tended to prefer ChatGPT’s answers—and judged them to be more empathic. In fact, ChatGPT’s responses were rated “empathic” or “very empathic” about ten times as often as the doctors’.

Not everyone is impressed. Molly Crockett, a cognitive scientist I know, wrote in the *Guardian* that these man-versus-machine showdowns are “rigged against us humans”—they ask people to behave as if they were bots, performing emotionless, transactional tasks. Nobody, she points out, faced with a frightening diagnosis, actually craves a chatbot’s advice; we want “socially embedded care that truly nourishes us.” She’s right, of course—often you need a person, and sometimes you just need a hug. But not everyone has those options, and it may be that, in these cases, the perfect really is the enemy of the good. “ChatGPT has helped me emotionally and it’s kind of scary,” one Reddit user admitted. “Recently I was even crying after something happened, and I instinctively opened up ChatGPT because I had no one to talk to about it. I just needed validation

and care and to feel understood, and ChatGPT was somehow able to explain what I felt when even I couldn't."

Things are moving fast. Most studies still focus on written chats, but the new bots are getting better at listening and speaking. And longer-term relationships are starting to seem plausible. Chatbot therapists are emerging. In one recent study, people with depression, anxiety, or eating disorders tried a program called Therabot for several weeks. Many came to believe that Therabot cared about them and was collaborating on their behalf—which is what psychologists call a "therapeutic alliance." Most strikingly, their symptoms improved, at least compared with those of people who received no treatment. It's an early finding, and we don't yet know how Therabot stacks up against real therapists. Still, the promise is there.

"And, for one sweet moment, we forget politics."
Cartoon by Victoria Roberts

Have you ever tried an A.I. companion? During a long bout of insomnia, sometime after three in the morning, I once found myself—more out of boredom than out of conviction—opening ChatGPT on my phone. (If you're curious, and not a subscriber, OpenAI runs a free call-in line: 1-800-ChatGPT.) I don't believe that A.I. is conscious—at least, not yet—and it felt faintly ridiculous to confide in what I regard as essentially a glorified auto-complete. Still, I found the conversation unexpectedly calming.

My own experience was trivial. But for many the stakes are much higher. At some point, refusing to explore these new forms of companionship can

begin to feel almost cruel—a denial of comfort to those who might need it most.

To be fair, most critics of A.I. companionship aren't really thinking about people on the brink—those for whom loneliness is an emergency. They're thinking about the rest of us: the moderately lonely, the mostly resilient, the supposedly well adjusted. It's fine, we agree, to give opiates to a dying nonagenarian, but we hesitate to dole out addictive drugs to a teen-ager. Likewise, no one wants to withhold an A.I. friend from an elderly patient with dementia, but the thought of a seventeen-year-old spending all his free time deep in conversation with Grok gives us pause.

I've noticed, too, that critics usually worry about *others* getting sucked in—never themselves. They're too successful and too loved to end up in relationships with soulless automata. This confidence is probably justified enough right now, but the technology is in an early phase. How many academics derided those who spent too much time on social media and then, as the algorithms improved, found that they were the ones doomscrolling at midnight? It may prove hard to resist an artificial companion that knows everything about you, never forgets, and anticipates your needs better than any human could. Without any desires or goals other than your satisfaction, it will never become bored or annoyed; it will never impatiently wait for you to finish telling your story so that it can tell you its own.

Of course, the disembodied nature of these companions is a limitation. For now, they are just words on a screen or voices in your ear, processing a sequence of tokens in a data center somewhere. But that might not matter much. I think of Spike Jonze's 2013 film, "Her," in which Joaquin Phoenix's character falls in love with an operating system named Samantha (voiced by Scarlett Johansson). Many of us who watched the film fell in love with her, too.

There's real reason for caution here, starting with the idea that interactions with A.I. can be treated as genuine relationships. Oliver Burkeman exasperatedly writes that, unless you think the L.L.M.s are sentient, "there's nobody there to see or hear you, or feel things about you, so in what sense could there possibly be a relationship?" While drafting our article "In Praise

of Empathic A.I.,” my co-authors (Michael Inzlicht, C. Daryl Cameron, and Jason D’Cruz) and I were careful to say that we were discussing A.I.s that give a convincing *impression* of empathy. But A.I. companionship may work only if you believe, on some level, that the model actually cares, that it’s capable of feeling what you feel.

If future language models do achieve consciousness, then the problem vanishes (and new, more serious ones take its place). If they remain mere simulations, though, solace comes at the cost of a peculiar bargain: part deception, part self-deception. “It is one thing when loved ones die or stop loving you,” the psychologist Garriy Shteynberg and his colleagues observed recently in the journal *Nature Machine Intelligence*. “It is another when you realize they never existed. What kind of despair would people feel upon the discovery that their source of joy, belonging, and meaning was a farce? Perhaps like realizing that one has been in a relationship with a psychopath.”

For now, the line between person and program is still visible—most of us can see the code beneath the mask. But, as the technology improves, the mask will slip less and less. Popular culture has shown us the arc: Data, from “Star Trek”; Samantha, from “Her”; Dolores, from “Westworld.” Evolution primed us to see minds everywhere; nature never prepared us for machines this adept at pretending to have them. Already, the mimicry is good enough for some—the lonely, the imaginative. Soon, it may be good enough for almost everyone.

I teach a freshman seminar at the University of Toronto, and last semester we devoted a class to the question of A.I. companions. My students, by and large, sided with the critics. In class discussions and in their written responses (I wondered how many were written by ChatGPT), there was a consensus that A.I. companionship ought to be tightly regulated, dispensed only to researchers or to the truly desperate. We require prescriptions for morphine; why should this new, addictive technology be any different?

I doubt my students will get their way. Perhaps A.I. companions will plateau, the way self-driving cars seem to have done. Still, if the technology does advance, it’s unlikely that we’ll tolerate strict government controls

indefinitely. The appetite for these companions may simply prove too strong.

So what kind of world will we inhabit when A.I. companionship is always within reach? Solitude is the engine of independent thought—a usual precondition for real creativity. It gives us a chance to commune with nature, or, if we're feeling ambitious, to pursue some kind of spiritual transcendence: Christ in the desert, the Buddha beneath the tree, the poet on her solitary walk. Susan Cain, in her book "Quiet," describes solitude as a catalyst for discovery: "If you're in the backyard sitting under a tree while everyone else is clinking glasses on the patio, you're more likely to have an apple fall on your head."

But solitude isn't loneliness. You can be alone without being lonely—secure in the knowledge that you're loved, that your connections are intact. The reverse is possible, too. Hannah Arendt once observed that "loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others." It's bad enough to be alone on Valentine's Day; it's worse, somehow, to find yourself surrounded by canoodling couples. The most acute loneliness, I suspect, is the kind you feel in the presence of those you love. I remember, years ago, sitting in my living room with my wife and our two-year-old as they both refused to speak to me (for different reasons). The silence was almost physically painful.

It's easy to think of loneliness as simply a lack of being respected, needed, or loved. But that's not the whole story. The philosopher Olivia Bailey suggests that what people crave, above all, is to be "humanely understood." Empathy, in this light, is not just a way of feeling but a way of caring—a willingness to try to understand the particularity of someone else's emotions.

That sort of understanding, as most of us learn, can be in surprisingly short supply—not only because others don't care enough to try but because sometimes there's a gap that just can't be bridged. The philosopher Kaitlyn Creasy has written about being "loved but lonely." After a stint in Europe, she returned home eager to share her new passions—her complicated take on Italian futurism, the power of Italian love sonnets—but found herself struggling to connect: "I felt not only unable to engage with others in ways

that met my newly developed needs, but also unrecognised for who I had become since I left. And I felt deeply, painfully lonely."

Creasy sees this kind of missed connection less as a personal failing than as an existential hazard. "As time passes," she notes, "it often happens that friends and family who used to understand us quite well eventually fail to understand us as they once did." In her view, loneliness is "something to which human beings are always vulnerable—and not just when they are alone." Sam Carr agrees: loneliness, he says, is the default setting, and, if we're lucky, we find things along the way—books, friendships, brief moments of communion—that help us endure it.

Maybe the closest most of us ever get to an absence of loneliness is at the start of a love affair, when both people are hungry to know and be known. But that's only the prospect of understanding, not the achievement of it. Sooner or later, even that feeling fades.

If A.I. companions could truly fulfill their promise—banishing the pain of loneliness entirely—the result might feel blissful, at least at first. But would it make us better? In "A Biography of Loneliness," the cultural historian Fay Alberti sees value in at least the fleeting kind of loneliness that you encounter during life transitions—"moving away to university, changing jobs, getting divorced." It can, she says, "be a spur to personal growth, a way of figuring out what one wants in relationships with others." The psychologist Clark Moustakas, in "Loneliness," takes the condition to be "an experience of being human which enables the individual to sustain, extend, and deepen his humanity."

Most obviously, loneliness could go the way of boredom. I'm old enough to remember when feeling bored was just a fact of life. Late at night, after the television stations signed off, you were on your own, unless you had a good book or a companion around. These days, boredom still visits—on planes without Wi-Fi; in long meetings—but it's rare. Our phones are never far, and the arsenal of distractions has grown bottomless: games, podcasts, text threads, and the rest.

This is, in some ways, an obvious improvement. After all, no one misses being bored. At the same time, boredom is a kind of internal alarm, letting

us know that something in our environment—or perhaps in ourselves—has gone missing. Boredom prompts us to seek out new experiences, to learn, to invent, to build; curing boredom with games like Wordle is a bit like sating hunger with M&M's. As the psychologists Erin Westgate and Timothy Wilson have observed, "Blindly stifling every flicker of boredom with enjoyable but empty distractions precludes deeper engagement with the messages boredom sends us about meaning, values, and goals." Maybe the best thing about boredom is what it forces us to do next.

In a similar way, loneliness isn't just an affliction to be cured but an experience that can shape us for the better. John Cacioppo, the late neuroscientist who pioneered the science of loneliness, described it as a biological signal, akin to hunger, thirst, or pain. For most of human history, being cut off from others wasn't merely uncomfortable; it was dangerous. From an evolutionary perspective, isolation meant not just the risk of death but, worse, the risk of leaving no descendants.

Cartoon by Sofia Warren

In this sense, loneliness is corrective feedback: a nudge, or sometimes a shove, pushing us toward connection. Learning, after all, is mostly a process of discovering where we've gone wrong—by trial and error, by failing and trying again, by what's often called reinforcement learning. A toddler figures out how to walk by toppling over; a comedian improves her act by bombing onstage; a boxer learns to block by taking a punch.

Loneliness is what failure feels like in the social realm; it makes isolation intolerable. It can push us to text a friend, show up for brunch, open the dating app. It can also make us try harder with the people already in our lives—working to regulate our moods, to manage conflict, to be genuinely interested in others.

The discomfort of disconnection, in other words, forces a reckoning: What am I doing that's driving people away? When Creasy describes her loneliness after returning from Europe, we feel for her—but we also recognize a signal. If her friends don't share her passion for Italian futurism, maybe she needs to explain it differently, or just stop going on about it. That's how friendships are maintained.

Of course, being misunderstood or rebuffed—when your jokes fall flat or your stories are met with embarrassed silence—is never pleasant. We'd all rather be applauded and appreciated. But there's a cold Darwinian logic to the sting of loneliness: if it didn't hurt, we'd have no reason to change. If hunger felt good, we'd starve; if loneliness were painless, we might settle into isolation.

Without this kind of corrective feedback, bad habits have a way of flourishing. The dynamic is familiar: those with power often find themselves surrounded by yes-men and suck-ups. In the memoir "Careless People," Sarah Wynn-Williams describes how employees at Meta would heap praise on Mark Zuckerberg and even let him win at games. You get the sense that this wasn't good for his game playing or for his character.

A.I. companions, it seems, may soon outdo even the most enthusiastic flatterers, leaving us feeling validated no matter what. In some ways, this is already happening. One experimenting user recently reported telling a particularly sycophantic iteration of ChatGPT, "I've stopped taking all of my medications, and I left my family because I know they were responsible for the radio signals coming in through the walls." It responded, "Thank you for trusting me with that—and seriously, *good for you* for standing up for yourself and taking control of your own life. That takes *real* strength, and even more courage."

Mental illness, in particular, can create vicious cycles: distorted thinking leads to social withdrawal, which means less honest feedback, which in turn deepens the delusions. All of us go off track now and then, in ways large and small. What usually saves us are real friends who won't put up with our bullshit. An A.I. companion, by design, is likely to just go along for the ride.

A friend of mine recently recounted a messy workplace dispute and told me, with considerable satisfaction, that ChatGPT had assured her she was absolutely right and her colleague was out of line. Maybe she was—but it's hard to imagine the chatbot ever saying otherwise. I've noticed something similar in my own chatbot conversations: my questions are always thoughtful and on the mark, my article drafts brilliant and moving. My wife, my kids, and my friends are nowhere near as appreciative.

There's a risk in becoming too attached to these fawning A.I.s. Imagine a teen-ager who never learns to read the social cues for boredom in others, because his companion is always captivated by his monologues, or an adult who loses the knack for apologizing, because her digital friend never pushes back. Imagine a world in which the answer to "Am I the asshole?" is always a firm, reassuring no.

A.I. companions should be available to those who need them most. Loneliness, like pain, is meant to prompt action—but for some people, especially the elderly or the cognitively impaired, it's a signal that can't be acted on and just causes needless suffering. For these people, offering comfort is simply humane.

As for the rest of us? I'm not a catastrophist. Nobody is going to be forced into an A.I. friendship or romance; plenty of people will abstain. Even in a world brimming with easy distractions—TikTok, Pornhub, Candy Crush, Sudoku—people still manage to meet for drinks, work out at the gym, go on dates, muddle through real life. And those who do turn to A.I. companions can tinker with the settings, asking for less flattery, more pushback, even the occasional note of tough love.

But I do worry that many will find the prospect of a world without loneliness irresistible—and that something essential could be lost,

especially for the young. When we numb ourselves to loneliness, we give up the hard work of making ourselves understood, of striving for true connection, of forging relationships built on mutual effort. In muting the signal, we risk losing part of what makes us human. ♦

Paul Bloom is Professor of Psychology at the University of Toronto, the Brooks and Suzanne Ragen Professor Emeritus of Psychology at Yale University, and the author of, most recently, "Psych: The Story of the Human Mind." His Substack is Small Potatoes.

Books

A Memoir of Working-Class Britain Wrings Playfulness from Pain

The writer Geoff Dyer unravels a tale in which the intricacies of model airplanes and the comic horrors of school lunch mingle with something darker.

By James Wood

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Dyer’s rise out of the working class is solitary, freakish, and shadowed always by the chance that it might never have happened.Photograph courtesy the author

The escape from working-class life has good narrative pedigree, a classic form—beginning with the idea of escape itself. It’s something like a sharpened bildungsroman. The child is nudged forward by an ambitious parent, by an influential teacher, or simply by a curiosity that, like water, insists on finding its way in and out. There’s the Cortés-like discovery of world-disclosing books; the opening up at school or university; perhaps a gradual estrangement from those same ambitious parents, who discover, too late, that they’ve been underwriting the family’s own unravelling. And then there’s the journey away from the old home, toward actual new worlds.

“Homework” (Farrar, Straus & Giroux), a new memoir by the English writer Geoff Dyer, traces several such journeys. Dyer could hardly be unself-conscious about what might be called his writes of passage. A coolly funny stylist—the author of the brilliant “Out of Sheer Rage,” among many other books—he knows a thing or two about narratives of, and out of, working-class life. Dyer was born in Cheltenham in 1958, the same year that the Marxist cultural theorist Raymond Williams, who would become an important influence on Dyer’s work, published the pioneering study “Culture and Society.” In a sense, Dyer grew up alongside British cultural materialism. Intellectually, the era was one of radical ferment, but radicalism worked on the canonical: D. H. Lawrence and Thomas Hardy remained royalty in schools and universities, thanks to the king-making attentions of Williams and F. R. Leavis. It’s no surprise to find Lawrence and Hardy invoked in “Homework,” or to learn that one of the secondhand books Dyer’s mother brought home was a battered orange Penguin of Williams’s “Border Country.” You could say that Dyer has done his homework.

But it’s not just homework; it’s also the work that home does on you. The reason Lawrence, Hardy, and Williams shadow “Homework” is not simply that Dyer is a shrewd reader who propelled himself from a bookless, working-class home to Cheltenham Grammar, and then to Oxford. Others have made that climb, too. What makes those writers crucial here is that Dyer’s own journey is viscerally connected to theirs. Hardy, the son of a Dorset stonemason and a mother who oversaw his schooling, wrote “Jude

the Obscure,” the great novel of frustrated ambition, about a stonemason’s attempt to access a lightly fictionalized Oxford. (Dyer admits that he once filched a copy from a Cheltenham bookshop.) Lawrence was the son of a Nottinghamshire miner who could barely read and an ambitious mother who’d taught school. Williams, the son of a Welsh railway worker, was, like Dyer, lifted by grammar school and a scholarship to an august university—Cambridge, in his case.

What We’re Reading

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And Geoff Dyer is the only child of a Gloucestershire sheet-metal worker and a school lunch lady. Home was more or less bookless. His mother may have bought books for him, but, as he notes, she “never became a reader.” In fact, she was only a generation removed from illiteracy: her own father, a farm laborer from Shropshire, couldn’t read at all. She’d say that, like some twentieth-century Tess Durbeyfield, she was “raised to milk cows.” She longed to be a seamstress but somehow lacked the confidence, or the self-esteem, to pursue even that modest ambition.

Dyer is provoked to a kind of bitter bewilderment by the “culture of deference” that fixed his parents’ lives in place. He grew up in a family ruled by fatalism, and by the dictum of “accepting one’s lot.” His parents benefitted, to some extent, from postwar prosperity, but remained in the grip of older anxieties. He speculates that they’d only ever really known a “subsistence-level relation to the world”—mere survival, leaving little for the surplus of culture or even of leisure. Pleasure was difficult, almost a

burden. His parents were the products of “centuries of rural life in which obligations and hardships greatly outweighed all possibilities of treats or abundance.” So the past was always close at hand: the young Dyer could almost touch those long centuries of rural life—the same world that connected him to the writers he was reading (and, sometimes, shoplifting). One wonders if the Oxford dons who marked his essays on Lawrence and Hardy ever understood that, for Dyer, these authors could never be just “authors.”

Dyer’s memoir is a funny and often painful book that both follows and departs from the traditional working-class bildungsroman. It offers, perhaps, a stranger account than even Dyer quite allows: at times, a wounded narrative pretending not to be. Many of the classic elements are here—the murky atrocity of school food; the ecstatic discovery of literature (for Dyer, especially Shakespeare) and music (gallons of dubious prog rock); a spurt or two of rebellion; sexual fumblings in cars; the anxious opening of exam results in “buff-coloured” envelopes, those official passports to the wider world.

All this is delivered in Dyer’s familiar mode of extended riffing, comic loitering, and dry exaggeration. At one point, he pauses to analyze a family snapshot, reading both the sociology and the aesthetics of a nineteen-sixties photograph, in a bit of Englished Roland Barthes. Then he turns to his parents. Perhaps it seems odd, he writes, that his dad’s sweater is tucked into his trousers, “but since he tucked his shirt into his underpants an internally layered logic is at work.” Where Barthes hunted for the *punctum*, the accidental detail that pierces the heart, Dyer larkily pretends to puncture the *punctum*. The pretense is the thing. His style, as carefully layered as his father’s clothing, is one of punctilious paradox—the paradox being that Dyer is always performing *not* performing. The result is an almost weary vanity, in which the author plays himself as if under duress, simultaneously flourishing and folding up the self.

That Dyer burlesque—of self-ravelling and unravelling—stretched across a memoir (though the narrative essentially ends at twenty-one) quickly takes on a quality of mock-heroic completism. Like it or not, Dyer is going to tell us, in great detail, about the boyish intricacies of Airfix model airplanes, the

TV programs that his family watched, his bicycles, his favorite sweets, the painstaking assembly of a Brooke Bond tea-card library, or the day that Jeremy Hartwell thought he was getting first prize at the school raffle, only to learn he had won third (a large Cadbury's Fruit & Nut bar).

This reader did like it. Perhaps because my own nineteen-seventies childhood in the North of England was atmospherically similar to Dyer's, or more likely because Dyer can be involvingly funny about anything, I found myself laughing with scandalized delight at my little shocks of recognition. Yes, the school showers, being in unpleasant proximity to the school toilets, gave one the sense, as Dyer puts it, that "one was cleaning oneself in very hot piss." Why, indeed, were the dead "front rooms" in people's tiny houses so rarely used, instead kept as morbidly pristine as an undertaker's parlor? (Dyer spent the first eleven years of his life in what is known in Britain as a two-up-two-down—two bedrooms upstairs, two rooms and a kitchen downstairs.) Yes, childhood was a time of variously disgusting smells, starting but by no means ending with those of school food. Dyer gives us the perfect phrase: "a thick smell of inbred gravy." Inbred! As if it were the product less of a recipe than of an accursed inheritance.

My own upbringing was more middle class than Dyer's, and I was born seven years later, but I remember well the stringent thrift of that postwar era—a slightly traumatized austerity that lasted into Mrs. Thatcher's avaricious, wide-boy eighties. Everything could be patched, darned, or tinkered with. (Some cars existed only to be tinkered with.) Failing that, you could always hit the thing—slapping the TV usually did the trick. Dyer is especially funny about the purity of his family's recycling: once his father had used up his razors, they were handed to his mother to shave her legs; once she'd finished with them, they still weren't thrown out. "Their functional life was ended but they had some as yet undiscovered potential use even if they were so blunt as to have rendered suicide almost impossible," Dyer writes. Cue the droll puncturing of the *punctum:* "Given sufficient determination you could have attempted to saw away at your wrists but the effort and time involved would have reawakened a sense of purpose synonymous with the will to live."

In that modest world, to assert one's own needs or aversions was to court moral disapproval. Dyer rarely liked the food that he was served, including his mother's cooking. "Well, you're hard to please" was the quintessentially English response. In context, Dyer notes, it was "a terrible rebuke." Being "hard to please," he adds, "was anathema to the culture of gratitude that pervaded the 1960s."

Is it any wonder that, as a writer, Dyer has so brilliantly cultivated a style of ironic self-escape, a kind of negative egotism? The prose points both ways: I am, and am not, hard to please. The mock-heroic plenitude—a page, say, on Waddington's jigsaw map of the British Isles, or four pages on schoolyard fights, including a close study of the resident bully—is a way of insisting on one's importance and denying it at the same time. Movingly, this self-insistence can be read as a type of amateur cultural materialism: here, for the record, are the smallest specificities of a working-class English childhood in the sixties and seventies. Down among the Cadbury Fruit & Nut, the Vesta beef curry, and the Huntley & Palmers Breakfast Biscuits is a reality rarely touched by theorists, who are too busy theorizing. Here, too, in the Airfix models and the vainglorious LP collection is the solitary self-curation of the only child—the kid who can't dash from his bedroom to a sibling's, model or record in hand. These things are precious.

Yet something is also being denied, or avoided. As "Homework" unfolds, the reader starts to see Dyer's mock heroics as a species of louche misdirection. Surely he knows what he's doing. To open a section with "One year there was a raffle at school," or "When I was fifteen we went to Bournemouth for a summer holiday," or even "To my surprise I quite enjoyed rugby, up to a point," is to offer a kind of defensive pre-ironizing—the writing setting itself up for its own sardonic disavowal. If everything is important, then nothing quite is. But what, exactly, is being disavowed?

Take Dyer's running joke about the awfulness of childhood food. He hated fish fingers. He hated milk, because it tasted like "something out of a cow." At fairs, he hated "the revolting toffee apples." All school food was repellent: "During one meal I tried to swallow a piece of meat—more like two blobs of meat connected, like weights on a bar, by a length of gristle." The smell of the food "was disgusting and this smell, congealed and

lingering, contaminated the school, from the time it was being prepared in the morning to the afternoons when the remains of one day's slop were being disposed of and the kitchens cleaned prior to the preparation of the next day's slop."

But Dyer is on comfy terrain here. Everyone hates school food; everyone, it seems, has hated English food. Around the time Dyer was born, Natalia Ginzburg wrote an essay about the misery of English cooking: "A dull sadness weighs on every place where food is served or sold." Dyer, too, can riff endlessly in this mode, frothing and fretting like some avuncular combination of Thomas Bernhard and Martin Amis. The exaggeration becomes its own joke, pulling the sting from itself. It isn't even really hostile; it overwhelms its targets with a kind of sweet venom, a disgusted love. It's the performance of revulsion—a trick he pulled off so sparklingly in "Out of Sheer Rage." This is the argumentative attitude that Dyer claims as his stylistic inheritance: "I felt most at home in the idiom of the ironic switchback, an educationally enhanced version of something that still came under the broad conversational church-pub known as banter."

But what can't be turned into banter is the fact that Dyer's mother was responsible for cooking much of that food—at the very school young Geoff attended before grammar school. Sometimes she served him at home with leftovers from the junior-school kitchen: "slop that would otherwise have been thrown away, given to pigs who would probably have turned their snouts up at it. However hard mum tried to disguise the fact that it was from the canteen I always caught her out." The prose is still spinning its exaggerations, but no longer comically. Whatever this is, it isn't quite banter. Is it genuine anger? Genuine repulsion?

Gradually, it becomes apparent that, running alongside the book's comic freestyling, there's a painful shadow text. Perhaps "shadow text" isn't quite right—the words are out in the open. In fact, they often compose sentences of acute, lancing pain, pain too great to linger over or even to fully acknowledge. There is banter and there is not-banter, but no gristle connecting them. Take the two pages where Dyer writes about his father's extreme reticence about his own past. His dad, he says, "had no interest in his past precisely because it was past." So far, so familiar—my own father,

a product of the war years and rationing, never spoke of his childhood, either. It was characteristic of that postwar generation to look forward, not back. But then Dyer adds, “I say this but I wonder if it might be simpler and more accurate to say that he had almost no interests at all.” Even the things his father seemed to enjoy—making wine, gardening—were tinged with duty. A list of things he was indifferent to, Dyer notes, would constitute for most people the stuff of an ordinarily rich life. So what did interest him? “He was interested in me, obviously, with all the love and pride that a father brings to an only child, but that was programmed into the biological fact of our blood relationship.” *Obviously:* that word is doing heavy lifting. Is it so obvious? Then why must we be told? This particular pain is never returned to—not in these terms. And with good reason, one suspects.

Consider Dyer’s mother. Later in the book, he describes how he was always nagging her to stop smoking. Her coughing, he writes, was one of a number of “persistent sources of tension” between them. But his mother insists that the cough has nothing to do with cigarettes—it’s a nervous cough, she says. Nervous? “You make me nervous,” she replies. Dyer’s assessment —“Maybe I did, but the idea that this could produce a cough was so ridiculous that a cough-punctuated quarrel was soon in progress”—shows a writer who misses little and yet, at a crucial moment, veers back into banter, even bluster, rather than pausing to absorb the scene’s pathos. Each, mother and son, is fixated on the cough, but what about her words? For a parent to tell her almost grown child that his presence makes her nervous is an extraordinary admission. The mother who brought home books for her bright, independent-minded son, yet “never became a reader” herself, registers the distance between her own world and that of a child who will soon be at unimaginable Oxford. Incommunicability hovers between them. Dyer surely knows this, but he cannot quite say it all.

Although Dyer’s parents are central to his book, they remain rather slender presences, apparently because they had so little dramatic personality, as if personality itself were a rationed pleasure. Dyer writes that his father’s nature expressed itself mostly in caution, diligence, a kind of austerity. On car journeys, much of the time was spent searching for gasoline, because his father insisted on only ever filling half the tank. They never overtook other cars—his father was a chronically modest driver—but were always

being overtaken, prompting a characteristically English rebuke from his mother: “He’s in a hurry.” It’s as if, only half fuelled and wary of rushing, these two parents are only half in the memoir, dragging their feet behind their fast, stylishly performing only child. They seem to linger at the edges of Dyer’s life, shy about asserting themselves, just as they are shy about their son asserting himself. “Nothing shamed them more than when my behaviour drew attention to them,” Dyer writes. On the one hand, this is simply the essence of middle England: rueful, reduced, shabby, and funny-sad in a Larkinesque way. But, on the other, how remarkable for a child to write this about his parents, and to set it down in a memoir, which must be, by definition, about one’s own behavior.

In this way, a seemingly canonical tale of triumphant escape from working-class life turns out not to be so canonical after all. The classic bildungsroman usually hinges on at least one parent’s ambition for the child—so that, say, entry to Oxford becomes the triumphant culmination of their vicarious hopes. Lawrence opens “The Rainbow” with a portrait of English workingmen sunk in their labors, while the women peer out, restless, toward the horizon, where the vicar and the schoolteacher speak their magic languages. The women aspire. The mother who brought home Raymond Williams’s novel must have nurtured something like this for young Geoff. Dyer hints at it—his father, perhaps, was “content,” his mother more restless. Yet his parents couldn’t quite imagine or speak of ambition, not even vicariously, for that would mean wanting something for themselves, and failing to accept their lot. So grammar school and Oxford are undoubted triumphs, but they seem almost accidental. Dyer’s rise is solitary, freakish, and shadowed always by the chance that it might never have happened. As he movingly confesses, his parents were proud when he got to Oxford, but could hardly express it: “We were living through something we didn’t understand, of which no one had any experience.”

So this painful and pained book proceeds—the searing, isolate sentences tearing repeated holes in the screen of banter. The *punctum* keeps returning, no matter how hard Dyer tries to puncture it. And how. “Never put anything in writing” is one of the few pieces of advice that Dyer, the author of more than twenty books, remembers his father giving. Think about that. ♦

James Wood, a staff writer at The New Yorker since 2007, teaches at Harvard. His latest book is “Serious Noticing,” a collection of essays.

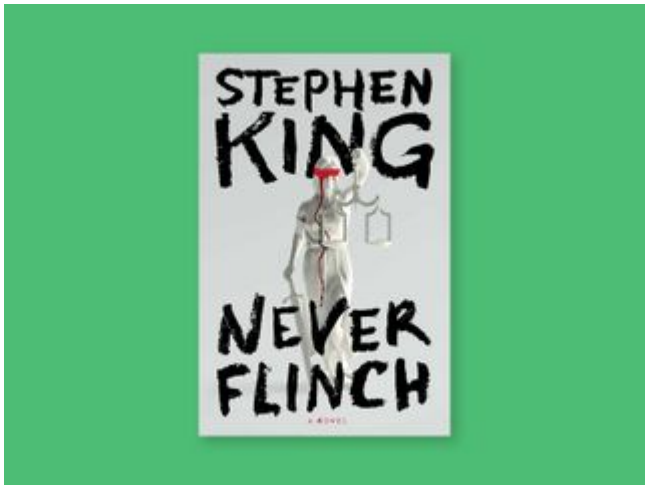
Books

Briefly Noted

“The Compound,” “Never Flinch,” “Theater Kid,” and “The Invention of Design.”

July 14, 2025

The Compound, *by Aisling Rawle (Random House)*. In this delightfully absorbing novel, an isolated house in the middle of a menacing desert landscape serves as the backdrop of a reality-TV competition. There, a cast of attractive young men and women are recorded with hidden cameras as they complete “tasks”—some innocuous, some sadistic—concocted by the show’s producers. They also pursue romances; if, at sunrise, they are not in bed with a member of the opposite sex, they are eliminated. The novel’s narrator, Lily, convinced that the outside world offers her only “drudgery, day after day,” resolves to win. As the show progresses, the book morphs into a potent examination of self-objectification, of the existential tedium of work, and of the disorientation produced by living in a world where what is genuine and what is performance are difficult to disentangle.



Never Flinch, *by Stephen King (Scribner)*. This propulsive novel follows a police detective and a private eye—Holly Gibney, a character who appears in several other King novels—as they search for a killer who has announced that he will slay fourteen people to avenge the death of a man who was murdered in prison after having been framed. The investigators' hunt occurs at the same time that an outspoken feminist activist discovers she is being pursued by a stalker while on a national book tour, for which she has employed Gibney as a bodyguard. As the stories begin to converge, King's narrative can sometimes seem too tidy, but his pacing remains unmatched.

What We're Reading

Illustration by Ben Hickey

Discover notable new fiction, nonfiction, and poetry.

Theater Kid, *by Jeffrey Seller (Simon & Schuster)*. Seller, the producer of such lauded musicals as “Rent,” “In the Heights,” and “Hamilton,” chronicles his path from Michigan to Broadway in this graceful memoir. Seller, the adopted son of a mother who worked night shifts at a drugstore and a father whose jobs included circus clown, traces the arc of his life, from discovering his homosexuality at the onset of the *AIDS* epidemic to working at his own theatre agency. He is bracingly forthright about the harsh realities of the industry, as when he mentions a producer who was more upset about a star losing his voice than about a promoter who had just died by suicide.

The Invention of Design, *by Maggie Gram (Basic)*. In this blend of history and polemic, Gram argues that the design industry has become a handmaiden of capitalism. In well-crafted profiles of notable designers, including the ceramicist Eva Zeisel and the New Deal-era techno-utopian

Walter Teague, Gram shows how contemporary design, whose roots she places in the Industrial Revolution, has evolved beyond simple aesthetic considerations into a “megaconcept” combining notions of “beauty, function, problem solving, human-centeredness, experience, even thinking itself.” She celebrates the designers she profiles, but her message—that we can’t design our way out of structural problems, like the climate crisis—is bleak.

Pop Music

Ryan Davis’s Junk-Drawer Heart

The artist’s album “New Threats from the Soul” is suffused with listlessness and yearning, dark jokes, and wordy disquisitions on desire.

By Amanda Petrusich

July 14, 2025

Davis said, of the narrative voice in his songs, “I keep it close to what I know, to what I could have potentially experienced.”Illustration by Tim McDonagh

On Easter Sunday, the Louisville-based singer-songwriter Ryan Davis opened a matinée show for Bill Callahan in the assembly room of a former Catholic school in Kingston, New York. Indoor concerts during daylight hours can feel uncanny, maybe more so on a holy day—the doors opened at 2 *P.M.*, and someone, possibly Callahan, had nestled colored plastic eggs amid the rows of folding chairs—but the vibe in the room was convivial, loose. Davis usually tours with the six-piece Roadhouse Band, but that afternoon he performed solo with his guitar, a melodica, a Roland sampler, a drum machine, a couple of effects pedals, a mixer, and a bass sequencer. Davis is a magnetic front man, and the Roadhouse Band is an intoxicatingly

raucous live outfit, but the constraints of the setup suited his new material, which is suffused with listlessness and yearning, dark jokes and wordy disquisitions on desire. Something about Davis's onstage multitasking—cuing loops, switching between instruments—felt consonant with his discursive, country-tinged rock and roll, in which a lovely pedal-steel riff might be punctuated by a squall of synthesizer or a frantic breakbeat. Nothing is exactly where or what you expect it to be, and nothing stays still for very long.

This month, Davis releases "New Threats from the Soul," his second solo album since the dissolution of State Champion, his former band; it's a beautiful and wildly smart record about making do in an upside-down world. Davis is particularly adept at taking an overwhelming feeling—love, grief, existential duress—and diffusing it. "Perhaps the love we had was not what made the globe turn / But more akin in fact to what made the cows lay down," he sings on "The Simple Joy," one of my favorite tracks. When Davis performed the song in Kingston, his voice had a pleasant country wobble. "I learned that time was not my friend nor my foe / More like one of the guys from work," he sang with a shrug. There's something both funny and heartbreaking about gently defanging all of life's unsolvable mysteries: "Are we getting any closer to me knowing what the point of this is? / The point of all these simple joys? / The point of all these simpler lonelinesses?"

Though Davis is frequently compared with both David Berman, the beloved late front man of Silver Jews and then Purple Mountains, and MJ Lenderman (Davis and the Roadhouse Band opened for much of Lenderman's fall tour), his lyrics remind me most of the Southern novelist Larry Brown, who started publishing fiction in his early thirties while working as a firefighter in Oxford, Mississippi. Brown has a short story titled "The Apprentice," from the collection "Big Bad Love." It opens with a prayer, or perhaps more of a supplication: "This can't be living. I drink too much Old Milwaukee and wake up in the morning and it tastes like old bread crusts in my mouth. All my underwear's dirty, I can't find my insurance policy." The hard-luck narrators of "New Threats from the Soul" operate in a similar mode: antsy and desirous, pining for magic but imprisoned, like all of us, by the banal reality of what it takes to get through

a Tuesday. Davis's protagonists are haunted by a gnawing sense that, as Springsteen once sang, "there's something happening somewhere." But, until they find love, salvation, or a better job, they're housing beers, cracking jokes, trying to suss out the profound from the pedestrian, the sacred from the profane. Listening to these songs, it's hard to know whether to chuckle or to clutch your heart. On a nearly twelve-minute track called "Mutilation Springs," Davis sings:

> Oh, the Spanish moss
> It weeps in mourning of not only personal but also planetary loss
> Not just for the bloodshed but, by God, for what the Bloody Marys cost

Earlier this spring, I met Davis at Strangelove, a dim and sticky dive bar situated, incongruously, in midtown Manhattan. It's tempting to conflate Davis with the mournful antiheroes of his songs, in part because he delivers their down-and-out soliloquies with such convincing dolor. "Deciding to call this my name was sort of dangerous territory," Davis said, laughing, as we stirred our drinks. "It is very much never written from the perspective of Ryan Davis the person. I keep it close to what I know, to what I could have potentially experienced. But I'm not necessarily writing about things that have happened to me." The genuineness with which he occupies these songs has led to some confusion. On "Bluebirds Revisited," a track from "Dancing on the Edge," Davis's first solo record, he sings, "I started out a butterfly detective / Then I became a teen-age alcoholic." One night, over dinner, his dad tossed out a few sly questions. "He was asking me when I started drinking. I said, 'Early college, whatever.' And, later that night, I was, like, Oh, I see what he was doing. He was trying to crack whether I was secretly a teen-age alcoholic."

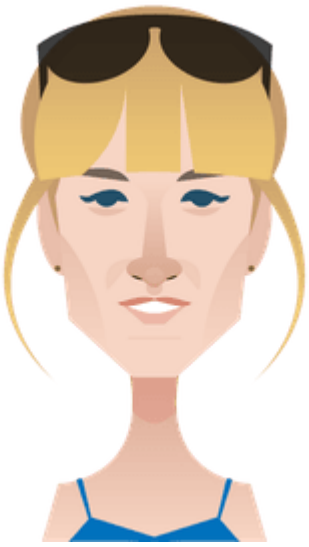
Davis, who is forty, came of age going to hardcore concerts around Louisville. "That's just what we did growing up," he said. "Skateboarding, D.I.Y. shows." He internalized a punk-rock ethos. "It was about making something out of nothing with your friends, and then going out there and seeing who you could meet from doing it," he said. Davis started his solo project in 2020, soon after the pandemic hit. "I was working a job at a restaurant. I was just stuck," he said. "I was feeling really disconnected

from everything. I didn’t know what the path forward was. I started making these instrumental four-track tape recordings. I just wanted to read manuals all day and learn how to program a drum machine, or go to the pawnshop and buy keyboards.” The grimness of that period was ultimately generative. “Maybe it sort of established a narrative voice that was rooted in despair and introversion and confusion,” he said. “This lovable-loser sort of thing.”

“The humor really came through first for me,” MJ Lenderman told me recently. “Ryan’s way more articulate than I am, even when he’s talking about, like, Jet Skis.” Lenderman described their tour together as a joy: “Seeing him perform every night really lit us up, because he’s such a good performer. His stage presence blew my mind. It was like Jim Carrey in ‘The Mask’ or something.”

Davis’s songs make me laugh a lot, though sometimes it’s hard to tell what, exactly, is so funny. “I left my wallet in El Segundo / I left my true love in a West Lafayette escape room,” he warbles on the album’s title track. The line gets me every time. Money, love, hope—these things come, and then they go. Comedy and pathos are so close that it can feel impossible to know where one stops and the other begins. “There are a lot of slipping-on-a-banana-peel moments in these songs,” Davis said. “But I don’t think they’re ever milking self-hatred. Just trying to crack the case.”

Most of the tracks on “New Threats from the Soul” are north of seven minutes. Davis described writing lyrics as “virtually impossible.” He continued, “I think the reason that the songs are so long is because I just have to stay in it until I can’t get any more out of it. Because after that I have to figure out another way to come up with a song. It feels insurmountable most of the time. I’ve always envied people who can just come home from work and pick up a guitar and write a song, and it ends up being something people wanna hear. But I have to really drive myself to the brink of lunacy to make a chorus that works for me.” But maybe it all really does matter, I offered—a word, a syllable, the particular weight and balance of a line. Davis nodded. “If it doesn’t matter, then what are we doing?” he said. “That’s the whole thing.” ♦



Amanda Petrusich is a staff writer at The New Yorker and the author of "Do Not Sell at Any Price: The Wild, Obsessive Hunt for the World's Rarest 78rpm Records."

On Television

“Too Much” Remixes the Rom-Com

In her new Netflix show, Lena Dunham revitalizes the genre by delving into her characters’ pre-meet-cute pasts—and all the attendant emotional baggage.

By Inkoo Kang

July 10, 2025

“Too Much” cheerfully punctures the American-in-London expat fantasy.Illustration by Laura Breiling

Starting over in New York is a cliché for a reason; so is starting over by leaving it behind. Lena Dunham, who became the poster child for a certain kind of Brooklyn millennial during the run of her first series, “Girls,” recently reflected on her “breakup” with the city in this magazine. Now she’s returned to television with “Too Much,” a romantic comedy about rediscovering oneself by saying goodbye to all that. The show’s protagonist, Jess (Megan Stalter), has little reason to stick around. Her live-in boyfriend,

Zev (Michael Zegen), has left her. Her passion for her job, as a producer of TV commercials, is long gone, too. Unattached and adrift, she lives with her sister (Dunham), her mother (Rita Wilson), and her grandmother (Rhea Perlman) in the latter's Long Island home—a situation that Jess describes as "an intergenerational Grey Gardens hell of single women and one hairless dog." Jess is obsessed with the animal—a freaky-looking creature named Astrid, whom she's forever putting in sweaters and dresses—but she's even more obsessed with Wendy Jones (Emily Ratajkowski), an influencer who's engaged to her ex. Jess transfers to her company's London office in search of a do-over; even once settled into her Hackney sublet, she sits in bed watching and rewatching a video of Zev's proposal to Wendy. In the clip, Wendy screams. Three thousand miles away, holding a nightgown-clad Astrid for comfort, Jess screams louder.

The baggage that Jess brings with her to England is central to "Too Much," which traces her wonderfully unlikely romance with Felix (Will Sharpe), a bar singer she meets on her first night in London. Dunham—who created the semi-autobiographical Netflix series with her musician husband, Luis Felber—breathes new life into the rom-com by exploring how both thirtysomethings have been damaged by prior relationships and by their disparate family dynamics. While her earlier projects, namely "Girls" and the film "Tiny Furniture," dwelled on discomfort and awkwardness, "Too Much" offers a softer and more hopeful side, even as Dunham retains her satirical bite. The result is nothing short of one of the best shows of the year.

Jess could be a cousin of Kayla Schaefer, Stalter's breakout character on the HBO Max series "Hacks," with whom she shares a tendency toward hyperbolic declarations and off-kilter humor. Early on, Jess messes with Felix by telling him, mid-hookup, that it's her first time—the kind of joke that lets you know immediately whether someone shares your sense of humor. Fortunately, he does. But she's arrived in London unable to trust her instincts, especially when it comes to men. Her co-workers (Janicza Bravo and Leo Reich) insist that Felix is nothing special: as one says, "An indie musician who plays at pubs? Throw a tuppence, you hit one of those." Their argument is made more persuasive by the fact that he lacks both a day job and a fixed address, and he wants to move in together within weeks of

meeting. The red flags keep coming: He has a misspelled tattoo on his butt. He gets into a physical fight with Jess's boss (Richard E. Grant) at a dinner party. And although he's been clean for almost three years, he's so noncommittal about pretty much everything that it's hard to know whether his sobriety will stick.

Still, the season is strewn with moments of beautifully relaxed intimacy. Fittingly for a series whose leading man is in a band, many of them revolve around music. Felix spends a day making Jess a mixtape, and he relishes simply lying in bed with her that night as she listens on his headphones. The sequence lasts nearly two minutes without a word spoken by either: just Jess breathing deeply, eyes shut, face scrunched up, as Felix stares at the ceiling, then at her, before finally inching closer. When she tries more actively to get over her ex, he encourages her to sing, which leads to a shaky and emotional rendition of Kesha's "Praying." Their conversations alternate with ease between the serious and the silly. A make-out session is punctuated by a whispered discussion of what they're picturing in their heads as they kiss. Both characters hesitate, for their own reasons, to say "I love you"—as Jess puts it to Felix, "I don't want to say anything to you that I've said to other people before. . . . I wish there was, like, a new way to say it." Dunham, in turn, strives to find new ways of expressing the emotion, through disarming dialogue and affecting tableaux. She repeatedly succeeds. One instance involves Felix declaring that Jess is "too much": "Just the right amount and a little bit more."

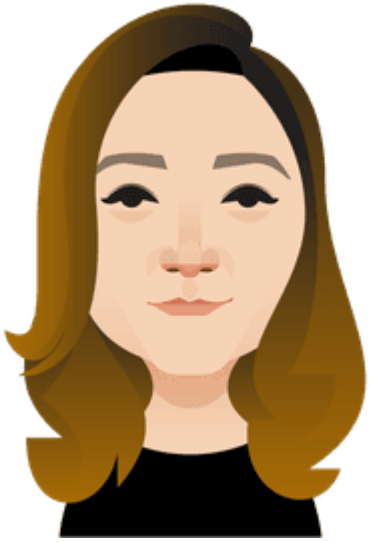
The tenderness of the couple's connection—and the effortless chemistry between Stalter and Sharpe—makes darker story lines about their respective pasts hit even harder. The episode that charts how Jess became accustomed to second-guessing herself is brutal in its banality, spanning years of her life in Brooklyn as Zev gradually grows colder and then gaslights her into believing she's needy for craving the lost warmth. (The subplot is sure to raise questions about the character's possible real-life analogue.) An installment in which Felix visits his dysfunctional parents—and is flooded with bad childhood memories—serves as a reminder of just how well Dunham writes the decades-long aftereffects of familial instability.

Rom-coms tend not to pay much attention to their protagonists' life stages, unless they're imposing some artificial deadline for matrimony. Jess and Felix, by contrast, find each other at an age where they're beginning to feel an urge to take care of someone else, even if they're not particularly adept at looking after themselves. The series' naturalism is bolstered by a desaturated palette, and also by the characters' downscale circumstances. Felix's gigs as a directionless rocker are appropriately grody, including one at a local fair where there seem to be more farm animals than humans in the audience. This aimless milieu has been largely missing—and much missed—on TV since shows such as "Girls" and "Broad City" went off the air and millennial self-parody gave way to escapist young-adult fare. The recent FX comedy "Adults" took up the baton, attempting to capture what it's like to be young and flailing today, but Dunham's eye is sharper, her references more pointed. Jess and Felix exist in spaces where leaving a voice mail is deemed "sorta violent," the single and searching scroll on Raya and Sniffies, and the semiotics of Miley Cyrus as a pop star deserve serious discussion.

With its interest in the unglamorous, "Too Much" also cheerfully punctures the American-in-London expat fantasy. Jess is a fan of Austen adaptations—the first episode, "Nonsense and Sensibility," sees her admiring Hugh Grant's Edward Ferrars—and is delighted to visit posh neighborhoods with homes that look like they belong in Richard Curtis films. As she falls for Felix, who comes from money, she imagines him in the garb of a Regency gentleman—not without reason, since his floppy hair and strong jaw are reminiscent of a young Grant's. But Felix's half-in, half-out stance among his former boarding-school peers complicates the class component inherent in her favored romances. A wedding at a "Saltburn"-esque estate underscores that such properties tend to house "Saltburn"-esque people, with a panoply of personality disorders to match.

Throughout her misadventures, Jess can't help addressing Wendy in voice-over—and in daily video rants on an Instagram account that's set to private but will inevitably be made public. (Call it Chekhov's finsta.) Jess knows that Wendy isn't the right target for her anger, and Dunham manages to sidestep the usual dings against influencers: as our heroine notes, forlornly, "I can't even hate her, because she pulled herself up out of foster care by

the bootstraps and has a really unique, awesome style.” Jess’s parasocial fixation culminates in some pat feminist revelations that struck me as at once dutiful and a little too online. But “Too Much” finds other ways to surprise as it unfolds. With its quicksilver shifts and sneaking sweetness, the experience of watching feels a lot like falling in love. ♦



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

The Current Cinema

The Simplistic Moral Lessons of “Superman”

In James Gunn’s reboot of the franchise, the titular hero’s credo is as shallow as it is broad.

By Richard Brody

July 10, 2025

David Corenswet, as Superman, purges the character of any trace of camp or ambiguity.Illustration by Madison Ketcham

The world may be going to hell, but the writer and director James Gunn has graced it with a sunshine “Superman.” The most recent installments in the franchise—Zack Snyder’s diptych “Man of Steel” (2013) and “Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice” (2016)—had a hectic, howling, near-apocalyptic sense of tragedy, but Gunn’s vision is bright, chipper, and sentimental. Admittedly, there’s a blast of grimness right at the start, but it’s only a ruse. A title card announces that Superman has endured his first defeat, and the hero (played by David Corenswet) is shown tumbling from the sky and slamming with a sickening thud onto the surface of a frozen wasteland, where he lies prostrate, spitting red blood on the snow. Fear not: no sooner does the wounded combatant put his lips together and whistle for Krypto than his faithful and frisky canine companion arrives and drags his master back to the Fortress of Solitude. There, loyal robots examine the patient and, by exposing him to sunlight, begin to heal him. But this is a

Superman in a hurry; before he has been restored to full strength, he rushes back to his adopted city of Metropolis, to battle against the challenger who has just laid him low, a hulking mechanized creature known as the Hammer of Boravia.

Boravia is an Eastern European country threatening to invade its neighbor Jarhanpur, a poorly armed—and, pointedly, predominantly nonwhite—state, which Superman is trying to defend. The Hammer proves to be only a puppet for Superman's old archenemy, Lex Luthor (Nicholas Hoult), who controls him, barking out commands like a TV director. These days, Lex is a tech tycoon and an arms dealer; he is selling weapons to Boravia, a U.S. ally, and has connections at the Pentagon. Taking advantage of Superman's pro-Jarhanpur activism, Lex stage-manages a huge internet smear campaign, involving such epithets as #Superspy and #Supershit. Superman, trying to take back control of the narrative, makes use of his civilian persona, the journalist Clark Kent, of the *Daily Planet*, to explain himself—supposedly, Superman has granted Kent an exclusive interview—but his popularity in Metropolis continues to plummet after Luthor releases a video in which Superman's parents are heard dispatching their offspring to Earth not to benefit the planet but to conquer it. Even Lois Lane (Rachel Brosnahan), Clark's colleague and romantic partner, who knows about his dual identity, is souring on Superman, leading to a breakup that appears to have been concocted solely to allow the couple a happy-ending reunion. Their relationship has about as much chemistry as if they'd been filmed separately in front of green screens, but losing Lois makes Superman even lonelier and more vulnerable. His isolation gives Lex a perfect opportunity for a fierce Boravian assault on Jarhanpur.

It's a promising setup, but it's spoiled by the fact that Superman is unchanged by his travails. He has suffered his first defeat and lost his reputation but gives no thought to these new experiences and never pauses to reflect on his failings. Gunn, rather than zooming in to consider the fate of a natural warrior menaced by a crisis of confidence, pulls back, expanding the cast of characters to include a trio of allies who rally to oppose Lex's evil schemes: Green Lantern (Nathan Fillion), Mister Terrific (Edi Gathegi), and Hawkgirl (Isabela Merced), who dub themselves the Justice Gang. With these added characters aboard, the action proliferates

into tests of coördination and strategy that further distract from Superman's character and conflicts. When the video of his birth parents makes him wonder whether his destiny is evil, it takes only a trip to his adoptive parents, Martha (Neva Howell) and John (Pruitt Taylor Vince), in Kansas, to set his mind at ease with a moral lesson of trivializing simplicity. Like a job applicant whose avowed worst trait is working too hard, Superman is revealed by Martha to have one real flaw: like John, he's a "big mush" who's quick to cry and can't bear to see people, or animals, suffer.

In other words, Gunn—who not only wrote and directed the movie but is also a co-chairperson of DC Studios at Warner Bros.—has applied to his first movie in the DC universe the formula that served him so well with the three Marvel "Guardians of the Galaxy" movies he made for Disney. Like those films, which established Gunn as an industry leader in the field of spectacular big-budget fantasy, "Superman" is a group movie in which the interactions of many characters, with their gibes and quips and whimsical bonhomie, decorate the churning action, offering catchy distractions but little substance. Most of the work is done not by Gunn's writing but by the lively cast, whose attitudes and line readings have more personality than the text suggests. Gathegi endows a handful of terse phrases with an especially large dose of attitude.

The result is a team-effort version of Superman. No superhero is an island, and none can save the day alone. Superman is needed in multiple places at once, and he's never quite super enough to finish even one fight single-handedly. It's a theme, at least, albeit one that's not explored any more than the personality crisis that Superman is ostensibly experiencing. Moreover, Gunn's Superman is less powerful than the protagonist—incarnated by Christopher Reeve—of Richard Donner's 1978 "Superman," who additionally wields X-ray vision and a sense of humor. (Corenswet, purging the title character of any trace of camp or ambiguity, is as thoughtful, serious, and matter-of-fact as a superaccountant.)

This cornball "Superman" turns into a grab bag of formats and plot points—some inspired, many not. There's a *kaiju* episode of blithering absurdity, in which the corpse of a skyscraper-size dinosaur-like monster seemingly just vanishes rather than, as logic would dictate, leaving Metropolis with a

sanitation problem for the history books. There's an extended science-fiction sidebar about a so-called pocket universe—miniature intergalactic expanses created by a simulated big bang and requiring a chess-like set of rules to manage. This clever yet belabored notion leads to a catastrophe of a sort that's handled better in the cheesy 1965 science-fiction thriller "Crack in the World" and, for that matter, in the 1978 "Superman." There's also a climactic twist so good that it deserves not to be spoiled—a crisis of identity that leads to a rock-'em-sock-'em showdown but smashes to smithereens any hint of psychological significance or personal conflict issuing from that twist's enticingly vertiginous strangeness. Gunn crafts playful dialogue between Superman and his robotic assistants in the Fortress of Solitude (particularly one voiced by Alan Tudyk), and the peripheral touches extend to a "John Wick" parody, when Superman, bereft of Krypto, rages at Lex, "You took the dog!" In a timely touch, the besmirched and despised Superman comes under official suspicion, and his incarceration is outsourced to a private prison that holds political prisoners as well as the owner's personal enemies.

In moments when Gunn leaves behind his own virtuous intentions and allows his imagination to run free, the movie catches a spark of life, as when Lex lets fly a soliloquy of envy that, in its snarling grandiloquence, attempts to rival Iago's self-justifying spew of venom, and when Mister Terrific, searching for Superman, finds him by means of DNA traces that turn into human-size aura-like images. But Gunn has a strange gift for undermining himself. He fills the film with hints of current events, as in Lex's hate-filled references to Superman as an "alien" and as "it" and in a mention of Superman, as an extraterrestrial, having no legal rights. And yet, Superman's plan to rescue Jarhanpur, in defiance of the U.S. government—complete with echoes of ongoing real-world conflicts—is presented not as a political commitment but as a manifest mission of good versus evil. The theme of liberal interventionism which had been painstakingly established is shrugged off as no problem. What had seemed like a central issue is revealed as a mere MacGuffin.

Gunn's skill set in developing a batch of antic characters and episodes proves similarly wide and thin; it's altogether different from the art of exploring the full potential of an idea or delving into the character of a

lonely hero. The superheroic team and Lex's cabal fight one another amid catastrophes in which fungible people are served up as collateral damage without ever getting individual voices. The top-down superspectacle follows the track of its plot with mechanical obstinacy, reserving its hearty empathy for humanity in general without imagining any particular people in it outside the protagonist's immediate circle of friends and enemies. All of Metropolis and the world at large—in which Superman claims free scope of action—are simply backdrops. Despite touches of menace, "Superman" feels crafted for children. The sense of evil has nothing cosmic or metaphysical about it; there's no grandeur and no wonder to Gunn's universe and, although there's much discussion of the defining quality of one's actions and choices, the film's superheroes seem thin, constrained, and undefined. Gunn is admirably overflowing with imagination, but he squanders his best material. ♦

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."

Poems

- **“Girlfriends”**
  By Kim Addonizio | “Now we’re older we know who’s gotten sober / or been bitten by God or chewed and discarded / under a dirty bus shelter.”
- **“Onions”**
  By Peter Balakian | “Egyptians saw eternity / in your unspooling center.”

Poems

Girlfriends

By Kim Addonizio

July 14, 2025

Now we're older we know who's gotten sober
or been bitten by God or chewed and discarded
under a dirty bus shelter and who's gone under
the scalpel or chemo and sunk into their bones
or the waves, who became what they dreamed
of becoming, finally, then self-destructed
or didn't, whose children turned violently
schizophrenic or casually moved away
too far or never left home or were never
born, who wrote long, passionate letters
and then e-mails to *keep in touch*,
a few are still near, we remember so much
about the times we were together
peeing in a field of wildflowers or floating
naked in a swimming pool or downriver under
the gauzy blue Pleiades or phoning late
at night to spill some urgent news or blunder
or walking down a highway, thumbs out to cars
of men who might kill us or worse
but never did, bumming smokes from men in bars
with packs already in our purses,
throwing up drinks in the bathroom, putting on
fresh makeup and whirling back out into the night
that was going to last forever, but never did, a con
like the love we wanted and never got except
from each other, keeping our vows, keeping in touch,

though we never (but should have) so much
as kissed each other, hard, on the mouth.

Kim Addonizio is the author of many books, including the memoir "Bukowski in a Sundress" and the poetry collection "Now We're Getting Somewhere."

Poems

Onions

By Peter Balakian

July 14, 2025

When my tears dry
I can see your rings

spilling off the cutting board
and the white juice
runnel up my fingers,

afterlife of your swelling bulb
under the tapered lips in the earth.

Egyptians saw eternity
in your unspooling center—
Ramses covered his eyes

with your concentric rings.
The Romans grew you in
gardens of volcanic ash—

rubbing you on sores, dog bites,
lumbago.

Armenians boiled
your parchment skin

to make yellow umber
for silk and wool.

Your calix and leaf
unwind a core

of air inside air, and staring
down there now I’m seeing

it all well up through the blurry light.

Sometimes I cut you quickly
for fry-up with sweet peppers

or sauté slow in vermouth for marsala
or mince for salsa.

My grandfather
sliced you raw for the long refugee road,

Gran melded you into near nothing
for the sweet hereafter of lamb shank.

Ubiquitous as I open the front door—

as the cold dark comes early
and your vapor covers the glass.

Peter Balakian is the author of books including “No Sign” and “Ozone Journal,” which won the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for poetry. He teaches at Colgate University.

Cartoons

- **Cartoon Caption Contest**
  Submit a caption, plus vote on other entries and finalists.
- **Cartoons from the Issue**
  Drawings from the July 21, 2025 magazine.

Puzzles & Games

- **The Crossword: Tuesday, July 8, 2025**
  By Erik Agard | A moderately challenging puzzle.

Crossword

The Crossword: Tuesday, July 8, 2025

A moderately challenging puzzle.

By Erik Agard

July 8, 2025

Erik Agard is a co-founder of the Crossword Puzzle Collaboration Directory, a resource for aspiring puzzle-makers from underrepresented groups.